

How old should you be to drive a bus? Using simple questions to explore ageism

Abstract

When teaching diversity, instructors require a solid tool-box of readings and exercises to support students' exploration of issues and topics that at best may be completely new to them and at worst topics that they feel uncomfortable or unable to address. The session proposed in this paper would present a simple, yet highly effective exercise on ageism, a topic of diversity that has so been greatly overlooked in terms of teaching support materials.

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Teaching diversity is not easy, instructors must use a range of techniques to help and support students to engage with issues that are usually swept under the carpet, discussed in hushed voices, or completely ignored. In some cases, such as racism or sexism, students feel they already know what the issues are, in other cases such as ableism or ageism, they may be surprised such terms even exist – leading them to believe these are not real aspects of diversity that need to be addressed. Overall, instructors must carefully navigate the many levels of political correctness and social pressures that can restrict any authentic discussion of sensitive issues (Avery & Steingard, 2008).

However, there is hope. For many of the topics that fall under the wide umbrella of diversity issues there are many readings and exercises that can be used to guide the students in exploring these issues. A quick search in the Journal of Management Education alone highlighted over 100 exercises related to investigating and illustrating many aspects of diversity. There is however, one area of diversity that is given short shrift in terms of reading and exercises, and that is ageism. Evidence suggests that age sensitivity is something that needs to be taught, especially to management students. Hedge, Borman, & Lammlein (2006) report that age discrimination law suits have been on the rise since the 1990's, further Dipboye and Halverson (2004) provide compelling evidence of multiple types of “subtle (and not so subtle) discrimination in organizations” and their pernicious effects (p.131).

Teaching ageism is particularly challenging with undergraduate students as they do not realize how much they have been socialized to believe that certain chronological ages directly correspond to certain specific abilities. They underestimate how much the

vast legal framework surrounding issues related to age in our society have shaped their beliefs and expectations, and therefore their actions.

I have taught issues of diversity both in terms of weaving topics into traditional organizational behavior classes, and graduate classes in managing diversity. However more recently I've been teaching an introduction to diversity class for freshman students and it is for this class I developed the following exercise. I have found through discussions of ageism with this population of students that they find it very hard to distinguish what is discrimination based on age, and what is just a good, solid rule or regulation based on abilities and/or maturity. I also found that the few exercises I could find were mostly role-plays or case studies involving a manager trying to deal sensitively with an older worker, and these types of activities do not engage this population of students because they either don't care that older workers are not treated fairly, or because they cannot visualize themselves in such a position of status or authority. I wanted to develop an exercise that illustrated aspects of how we discriminate based on age at all areas of society, and that anyone and everyone can be discriminated against, no matter what age they are.

How old should you be to....?

The exercise begins by asking the students to think about some of the milestones we pass through in life and what ages should be associated with them. This can be done by the instructor bringing a pre-prepared list to class, however I find it engages the students more if they are able to develop the list themselves. I write the opening at the top of the board: how old should you be to....?, I then make a list below. If the students are having problems thinking of examples a few easy ones that I use to get them going

are: start formal schooling, leave school, live alone, drive a car, drive a bus, fly a commercial plane. Once the students get warmed up with this the list can be endless but I usually stop it at about 12-15 items. Key to making the list is to ensure that it includes activities that are stereotypically or legally bound at a range of ages including child, teen, emerging adult, adult, middle aged, old, older. I then split the students into groups to come to agreement on what age is fitting for each activity and why. The length of time for this portion of the exercise can be based on the class time available, I've found that students need at least 25 minutes in their groups to come to agreement on the age for around 12 activities.

At the end of the separate groups discussion period I record the ages suggested on the board next to the list of activities. It is here that a whole class discussion can highlight the difficulties that students have with thinking outside the age-appropriate framework we live in. In my experience the groups will vary a year or so around a 'legal' age for something, but will not suggest any drastic changes to the status-quo. Groups that have tried to beat the system by simply removing any age limit are pushed to justify if no age limit is appropriate. When leading this discussion the biggest 'aha' moments for the students actually comes when they realize that they really can't give reasons for their choices other than things like "well, that's just what fits", or "that's how it's always been". Finally, doing some web-searching (either before or during the class if the list is made in class) to show the provenance of some age limits and laws can illustrate that age is something that, although they believe is very objective and therefore valid to discriminate on, is actually very subjective and socially constructed. I've found

this exercise to be a deceptively simple tool to highlight how acceptable age discrimination is.

I feel that this session speaks directly to the theme of this year's conference, engaging difference. The exercise to be presented will give management educators a simple, yet effective tool to illustrate and provide a basis for discussion of an often overlooked aspect of difference in our society. In addition, this is an exercise that could be used in a mixed age-group class to highlight differences and similarities of perception across age-groups, hopefully bringing even more insight to the members of the different groups and helping them to be more sympathetic to points of view which may vary from their own.

Session Content

I plan to use this session to both demonstrate the exercise and to engage participants in a discussion aimed at improving and expanding the current format. I would need a 30 minute session. The first 15 minutes would involve the session participants taking part in a shortened version of the exercise. The second 15 minutes would be comprised of an open discussion. One of the great aspects of this exercise is that it can be tailored to fit the time available to the instructor, and no special technology resources are required, simply a whiteboard and a marker.

References

Avery, D. R., & Steingard, D. S. 2008. Achieving political trans-correctness: Integrating sensitivity and authenticity in diversity management education. *Journal of Management Education*, 32, 269-293. DOI: 10.1177/1052562907305557.

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