



IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS

Spreading the Word: Teaching Health Promotion to Students from Disciplines Other than Health

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ABSTRACT *Intersectoral collaboration has gained acceptance as a strategic approach in promoting health, based on the assumption that the main determinants of health are social, physical and politico-economic factors and not medical care utilization. However, the difficulties of collaborating intersectorally for better health have become apparent over the last two decades. This paper describes an attempt to address these difficulties through an awareness-raising educational initiative devised for undergraduate university students from disciplines other than health. The course aims to raise students' appreciation of the ways in which their future occupations could have an impact on the health of others through intersectoral collaboration and the creation of environments that are supportive of health. The evaluation of the course, which comprised a peer-review process, a questionnaire seeking student feedback, and a task exploring students' ideas on how they could influence the health of others, demonstrated that students recognized the value of working intersectorally for better health. If intersectoral collaboration is really expected to be the way forward that many public health theorists claim, then this small but effective contribution should best be seen as one of a series of incremental building blocks leading to the desired effects.*

KEYWORDS *Teaching, health promotion, intersectoral collaboration.*

Introduction

The Alma-Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care of 1978 exhorted all member states of the World Health Organization to embrace some relatively radical principles in the quest for Health for All (WHO, 1978). One of the principles put forward was intersectoral collaboration. In the subsequent two decades, the difficulties of collaborating intersectorally for better health have

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become apparent. This paper describes one attempt to address these difficulties through an awareness-raising educational initiative within disciplines other than health.

Intersectoral collaboration is unequivocally valued in the Alma-Ata Declaration, which states "Health cannot be attained by the health sector alone" (WHO, 1978, p. 10). An important aspect of health promotion is intersectoral action where the health sector forms a relationship with another sector or sectors to improve health in a way that could not have been achieved as effectively if addressed by the health sector alone (Harris *et al.*, 1995).

Intersectoral collaboration has gained acceptance as a strategic approach in promoting health, based on the assumption that the main determinants of health are social, physical and politico-economic factors and not medical care utilization (WHO, 1978; National Health Strategy, 1992). Following this assumption, attempts to improve health must address these determinants, which lie outside the usual domain of the health care sector. One of the challenges associated with intersectoral collaboration, therefore, is having other sectors appreciate the effect that their contribution can have on health, and being willing to work with the health sector. Although efforts have been expended in building the capacity of the health sector to undertake this collaboration (Harris *et al.*, 1995), little attention has been given to enhancing the understanding of the partner organizations with whom this collaboration needs to occur. The literature is scant in attempts to do this, but one example was documented in this journal. A training course with government personnel from different sectors was shown to be successful in facilitating intersectoral decision making in relation to environmental health issues (Birley *et al.*, 1996). One strategy for increasing intersectoral collaboration and supportive environments might be that of raising awareness of the potential impact that the future occupation of students from disciplines other than health might have on the health of their communities.

An opportunity arose to develop an initiative with this goal through the General Education Program (GEP) of the University of New South Wales (UNSW), an aspect of undergraduate education of which this university is particularly proud. The purpose of the program is to "broaden students' understanding of the environment in which they live and work and to enhance their skills of critical analysis" (UNSW, 1999). The GEP aims to "increase opportunities for student choice of subjects; and to eliminate the artificial categorization of subjects" (UNSW, 1999). Students are expected to take several general education courses from any faculty except the one in which they are primarily enrolled. Thus the program allows for study of areas different from that in which the student wishes to major. For example, the humanities are made available to engineers, science topics can be addressed by students of drama and dance, and so forth. We determined that the UNSW General Education Program would be a most appropriate vehicle through which to explore the extent to which we could raise awareness regarding intersectoral collaboration for health and the creation of environments that are supportive of health. To this end, a new health

health promotion course was piloted in the first semester of 1998 by the UNSW Centre for Public Health.

Description of Course

While health promotion is taught to postgraduate students in UNSW's Faculty of Medicine as a core component of the Master of Public Health degree, we were aware of very little focus on the promotion of health for students in undergraduate courses within this institution. Due to the plethora of general education courses available, we needed to frame our new offering in a form that would appeal widely. Initial opportunistic discussions with undergraduates revealed that they were generally interested in personal development and fitness, so a focus on healthy lifestyles might allow us to start where the students were "at" (Knowles, 1975). Yet it was essential to address overtly the social, physical and politico-economic determinants of health. It was therefore determined that we would entitle the course "Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and Healthy Environments," with our intention being to help participants move from a focus on their own lifestyles to a focus on the wider issues that have an impact on health.

Our predominant aim was to foster the understanding that health is created in people's living conditions and lifestyles, and that the promotion of health is everybody's business (WHO, 1986). We intended that students who take this course would gain an appreciation of concepts of health promotion which would enable them to understand how they could improve not only their own health, but more importantly, the health of others.

The objectives of the course were designed to enable students to be able to:

- comprehend the range of meanings of health, health promotion and related terms;
- describe a wide range of health promotion strategies;
- appraise the major current issues in health promotion; and
- appreciate the necessity for interaction between various professions for the promotion of health.

To meet these objectives within the requirements of the General Education Program, we planned to offer the course material within a two-hour session in each week of the 14-week semester, with equal time devoted to interactive tutorial sessions and formal lectures. The number of students in tutorials would range from 15 to 20. We intended that the lecture component would serve as a trigger to raise pertinent issues, and the subsequent tutorial would enable the development of critical thinking within the class, through analysis of the lecture content and reflection on whatever issues arose. Keeping in mind the aim of initially raising awareness regarding the promotion of students' own health and then exposing them to opportunities for promoting the health of others, we started with a focus on promoting physical, mental and sexual health of

Table 1. Topics covered in the course “Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and Healthy Environments”

Week number	Topic
1	Introduction
2	Overview of the determinants that affect health
3	What is health promotion?
4	Overview of health promotion strategies
5	Alcohol, smoking and other drugs
6	Food and nutrition
7	Mental health
8	Sexuality
9	Occupational health and safety
10	Healthy housing
11	Environmental exposure to toxins
12	Poverty and unemployment
13	Aboriginal health
14	The global picture

individuals. As the weeks progressed, we addressed the wider issues of the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. We planned our final class to cover the issue of the health of people being dependent on the health of the global environment. The topics covered in the course are presented in Table 1.

We chose assessment tasks that were appropriate and relevant to the course objectives. Three short tutorial tasks became part of the overall assessment. These expected students to apply the theoretical learnings to their own situations. The final assessment required them to write an assignment demonstrating their understanding of the social, physical and politico-economic determinants of health in a particular setting from their own experience. We were aware we could use one of the short tasks as a component of the formative evaluation of the course task. In this assessment activity we asked students to describe ways they believed that their future occupation could influence the health of others.

Thirty-one students enrolled in the course in the first intake. The degree in which students were enrolled and their nominated future occupations are presented in Table 2. Although we were seeking to work with non-health disciplines, the course did attract students from some health-related degrees—social work, optometry and psychology. However, we expected that the involvement of the latter could enhance the opportunities for discussion around communication between health and non-health personnel.

Course Evaluation

The course was evaluated in three ways. First, there was ongoing peer-review of the course through regular meetings between lecturers and tutors, where

Table 2. The degree in which students were enrolled and their nominated future occupations

Bachelor degree	No. of students	Nominated future occupations
Arts	6	Film or television producer; sociologist; translator/interpreter; advertising/publishing; politician or diplomat
Social work	6	Social work; working with children, youth and staff in residential units/refuges
Science	5	Software developer; computer programmer/engineer; ecologist; research mathematician; pharmacologist
Optometry	5	Optometrist
Commerce	4	Management consultant; marketing; accountant; human resource management
Industrial design	2	Product design and development; marketing
Commerce/science	1	Merchant banker
Fine arts	1	Working for alternative health magazine
Psychology	1	Psychotherapist
Total	31	

reflection on the content and process of each session took place. Second, the activities of the course and its quality were assessed using the standard questionnaire for the University's General Education Program. Third, one of the tutorial tasks, tapping the students' ideas on how their future occupation could positively influence the health of others, was considered an important measure of the impact of the course.

Peer-review Process

The peer-review process was used to determine the appropriateness of the course objectives, the sequencing of subject topics, the effectiveness of the course materials, and the relevance of the assessment tasks. It was also used to assess whether the interrelationship between the lectures and tutorials was achieved and whether the pitch was appropriate for students from a range of disciplines. Recommendations arose from this process to improve the next offering of the course. Resulting minor modifications were incorporated into the revised instructional design. Differences were found between the students from health-related fields and those from non-health fields. Those pursuing health-related degrees were more familiar with health-related issues, but were less creative in identifying ways in which their future organization could have an impact on health.

The University's General Education Program Evaluation

Twenty-seven out of the 31 students in the course completed the university's GEP evaluation questionnaire giving a student perspective on the course. Most of the students thought that the course offered adequate systematic analysis, criticism and reflection and that they had developed skills needed to engage in critical analysis and evaluation of information. Responses demonstrated that the course succeeded in requiring participants to explore new disciplines beyond those of their major areas of specialization and provided them with the opportunity to interact with students from other disciplines. Students felt the course also provided a non-specialist introduction to the subject material without presuming prior knowledge.

The teaching was rated favorably and the difficulty level of the course compared with other courses was considered to be appropriate. Most students would recommend this course to other students. Overall, the student feedback evaluation of this new course was most positive.

Tutorial Task

Results from the tutorial task demonstrated that all students had an appreciation of ways in which their future occupation could have an impact on the health of others. In most cases this was beyond the expected requirements of their occupation. Responses also indicated a real understanding of the determinants of health. However, these responses tended to polarize, with one group of students emphasizing individual change through providing information for their clients, customers or colleagues, with the others using their job to create environments supportive of health.

Examples of ways students perceived that their future occupations could promote health at the individual level included the following:

- to make a video on the effects of passive smoking, or on sexually transmitted diseases (arts student);
- to advertise goods and services that are supportive of health (commerce student);
- to write a book on pollution in the home environment (arts student); and
- to have a non-smoking optometry practice that provided information on the effect of smoking on vision (optometry student).

Examples of ways students perceived that their future occupations could promote health by creating supportive environments included the following:

- to create positive representations in films by removing references to smoking and characters who smoke, as well as creating a more realistic representation of women (arts student);
- to work on the logistics of traffic flow, thereby cutting down on pollution (science student);

- to identify environmental hazards and to develop strategies to eliminate these hazards (science student); and
- to provide information and political pressure for the conservation of natural areas (science student).

Conclusion

Although intersectoral collaboration was first recommended 20 years ago and is valued in the literature as a strategy worth adopting for the promotion of health (e.g. WHO, 1986), many obstacles stand in the way of governments, organizations and individuals who choose to adopt this approach in practice. Within the health sector, much emphasis has been put on building the capacity of organizations to upgrade their ability to collaborate intersectorally (Harris *et al.*, 1995). An approach that raises awareness and has potential to set an agenda within sectors outside of health in the manner described here must surely be constructive in furthering this goal. If intersectoral collaboration is really expected to be the way forward that many public health theorists claim, then this small but effective contribution should best be seen as one of a series of incremental building blocks leading to the desired effects.

This course offers a unique opportunity to interact with a multidisciplinary group of students who have the potential for making a difference to the health of others through their future occupations. Further research is needed to determine the sustainability of the students' intentions after they have embarked on their careers.

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