



COMMENTARY

## **Sociology (and All the Behavioral Sciences) Have a Place in All the Health Professions: Commentary on “Teaching Sociology within the Speech and Language Therapy Curriculum”**

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The manuscript by Dr. Sarah Earle (2001) raises important points regarding the inclusion of sociology in the education of health professionals. The topic is relevant to training speech and language therapists, as she argues, and is pertinent to all health professions education.

As Dr. Earle correctly points out, sociology (and social sciences as a whole) suffers as health professions education adopts a semantic conjunction approach. In this approach, content areas directly related to a chosen profession are the primary (even exclusive) focus. This specialty (and sub-specialty) approach to health professional education is problematic for two reasons. First, it tends to keep the curriculum static because faculty who are focused primarily on their own disciplines tend to advocate traditional content and instructional methodologies. Second, it excludes content areas such as sociology that have not traditionally been included in the curriculum, thus impeding the growth of scientific knowledge (Leighton, 1994).

The exclusion of sociology and the social sciences as a whole seems quizzical. Most professional schools have divisions and/or departments of behavioral science. The behavioral science divisions are usually staffed by counselors and social workers as well as by clinical psychologists. Such professionals' training is clinical. If the purposes of behavioral science divisions or departments are the study of human behavior and helping health professionals gain enhanced insight into the people for whom they are providing care, then the exclusion of sociologists, cultural anthropologists, economists, cultural geographers, and other social scientists seems inappropriate. It appears that the inclusion criteria for entry into such divisions or

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departments are that the faculty members actually function in a clinical capacity, rather than focusing on the individuals with the best paradigm or approach to a given issue (Cassidy, 1995).

The evolution of health care makes the inclusion of the social sciences in the training process increasingly important. It seems that health professions education would be well served by learning from our basic science counterparts. The basic science curriculum is taught by experts educated within key components of their fields of study, regardless if the instructor is or is not a clinical practitioner. For example, physical anthropologists teach anatomy courses in many schools. Although not clinicians, the instructors are, nevertheless, content experts in the structure and function of the human body. Likewise, content experts in social interaction, whether in clinical practice or not, can and should be tapped to teach content areas in the behavioral and social sciences (Margereson, 1997).

Dr. Earle stressed that a paradigm shift is needed in health professional education. A model encompassing personal education, in which any academic discipline is valuable to future professionals, seems less tenable in educational systems that increasingly stress content specificity. Still, the semantic conjunction model in professional education appears to exclude those who are not practitioners. An expanded view of what is relevant to the health professions is needed, including a broader look at who is most qualified to teach the content. To do so means breaking down the territorial walls, dispersing ownership of content areas, and looking anew at what is taught and by whom.

Dr. Earle is to be applauded for her efforts. Too frequently, those of us who specialize in health professions education build our curricula around what traditionally has been included and what departments and divisions have traditionally been responsible for teaching. Dr. Earle's manuscript is a strong reminder to think creatively in our efforts to provide the strongest possible learning experience for future health care providers.

## References

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