

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: LEARNING ABOUT DEMENTIA UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

AN INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Biopsychosocial Aspects of Dementia is a high impact, integrated service-learning course. This design enhances student learning and excitement about course content (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Gilmartin-Thomas & Duncan, 2017; Niehaus et al., 2017). In addition, it provides a valuable service to an underserved population: Long-term care residents with dementing illnesses (R. Essmyer, personal communication, November 7, 2018).

The course begins with six weeks (3 hours/week) of a broad introduction to dementia. Students learn to distinguish between normal age-related changes, mild cognitive impairment, dementia and delirium. A brief review of some of the more than one hundred illnesses associated with dementia or dementia-like signs and symptoms provides a glimpse into this complex area of medicine. The curriculum emphasizes closer examination of the most common dementing diseases and disorders. Content includes assessment, early signs of these illnesses, and their typical progressions from mild to moderate and late stages. Also covered is caregiver decision-making regarding, for example, health and healthcare, quality of life, safety, home and residential care options, and end of life concerns for care recipients. Students explore the joys and challenges, frustrations and sacrifices of both formal and informal caregivers. Techniques for managing everyday tasks, handling the challenges, and bringing joy and entertainment to these individuals are shared extensively. Because communication is critical in every aspect of caregiver-care recipient interaction, a speech pathologist visits the class and demonstrates many of the creative approaches she takes to enhancing communication between herself and her clients with dementia as their language skills deteriorate.

Key to understanding what it is like to live with dementia, the class meets at a local memory care unit for four weeks (2-1/2 hours per week), visiting and participating in activities with residents, receiving some training from facility staff, and applying their newly acquired skills and knowledge. Throughout these four weeks, students consider and write about their observations in a journal, integrating these in-person experiences with course material. For the remainder of the semester, they study finer details of life with dementia for the caregiver as well as the individual with the illness. One of the most impactful activities in addition to spending time with the long-term care residents consists of a 15-minute Virtual Dementia Tour® (Beville, 2002), learning firsthand what it is like to have dementia, a powerful experience.

This course has been very successful in teaching students about an underserved population with whom most have never interacted. Class members rate the course very highly and recommend it to fellow students. It enriches the training of Missouri State University Gerontology majors while attracting students from a surprisingly wide variety of majors.

SELECT REFERENCES

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