Understanding and Teaching Emerging Adults

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Abstract: Understanding emerging adulthood has become a rising topic of interest in academic circles. While emerging adulthood is becoming more widely accepted and understood, little research focuses on emerging adults and academics. This seminar will focus on the available research to date and address some key themes that have surfaced: authenticity/relationships, credibility, and learning environment. If we are going to educate well it is important to understand what our current students value, what they are looking for, and how they learn.

Purpose and Background of Study

Understanding emerging adulthood has become a rising topic of interest in academic circles. Since Arnett (2004) first coined the term, emerging adulthood, “the study of emerging adulthood has grown significantly” (Swanson, 2016, p. 397). While emerging adulthood is becoming more and more widely accepted and understood, there is limited research available on emerging adults and academics (see Arnett, 2016; Swanson, 2016). This study is a product of my own initial dissertation research on emerging adults, research my institution probed me to conduct and present, and research I plan to continue pursuing over the next few years. To date, the literature review is in process and I have plans to conduct a qualitative study based on the literature review and theoretical research findings.

As noted above, this research endeavor began out of my dissertation studies and growing interest in emerging adulthood. Additionally, my university approached me about leading a professional development workshop on teaching emerging adults and what they value in professors. Following the workshop, several faith-based
organizations approached me about sharing my research on emerging adults and
education at various seminars and training workshops. Out of dual interest, my own and
the probing of others, I began conducting a literature review and complied my research.
So far, the findings have been quite interesting (overviewed below). I also hope to
continue the conversation and explore current undergraduate students’ perspectives.

Research Question

The main research question for this literature review is: “what is effective
teaching?” Alongside this broad question, I am also asking, “what do emerging adults
value most in their academic experiences?” In researching the first question, I have
begun to discover some key implications, or factors, for faculty who work with, teach,
mentor, and advise students. However, in my literature search I have found little
information dealing specifically with emerging adults, hence my secondary question. My
next step in the research is to address that secondary question. In so doing, I hope to
provide some empirical data to compare to, and compliment, the vast literature
available related to elementary and secondary education.

Methodology

To date, I have reviewed the literature and discovered some key factors related
to teaching well. Many of these factors, I believe, transfer across disciplines and age
groups of learners. However, I plan to continue to review the literature, create a
question guide, and conduct focus groups to probe further and hear from emerging

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adults. Conducting focus groups will provide a space for current emerging adults to share their stories, experiences, and academic values.

While there is a growing body of qualitative research, the dominant form of research related to emerging adulthood is still quantitative in nature (Swanson, 2016, p. 398). My hope is to utilize grounded theory and discover the key factors emerging adults’ value academically. Additional qualitative research is needed to provide additional information and support the quantitative data available (Swanson, 2016, p. 398).

**Literature Findings**

“The question, ‘What constitutes effective teaching?’ has been researched for decades” (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011, p. 339). With this question in mind, research suggests faculty responses to this question and students’ responses to this question are quite different. Specifically, faculty note “knowledge, enthusiasm about teaching, promoting critical thinking, being prepared, and being approachable” (Strong, et. al, 2011, p. 339) as the top five items of importance when the teaching-learning process is considered. Students, however, mention “realistic expectations and fairness, knowledge of the topic, understanding displayed, approachable and personal, and respectful toward students” (Strong, et. al, 2011, p. 339) as the top five. In light studying this topic, some key themes that have surfaced during my review of the literature available include authenticity and relationships, credibility, and learning environment. I will address each theme in the pages that follow.
**Authenticity and Relationships**

Upon reviewing the literature, it became clear that students expect teachers to be “real” people. Overall, students’ value, and more deeply respect, professors who can be themselves (Meyers, 2009; Schreff, 2011). A part of being yourself is discovering what you do best, strengthening that ability (whether it is an area of expertise, teaching style, etc.), and utilizing that strength to assist students in learning (Liesveld & Miller, 2005; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005, cited in Emmanuel & Delaney, 2014, p. 251).

**Effort.** A key aspect of authenticity is effort (Grimm, 2016). If we desire to be authentic, real people, we must authentically seek to understand, know, and respect our learners. Getting to know our students (their names for example) and a little about them goes a long way to show we are in fact authentic, real people who deeply care about, not just their academics, but them (Grimm, 2016, pp. 32-36).

**Mentoring.** Moore and Toliver (2010) also stress the value of filling the role of mentor in our students’ lives (p. 942). The role of mentor can be particularly impactful for students who feel disadvantaged, out of place, or in the minority (Moore & Toliver, 2010, pp. 942-943). Serving as a mentor, formally or informally, can impact our students beyond the classroom and remind them we are “real” people (Brown, 2016, pp. 15-17; Setran & Kiesling, 2013, pp. 205-230).
**Rapport.** The literature also emphasizes the importance of building rapport with our learners (Estepp & Roberts, 2013; Stronge, et al., 2011; Lowman, 1995; Meyers, 2009). According to the literature, student success, student’s goals, and rapport seem to have a close connection and impact the teaching-learning environment (Estepp & Roberts, 2013).

**Credibility**

Of the various factors that students and faculty list as valuable in the teaching-learning process credibility lands (in some form) on both lists. Ultimately, students expect us to be credible sources, have communication skills, and an ability to engage them in the teaching-learning process (Maceli, et al., 2011, p. 37; Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 179). Credibility, and how to be a credible source, will be addressed more fully in the implications section below.

**Environment**

A third area that seems essential in the teaching-learning process is the learning environment (Callan, 2016; Emanuel & Delaney, 2014; Marceli, et al., 2011; Reeves, 2006; Scherff, 2005; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Stronge, et al., 2011). Maceli, Gofliasso, and Baack (2011) suggest, “Instructors and the environment they create ultimately impact learning the most” (p. 43). Creating a safe and effective classroom environment will be addressed in the implications section.
Implications of the Literature

With the literature in mind, how do we apply some of these themes to the teaching-learning situation? What does it look like to be authentic, credible, and to create a safe learning environment? Each of these areas will be addressed briefly following.

Authenticity

When it comes to authenticity, building rapport is a great place to start. First impressions seem to matter and impact our learners at a significant level. With such in mind, building rapport can start with our syllabi (Grimm, 2016, pp. 1-3). Building syllabi that have a friendly, positive approach to assignments, course policies, and expectations can go a long way to establishing rapport and setting the tone for the semester.

As noted previously, another great way to build authenticity is to serve as a mentor or guide (Moore & Toliver, 2010, p. 942). Part of mentoring well is serving as a guide, being genuine, and caring deeply for the emerging adults in our lives as we help them see God’s working in the past, present, and future (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, pp. 205-230). Ultimately, current emerging adults need non-parental voices in their lives to help shape them both spiritually and academically (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, pp. 213, 219). If we value our learners and hope to see them succeed this is one area to develop an awareness of and find ways to practically serve as a guide for our students and mentor whom we are able to mentor.
Credibility

Based on the literature, we know credibility is of great value to both students and faculty (Strong, et. al, 2011, p. 339). However, how do we demonstrate credibility? One effective way to demonstrate credibility is to allow your passion and enthusiasm for your subject to shine through (Alderman, 2008, cited in Estepp & Roberts, 2013). In the midst of the teaching-learning process allow your passion to guide the session, share stories and examples from your own life, and demonstrate your knowledge of the subject in a way that is fun and contagious.

Additionally, students suggest classes where the content was interesting and meaningful (i.e. exciting, fun, applicable, and engaging) seemed to be the most impactful (see Scherff, 2011, chapter 2). Again, allowing our passion and enthusiasm for our subject area can make a deciding difference. Additionally, incorporating a variety of teaching methods and presentation styles may aid in creating interest and engagement, especially for current emerging adults (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 177; see also Paulson & Faust, 2008).

Finally, when it comes to being a credible source students suggest checking the “freshness date” (Grimm, 2016, p. 4). If we want to be perceived as credible sources, we must update course information, content, and keep our research up-to-date. Recycling old stats, readings, articles, and presentations should be avoided unless they are still relevant and accurate (Grimm, 2016, p. 4). There really is nothing more frustrating and credibility crushing than a class that utilizes out-of-date readings, articles, and/or stats.

In beginning to conduct research surrounding this topic, I have heard students say, “Dr.
Brown, the stats Professor X used in class today were from before I was born!” So, check the “freshness date” (Grimm, 2016, p. 4), unless it is a timeless truth or piece of information do not use it, or present it, as current.

Environment

Creating a safe classroom environment is also a key factor in the teaching-learning process for learners (Callan, 2016; Emanuel & Delaney, 2014; Marceli, et al., 2011; Reeves, 2006; Scherff, 2005; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Stronge, et al., 2011). As noted above, “Instructors and the environment they create ultimately impact learning the most” (Maceli, et al., 2011, p. 43). Callan (2016) also stresses the impact of safety on the academic setting. But, how do we create a safe learning environment?

The first step in creating a safe space may be first to consider the two topics address previously, authenticity and credibility. Additionally, considering things like expectations and policies, consistency, use of technology, use of power and titles, differences, and positivity may aid in creating a safe, learning-focused environment for students (Emanuel & Delaney, 2014; Grimm, 2016; Marcel, et al., 2011; Reeves, 2006; Scherff, 2005; Stronge, et al., 2011; White, 2017).

Expectations, Policies, and Consistency. Specifically, setting clear and consistent expectations is important (Marceli, et al., 2011; Reeves, 2006; Stronge, et al., 2011). Discussing the expectations and policies for the course can set the tone for the course and begin to create a learning environment that is a safe-space for students. Students
appreciate a learning environment that emphasizes consistency, fairness, and
democratic-oversight (Reeves, 2006; Stronge, et al., 2011). Similarly, research suggests
being consistent, but not monotonous, is helpful for student learning and creating a
supportive learning environment (Scherff, 2005, ch. 2).

**Technology.** Researchers also suggest handling technology in an appropriate, yet
helpful way (Brookfield, 2015; White, 2017). For example, it is important to keep in
mind that current college students have never experienced life without a “device” of
some kind (White, 2017). Being mindful of their mindset and tech-savvy nature can be
useful in the classroom and set the tone for the learning environment. While there is a
fair amount of debate surrounding technology policies in the classroom (which I will not
address here), the use of technology, freedom and limitations, impacts the classroom
dynamic and, therefore, the classroom environment. Consider the message your tech-
policy sends and how that impacts the classroom environment.

**Power.** Another important factor that seems to influence the classroom
environment is the use of power (Callan, 2016; Emanuel & Delaney, 2014, pp. 249-250).
As professors, we must consider the power dynamic in our learning environment. This is
another highly debated and loaded topic. Ultimately, we must be mindful of how the
power-dynamic influences the learning environment and how we approach the
teaching-learning situation in light of power.
**Differences.** Similarly, cultural and gender differences can impact the learning environment (Marceli, et al., 2011). The manner in which differences (i.e. gender, culture, etc.) are addressed can create a safe space or create an environment that is not safe for our learners. Being mindful of differences and how to appropriately address, or not address, such is important.

**Positivity and Autonomy.** Another key area related to classroom environment is positivity. Educational research suggests positivity goes a long way toward creating a safe, productive learning environment (Reeves, 2006; Stronge, et al., 2011, p. 348). Positivity surrounding the course, as well as the institution, seem to impact the classroom environment (Strong, et al., 2011). Therefore, utilizing a positive attitude toward the course and institution seem to be important factors when it comes to creating a healthy classroom environment.

In addition to positivity, the research also points to autonomy and internal motivation as key factors related to classroom environment (Reeves, 2006; Stronge, et al., 2011; Scherff, 2011). Encouraging internal motivation, giving reasons for tasks/assignments, and being supportive in nature seem to impact classroom environment (Reeves, 2006). Furthermore, allowing students a sense of autonomy, ownership, or choice in the learning community can greatly impact the learning environment (Reeves, 2006; Scherff, 2011, ch. 5; Stronge, et al., 2011).
Conclusion

While many of the afore mentioned factors may seem obvious, they are helpful reminders to those of us who have the privilege to teach. As youth ministry educators, if we are going to educate well it is important to understand what our current students value, what they are looking for, and how they learn best. From the literature review, it seems a few areas are key to successfully reaching and teaching learners. While little literature exists addressing emerging adults educational preferences, many findings can still be generalized across educational experiences. In conducting forth coming focus groups I hope to gain greater clarity and provide empirical data to add to the current literature available. In spite of the lack of research connected to emerging adults and academics the following quote from Lowman (1995) is a fitting reminder of both the joy and challenge we face as educators:

Beyond a solid mastery of one’s subject, college teaching of the highest order appears to be a complex task requiring the ability to communicate well with students, whether in large or small groups or in formal or informal settings, and to relate to them as people in ways they find positive and motivating. Exemplary college teaching should engender active learning not only of basic facts, theories, and methods but also of the relationships between different branches of knowledge. It should foster thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills characteristic of the educated individual. Above all else, a student receiving the best that college teaching can offer, whether in a liberal arts, technical, or professional curriculum, should be expected to emerge with an enhanced ability to evaluate information critically—to tell the difference between wisdom and poppycock. Such teaching may draw on many different skills and may be offered in a variety of styles and settings, but its unifying characteristic is that it spurs students to an active involvement in their own learning (p. 2).

May we always remember the complex nature of our calling as educators, but treasure the opportunity to speak into the lives, hearts, and minds of college students.
References


