

Intergenerational Women Students

Helping Each Other Inside and Outside the Classroom

by Melanie Ellsworth

As an ESL teacher with a class of women of all ages, I have found that both older and younger students have much to offer each other and frequently develop friendships and mentoring relationships inside and outside the classroom.

The relationship between older and younger women in the classroom is usually beneficial to both. Although one of my older students who is in her mid-fifties (I'll

call her Hong) has said that she sometimes feels shy to speak out in class because the younger students speak more quickly and confidently, she also explains that she feels qualified to speak about certain topics that younger students may not be able to discuss. As she put it, "I have experience, but young girl has no feeling to think about." Hong can teach her class-

mates much about "life experience, raising a family, and work." In a recent class, Hong felt confident to join in a discussion in which the teacher asked the students to talk about how parents influence children's future life decisions. Hong also speaks up in class when topics come up regarding work. She explains, "I know how to make conversation with co-worker. [It's] easy to meet co-

worker." With her many years of work experience, she is able to teach her classmates how to make small talk with co-workers and how to establish good relationships at work. "Sharon," Hong's 30-year-old classmate, agrees that she has learned a lot from older classmates about subjects "like taxes, government duties, voting." Hong also feels that as an older student, she is a role

model of how to work

hard. She often tells her classmates, "Never give up. Never give up!" Younger students find her dedication to learning English very motivational.

Hong and other older students also help their younger classmates outside the classroom. Hong and Sharon often shop for vegetables together, and Hong offers suggestions about

best cooking methods to Sharon, who admits to needing a mentor in this area! Sharon says that Hong has taught her a lot of English vocabulary for different types of vegetables. Sometimes Hong and younger classmates go to Dunkin' Donuts where they "teach each other real life vocabulary words," says Sharon. Hong also goes to the library with younger classmates, and they en-



Image courtesy of *Picturing Change*, ProLiteracy Worldwide, NY.

courage each other to speak to the staff to find books that suit their reading levels. Sharon says these outings with Hong help her “improve life knowledge.”

Just as older students help younger students inside and outside the classroom, younger students can provide necessary support to older students. Sometimes in the classroom, I watch as younger students help explain the meaning of a new idiom to their older classmates. Some of my older students complain of forgetting vocabulary more quickly than their younger classmates, so their younger classmates can provide assistance with reviewing new vocabulary. Younger students also provide a model of speaking out and participating in class. In the Chinese school system in which most of my students were taught, class discussion was not encouraged. Several students have told me that classroom methods are becoming more participatory in Chinese classrooms these days, so perhaps the shock of entering a more learner-centered environment is not as difficult for some of the twenty-year-olds in my classes as it is for the older students. I have also noticed that my younger students tend to know more about American pop culture and are more enthusiastic about discussing topics such as dating differences between their native culture and American culture, so younger students can also teach their older classmates about these topics.

There is occasionally tension between older and younger students in our classroom. My younger student, Sharon, said she does not discuss political topics such as relations between China and Hong Kong because she feels her older friend Hong might have a very different outlook as part of a different generation. I have also discovered that the younger students do not know much about China’s Cultural Revolution, and often the older and younger students avoid discussing this topic because of the huge gap in their experiences and the very emotional nature of the topic. Hong also says that occasionally younger students in class will do something that

she doesn’t approve of, but she says “no problem” because “they are young.” Both Sharon and Hong emphasized that despite certain silences and disagreements between students of different generations, there is generally harmony in the class. Both of these students in separate interviews used the words “cooperation” and “respect” in referring to relationships between older and younger students in their classroom.

Talking with my students about the issue of age in the classroom has made me more aware of the importance of providing many different kinds of topics in the classroom. One of my younger students suggested that older students, as well as other ESL students who have spent more time in the U.S., may feel more qualified and interested in talking about subjects like taxes and civic responsibility. Other students may wish to talk about family relationships and school or dating. Eliciting from students a variety of topics seems to be a key to getting students of all ages to participate in class. This gives different students a chance to be authorities on a subject. As one of my students said so well, older and younger students can help fill in the gaps in each other’s knowledge and “give confidence to each other.”

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you think it’s beneficial for a classroom to have a variety of ages?
- Can you think of any conflicts or tension that might arise between students of different ages in a classroom?
- What can the teacher do to help the younger and older students interact with each other and participate together in class?