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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Teaching Empathy and Understanding With a Game

It is difficult to teach students concepts in the affective domain. It is even more difficult to get students to examine their feelings and biases effectively. I struggle with this task each year in teaching beginning nursing students.

These students have particular difficulty identifying with the elderly. The component of the course that deals with older patients is often met with reluctance, anxiety, and negative attitudes. Entering the clinical setting with these feelings typically results in a poor experience for the students and for the patients. It is obvious that for students to learn about and care effectively for older patients, they must think critically about their own attitudes and increase their understanding and empathy for the problems of the elderly. This year, we used a game to create an environment for helping them accomplish these objectives.

The Game

The students "lived" the experiences of the elderly in this game. They started at the "identity table" where they were asked to select an age (older than 65), an occupation from which they have retired, a retirement lifestyle, and three personal possessions that they would like to take with them to a nursing home. To aid in the process of identifying with the elderly, students were given simulated deficits associated with aging: cotton placed in their ears simulated some degree of deafness; glasses with vaseline on the lens simulated cataracts; gloves with tongue depressors in one or two fingers simulated the stiffened joints of arthritis; shoelaces tied together produced the limited gait of arthritic hips; and pebbles placed in shoes provided the pain of walking with corns, bunions, or arthritic deformities.

The game identified three functional levels of elder living: independent, assisted, and totally dependent; each level was located at a separate table. Each had a table operator who wore an identification badge, Game Overall Director (GOD). Operators were coached to display biases and discriminatory practices typical of those seen in society. At Table 1, a newly retired player might be discouraged from learning to drive a car by being told he is too old to learn that now. A player at Table 2 might have cash (three pennies) confiscated for safekeeping and told he is not capable of handling his own finances. At Table 3, a player might be tied into a chair and labeled senile. An income grid allowed players an opportunity to supplement their fixed income. The operator of this area was equally demeaning to the players, attempting to cheat them or involve them in questionable money-making schemes.

At each table, players drew cards and proceeded through the game as the cards indicated. Some cards had positive consequences; however, the greatest number had negative consequences which caused the players to move from their independent healthy state to an eventual assisted, or total dependent state, with the loss of personal effects and income. Even their identities were threatened with nicknames such as "Pops," "Honey," and "Sweetie." As totally dependent, they were left on bedpans for prolonged periods of time, fed baby food, and their requests and complaints were ignored, until finally the consequence of death, instead of invoking dread, actually became a relief that the struggle was over.

The game was played for approximately one hour, then discussion allowed students to verbalize their feelings and observations. Students also were asked to critique the game for its value as a learning experience.

Evaluation

By altering students' perspectives of the elderly, we had hoped that their attitudes would change and that the care they delivered to their aged clients would improve. After the game, students in the clinical setting did show greater patience, concern, and empathy for their elderly clients. The nursing home rotation was seen as an opportunity to interact with the elderly, instead of a dreaded requirement, and a few students expressed a desire to return to the nursing home for further clinical experiences.

The utilization of this game as a teaching/learning tool allowed students the opportunity to experience the life of the elderly in a safe, reality-oriented environment. Students were able to explore their feelings and examine biases from a perspective designed to promote insights and understanding. The instructors worked to create an emotional and intellectual climate that was constructive and caring in order for students to freely participate and to be able to draw their own inferences and conclusions from the experience without fear of censure.

Conclusion

Responses from students about this game and their experiences were positive. They were intensely involved in the experience, fighting to keep the identity and independence of their character. They had some fun while gaining insights and understanding of older people and their problems. Student suggestions and responses have led us to work on offering this experience as a continuing education workshop to health care providers and other interested students. We also are considering other gaming strategies. This creative, multifaceted teaching/learning situation promoted the development of critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills necessary for students to meet the challenges of caring for the elderly.

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The Craft of Imaginative Writing: A Short Course on Discipline

Though all undergraduate institutions offer a range of English composition courses and many offer courses in creative writing, few programs allow interested, motivated students who are also good writers to hear firsthand how the professional writer of journalism, fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry progresses in the day-to-day engagement with the written word. Sensing an interest in such a course from a sufficiently advanced group of students, I offered "The Craft of Imaginative Writing" during a six-week semester.

Over the short summer semester, I invited 15 published writers from a wide range of genres to read to the class from their work and discuss it in terms of influence, craft, intention, and goals. The students, who had read something from the work of each writer, then questioned the visiting author closely, drawing, for the most part, from a pool of relevant questions we had written in our initial class meetings.

- Who (and what) have been your major influences?
- What is your typical writing routine? Do you write daily?
- Do you keep a journal? Why/why not?
- What techniques do you use to find "inspiration"?
- Do you use (have you used) any writing "exercises"?
- How much revision do you typically do?
- What is the formal content/intention of your work?
- What advice would you give a young writer?

On days when no writer visited, we compared reactions, discussed similarities and differences in approach, and discussed the work of upcoming writers.

Students were to respond to each visiting writer with an extended journal entry and to write a final 10-page paper discussing the work of any writer or writers who had visited the class. The midterm and final essay exams asked students to discuss insights they had gained about the process and practice of serious writing. I was pleased with the results of the course both in terms of what transpired in the classroom and in terms of the insights my students reached in their written work.

The course was a pleasure to teach; in fact, I often felt as though, having wound up and started a machine, I had only to stand back and watch it purr. There were surprisingly few lulls in the question-and-answer period; in many cases, the discussion lasted an hour or more beyond the allotted class time. My students learned a great deal, too—about dedication and hard work, about the importance of reading, and about how one becomes a writer—simply by writing, and then by writing (and revising) more. The information was both practical and literary: Students learned specific writing practices, and they engaged in discussions of aesthetics and values. Student feedback indicated that the course was not only interesting but that it was, for some, inspiring.

For the instructor, the success of such a course as "The Craft of Imaginative Writing" requires hard work in the months prior to the semester during which the course will be taught. It is imperative that the visiting authors not only be interesting, accomplished writers, but that they also be personable speakers who are honestly willing to share. (With the permission of the visiting writers, I make an audiotape of each speaker for use in future classes.) The students must be screened, as well, to ensure they are genuinely interested and are sufficiently advanced in their own writing that they will be able to engage in fruitful discussion with the visiting authors. And a course like this is best taught during a short semester—the experience might lose its intensity and become tedious over a longer term.

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