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TeachingTips:

Lifespan Development at the Graduate Level

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Although the oft-stated cliché indicates that “life is short,” it may not feel that way to instructors who are charged with teaching its entire contents in a single academic term! Lifespan psychology is growing in importance as universities recognize that development occurs after the age of 18 and that the population is growing older. Instructors with expertise in adult development are often asked to teach these courses. Recently, when my department revised its graduate curriculum, they asked me to help design an introductory proseminar that covered human development across the entire lifespan. This article deals with the challenges of teaching adult development in advanced undergraduate or graduate level courses that also cover child development.

Mechanics of Designing a Lifespan Course The first challenge instructors face in designing any course involves the organization of the material. Instructors of introductory lifespan psychology courses often rely on the implied organization of the material and simply teach sequentially, from birth to death. This approach makes the organization of the course transparent to introductory level students, but is not satisfactory for more advanced students. Graduate students experience material as disjointed when emotional development is covered one week in infancy and weeks later in early adulthood. Instead, a topical approach to organization works best when covering lifespan material at advanced levels.

Indeed, a successful organization to lifespan courses at any level involves introducing large themes at the start of the course and then using subsequent units to illustrate these themes. Specifically, our proseminar introduces themes of development such as: continuity and discontinuity, genetic and social contextual influences on development, and inter-individual and intraindividual variation in development in the first two weeks. The remainder of the course focuses on more specific topics such as: temperament and personality, cognitive functioning, identity formation, emotion regulation, and biological changes.

This approach to instruction is not problem-free. In my experience and the experience of other instructors who have taught our proseminar, the big themes of human development

are complex and daunting and, for some students, intimidating. Over time, however, as instructors point out examples of these themes in each unit, students come to see how human development can be understood and studied from birth to old age. It is particularly useful to introduce a more clearly defined topic in the second or third week of the course to avoid losing student interest. For example, students tend to find material related to temperament and personality easy to grasp with regard to bigger issues such as the influence of genetics and the environment, continuities and discontinuities and individual differences.

Instructors also should be aware of the dilemma they will confront about decisions over material to cover and to skip. It is impossible to cover the entire “lifespan” in every unit. There are few “lifespan” articles on most topics. Rather, instructors must rely on articles that cover different periods of life in each unit. If an instructor assigns one paper each on cognitive shifts in infancy, childhood, and adolescence, that leaves at most one reading assignment for all of adulthood. A single chapter might be used to cover material from infancy through adolescence, but students need to read at least some empirical studies in the early years of graduate school. Longitudinal studies such as the Berkeley Growth Study, The Normative Study of Aging, and the Seattle Longitudinal Study can help, as they deal with more than one stage of life, but other important studies cover much smaller age ranges. Decisions about what material to cover and what not to cover will be difficult until there are more studies of the entire lifespan. In the meantime, instructors should be aware of this problem. As will be discussed, the material itself will help instructors make some decisions about which periods of life to include and exclude in each unit.

Intellectual Issues in Teaching a Lifespan Development Course

In addition to the issues of basic mechanics when teaching a lifespan psychology course, instructors also face intellectual barriers that can divert students’ attention from a true understanding of the human lifespan. The field of child development is nearly 100 years older than gerontology. Because it is a more established field, studies of children may seem more detailed and sophisticated with regard to many topics. By contrast, articles on adult development often cover bigger ideas. It is difficult to help students derive a comparable sense of the lifespan as a result of these intellectual differences in the fields.

Further, research attention is scattered by stage of life and topic. Whereas there is a great deal of research attention to cognitive development in early childhood and late life, social relationships take center stage in research on adolescence. Students may gather a false sense of the contrasts and similarities in development across different stages of the lifespan based on these disparities in research attention. For example, social relationships have developmental implications throughout life, not just in infancy (attachment), adolescence (peer relationships and sexuality), and old age where they have received the most research attention. Instructors can hammer home these lessons, but the state of the literature does not provide easy integration for most topics.

Further, the phenomena under discussion vary in ways that make lifespan integration challenging. We cannot measure the same behavior to assess the same construct across

the lifespan. Is early temperament truly a precursor to later personality? Are the reasoning tasks in school children's tests equivalent to everyday problems older adults solve? The course can be strengthened by introducing such questions. There are also differences in the rates of change across the lifespan. Changes tend to be dramatic in the first two years of life. Students can readily note physical changes from the newborn who cannot coordinate binocular vision to the two-year-old dashing across the playground. Likewise, change at the end of life can be rapid when disease hits and debilitates. Students may garner a false sense that the big contrasts involve infancy vs. childhood or adolescence vs. late life. More subtle, psychological changes of young and middle-adulthood are lost as a result. It is important for instructors to highlight how we conceive of change and how less obvious patterns may be indicative of changes at different stages of life.

Further the shape of development varies at different points in the lifespan. Behavior in infancy tends to unfold in a regular, sequential pattern. In adulthood, development is less proscribed and unfolds at different rates in different individuals. (As an aside, I recently became a mother and, as a gerontologist, I was convinced I had the most unique and charming baby ever born. Much to my chagrin, when my son started daycare, I noticed that other babies his age engaged in the exact same adorable behaviors!) These differences in the shape of development may leave students who study children unsatisfied with research on adult development and aging. These issues do however, provide fodder for course discussion.

In summary, if we wish to integrate aging into the mainstream of developmental psychology, we must train future generations of scholars in material across the lifespan. The challenges of designing courses that accomplish this task are multifold and include discrepancies in the state of research on different age groups and in developmental phenomena themselves. With careful attention to these issues, instructors can engage graduate students in lively discussion (if not ready answers) pertaining to how development unfolds across the lifespan.