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GAY, OLD AND DISABLED: USING A SIMULATION TO TEACH SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY SYSTEMS

This paper describes development of a simulation for teaching students about social work practice with older people. At the core are two older gay men who have spent years together. One of these men has dementia and has been cared for by his partner. When this partner is hospitalized with a right sided stroke resulting in no speech, impaired cognition, an inability to swallow and muscle weakness decisions have to be made about future care. Students are assigned characters from the extended family and the health and community care systems, many characters coming from minority or dominant groups. As the students in their real life come from these backgrounds the complexity of the simulation is increased.

The rationale for this teaching approach emerges from understanding students and their characteristics and from the political context of higher education and the demands of professional education. Students, born after 1980 and currently entering university are referred to as “millennials” and comprise a diverse group with 31% coming from minority groups. As with previous generations such as the “baby boomers” and “Gen-X” it is asserted that they have particular characteristics and expectations which impact on how they communicate, how they learn. Our prior teaching and learning experiences and our specific generational perspective also influence how we teach them. Special, achievers, sheltered, team oriented, confident, pressured and conventional are some of the words used to describe millennial students. Active learning, working in teams, collaboration and using technology are key parts of their classroom expectations. They differ from their teachers who use one-on-one approaches valuing individualism and lecture style approaches.

Universities are currently subjected to new imperatives and expectations. In Canada, the Ontario government’s goal is for 70% participation in post secondary education. Together with this pressure are government demands to demonstrate that students achieve learning outcomes that show that universities deliver what they claim to deliver. Employers have expectations that graduating students are work and future ready. In the professional domain, registration boards and professional bodies clearly specify competencies that students are expected to have on entry into the profession. The use of entry examinations by registration bodies is used in some American states and is under consideration in Canada. These imperatives mean rethinking teaching and learning practices.

The challenge posed for social work educators is how to develop simultaneously an appreciation of identity politics, critical thinking skills, problem solving, working in a group, capacity to practice and make ethical decisions given the characteristics of millennial students. In other words, how do we enable this current “crop” of students to learn? This simulation allowed the presenter to reflect on the complexity of teaching about injustices to marginalized groups in a theoretical and practice sense whilst collaborating and solving a real life challenging situation.