

**MACH 5331 – Human Sexuality and Health**  
**Spring 2015**  
**Course Report**

*Prepared By: Dr. Melissa Oden, Course Professor*

**Introduction**

I believe that every Professor wants to do their best to make sure that students are learning what they need to learn to be successful in today's workforce. This is particularly critical in public health with old and new challenges facing public health practitioners each and every day. There are many different teaching methods that can be employed to assure that students are, indeed, obtaining what they need to be effective public health practitioners. However, with the culture of education in general, and the classroom specifically, changing with the entrance of Millennials into these learning spaces, it behooves Professors to critically consider what methods of instruction are best suited for their particular subject and classroom culture.

According to Ewell (1997), a growing number of stakeholders in higher education, including but not limited to politicians, employers and taxpayers, have growing doubts about what students are really learning in higher education and about the practicality of the current style of pedagogy in higher education. Does it really prepare students for the true complexities of today's work world? Additionally, Ewell (1997) suggests several different avenues through which deep and lasting learning actually occurs. Human learning and development; curriculum and instructional design; and a continual examination of the core processes of learning to improve outcomes should be considered.

Because I teach courses in the Behavioral and Community Health Sciences, these courses lend themselves well to using experiential learning techniques. The Experiential Learning Cycle was developed by David Kolb in 1984 to describe the process of deriving meaning from direct

experience (Oden, 2011). The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) (Kolb, 1984) consists of five important stages that pave the way to meaningful learning: (1) experiencing, (2) reporting, (3) processing, (4) generalizing, and (5) applying. This cycle is the conceptual foundation upon which all of my classes are designed. The purpose of using this theoretical construct is to support the student in moving past the basics of learning into deeper, more meaningful learning experiences, thus creating more fertile ground for learning to “stick”.

## **Background**

I employed The Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) from the very first day I set foot in a classroom as a Professor. I had used it successfully in my previous work in youth development, and had a strong conviction that if it worked well for youth, why wouldn't it work well for college students, and even adult learners as well? So from the very beginning I have used this theoretical base for all of my classes.

To ensure that I follow this plan, I set up a lesson plan form that was inspired from the ones I used while doing my work in youth development. Although these lesson plan forms have gone through several iterations over the last 4 years, the premise and basic structure is still the same: Follow the steps of the ELC. On the back of the lesson plan form is a form that I created, again based on something I was trained to use during my work in youth development, called the Professor Feedback Form. This form asks some basic questions about each particular class and allows me, the Professor, to reflect on whether or not that particular class session achieved what I thought it should have achieved.

This semester I wanted to know more. I wanted to see if I could determine not only IF my students were learning but WHAT they were learning. So, I employed some research-based

methods to develop a baseline of outcomes that would show whether or not these goals were achieved.

### **Methodology/Procedures**

This semester I taught MACH 5331, Human Sexuality and Health. There were ten students enrolled. This was the third semester that I have taught this particular course. The previous two years, this course was BACH 5331. Since we now have the new Maternal And Child Health (MACH) track, this course was moved to the MACH track and became a required course instead of an elective.

Because I only teach this course once per year, I like to do an annual syllabus audit of other Human Sexuality courses across the country to determine if there are some best practices in terms of assignments used to help student achieve learning outcomes. This semester I chose six out-of-class assignments that I felt like most reflected the modules I would be teaching, as well as allow the students multiple different ways to absorb and apply the material. Those assignments were:

- A human sexuality research proposal
- Two journal article critiques
- A media analysis
- A semester-long journal
- An in-class professional oral presentation
- The 3-2-1 Purposeful Reading Reflection

All of these assignments were explained via handouts as well as orally at the beginning of the semester. Each assignment had an accompanying rubric so that the students would know what was expected of them. (For a description of each assignment, please see Appendix A.)

The other method that I employed that directly reflected the ELC was weekly in-class activities. Although this was nothing new for my courses, what *was* new was the fact that I created a rubric for each student for each week of class and they were evaluated on six areas of performance: Participation/Contribution; Attitude; Content Mastery; Team Work; Integration of Course Material; Critical Thinking. An “experience” in my classroom can be anything from a video with discussion to group work to station-based activities, etc.

The in-class activities were pre-planned, hands-on activities that helped the student understand and integrate that week’s concepts. These activities were always planned and carried out following the ELC. At the end of each class I would sign into Canvas and complete a rubric for each student that reflected his or her performance that day.

### **Evaluation**

To help me evaluate how the course was progressing each week, I did an activity with the students at the end of each class period called “Plus/Minus”. I would take a sheet of chart paper and hang it on the whiteboard where everyone could see it. I would draw a line down the middle of the paper and then write a “+” on the left side and a “-“ on the right side. These signs represented the good things that the students felt happened in class that day, and the not-so-good things that either happened or should have happened but didn’t. This gave the students further opportunity to reflect on their learning and talk about what they learned or didn’t learn but *wanted* to learn.

There were also weeks that I opened up a discussion in Canvas to allow the students to further discuss issues that were addressed in class. It was interesting to me that few people took advantage of that; they all wanted to have face-to-face interaction.

## Outcomes

The student-specific averages for meeting learning outcomes ranged from 4.3 – 5.0 on a 5.0 scale. The competency averages ranged from 4.67 to 4.71 on a 5.0 scale. However, what I think are the most telling results come from the students' own responses to some questions I asked them to answer in their last journal entry for the semester:

1. What are three “take-a-ways” for you from what you heard in class this semester?
2. Which of your values were solidified? Which ones did you question?
3. What did you learn about yourself? Has anything changed for you?
4. Which of the activities that we did in class helped you understand and synthesize the material the most?

Some of their answers absolutely floored me:

*From Question 1: What are three “take-a-ways” for you from what you heard in class this semester?*

This class has shown me that things aren't black and white. I love living in a bubble where I can view things as one way or another, but that isn't living in reality. My views of things can't become stagnant. Life moves forward, society changes, and I must too.

Sex, health, relationships, cultures are messy and beautiful, but they aren't independent. Each entity is influenced by the other. It's a circle, not a line.

Acceptance doesn't mean compromise. My values and beliefs are my own, but that doesn't mean that the values and beliefs of others should be diminished. I can accept people for who they are without compromising who I am.

No work we do in public health is small or significant and also that we shouldn't give up on the work we do.

The task of bringing change in our communities through public health cannot be done alone. It requires the cooperation and support of not only our peers in public health, but also of professionals outside public health to make community programs work – it is a combined inter and intra professional effort.

As we go through the work we do it is important to constantly be introspective and remind ourselves of why we do what we do. It is essential to step back and reflect every once in a while to continue to inspire ourselves – this I learned from all the journals we wrote in this class.

A major one is critical thinking. My ability to think critically about concepts greatly increased to where I can be watching a movie for example and as I'm processing what's going on I'm thinking about how it relates to this or that.

Not being afraid to speak my mind is something very important that I learned from the class.

We had such an open environment that allowed me to slowly ease into speaking up and giving my opinion about something. It has definitely helped me speak up in my other classes, which have improved my understanding of more concepts. The discussions also allowed me to learn how to listen to other people and with their input allow even more ideas to sprout in my mind.

I really enjoyed learning about the sexuality research, how far we have come and how much of this research worked.

The focus on sex in the media and the consumerism that revolves around sex not just here in the U.S. but how it impacts the whole world.

This class really allowed me to open up and get more comfortable talking about sex and helped me realize how important it is to be open and to talk about it. That's the take-away that I'm most grateful for, I think, and it was probably where I learned most about myself too.

I think this class deserves a better name than just human sexuality because it did not just teach about human sexuality; it afforded opportunity for personal growth and societal awareness.

I will say this class potentially equips one to be street smart and professionally groomed all at the same time.

*From Question 2: Which of your values were solidified? Which ones did you question?*

If this class solidified anything for me, it was my sense of compassion and desire to serve. The discussions we had and the issues we addressed were honest and real, and they stirred up something in me that I forgot I had. It gets so easy to feel secure in your own safe environment, but service isn't safe. It's being willing to put yourself in uncomfortable situations in order to make life a little better for someone else. That's what this class reminded me.

One of the shifts in my values has been in the way I thought about sexuality. Because of being raised in a household where sexuality is never discussed and is almost taboo, through this class I realized that we shouldn't be scared to accept the fact that being sexual is part of being human. And having sex before marriage does not make any one a bad person, it is just a part of being human. But the values that were solidified were of the timing of sexual debut and its impact on lifelong sexual health. I had always believed that it is best to wait and to be safe when having sex, just so educational and career opportunities are not compromised due to unwanted pregnancies or STI's – through this class, I know I am not wrong for believing in waiting for the right partner and appropriate age for having sex.

*From Question 3: What did you learn about yourself? Has anything changed for you?*

Surprisingly, I've learned that I might not be as "big" of a feminist as I thought I was. (It's not really something I want to elaborate on.) This class also taught me that I should follow my own views. I'm ok with others not fitting into a box, but I've often required myself to. I've learned that it's ok for me to hold conflicting views, and just because they might not make outward sense, it's how they resonate to me that matters.

I never realized I question and process so much information from the world around me. I realized that only when I sat down to write a journal entry and later went back to re-read it. Also, due to this class I have started paying more attention to the world around me in terms of the messages media displays on a daily basis, the amount of money we indirectly spend promoting things like sexualized images.

I learned about myself that I can be vulnerable when I know I am actually being heard and respected.

Something that changed for me throughout the semester was finding my voice in a sense. As the weeks went by, our class became closer and my confidence grew. It's great being able to get over my fear of speaking in class.

I have gained greater friendships with my peers and have gotten to know my professors more than I ever did in undergrad.

This class really allowed me to open up and get more comfortable talking about sex and helped me realize how important it is to be open and to talk about it.

I learned much more about human sexuality, but about myself.

*From Question 4: Which of the activities that we did in class helped you understand and synthesize the material the most?*

The activities that helped me the most this semester were the discussions. Like I mentioned earlier, they were always honest and without pretense. It was great to hear all the different perspectives, process them, and learn to apply them to my own personal perspective. I think that's the best learning tool, at least for me. The best way to synthesize data is through discussion and application, and this class did that for me.

I have loved this assignment. (The journal assignment)

All the documentaries and discussions in class were helpful in expanding my mind. Activities like the auction, moving around the room for agree disagree undecided creating a program for teen pregnancy, and just hashing everything out.

### **Discussion/ Strengths and Limitations**

At the beginning of the semester, my goals were to facilitate this class in such a way that my students would grow not only in content mastery, but that they would grow personally as well. I wanted them to be able to look back on 16 weeks of material and know without a doubt that they not only learned something important, but they are now different people because of it. In my estimation, I can confidently say that those goals were reached. There is even more great information that is contained in their journal writings (which I will not make public), but if you were able to read their insights and musings, there would be no doubt that these ten students have been changed by their experience in this class.

### ***Strengths***

I cannot in good conscience take all the credit, however. These bright, ambitious students should be given credit as well. Ewell (1997) posits that learning will occur when, and only when, the learner is ready to learn. It is the decisive belief that students have in their own abilities that begins the true learning process. I think that another reason that the theoretical construct that I use makes each class so successful is because the structure of each class supports the students' already-present desire to learn. I am simply strengthening that by giving them the opportunity to explore and experience.

Additionally, I believe that these assignments work well because of the small class size. If there had been any more than 10 people in the class, I think that at bare minimum a couple of those assignments would not have worked. In a larger class, this model would have to be reconstructed. At this level (graduate school), small class sizes are highly desirable to achieve these kinds of positive results.

### ***Limitations***

One of the issues I encountered had to do with the learning outcomes listed in the syllabus. When I began the semester, I was under the assumption that the learning outcomes that I had to choose from were course-level learning outcomes. It turns out that they were departmental learning outcomes, which made a true evaluation of my course almost impossible. My recommendation would be to add another column on page two of the syllabus in between learning outcomes and assessment methods for "course-specific learning outcomes". Without these, it will continue to be a challenge to truly assess the success of any course. (Please see Appendix B.)

## **Conclusion**

The question I posed at the beginning of the semester was are my students learning, and, if so, *what* are they learning? I think I can wholeheartedly say, “YES” that they are, indeed learning. But what is really exciting is the answer to the second question. Not only are they learning, but they grew and developed not only professionally and academically, but they grew *personally* as well. I would posit that it is that personal growth that is what is going to make them strong public health practitioners, not just the academic progress they made this semester. I believe that I saw enough success with these activities and assignments that I feel confident using this model again and adapting it for my class this fall.

## Appendix A

### Assignment Descriptions

**Human Sexuality Research Proposal** - The purpose of this assignment was to allow the student to (1) practice writing a research proposal, and (2) consider a specific topic within human sexuality that needs further research and analysis. The students were not required to carry out the research, but the proposal was written in such a manner as if they were going to actually carry it out.

**Two Journal Article Critiques** - The student was asked to choose two, empirical (data-based), peer-reviewed articles to review. Ideally, it was to be on a topic that was of interest to the student or that was related to their semester project. This assignment allowed the student to critically analyze the data-based article. The goal was for the student to learn how to appropriately read an article, and use critical thinking skills to evaluate it and decide how an article can be improved.

**Media Analysis Assignment** - The media is arguably the most influential driving force that shapes our cultural norms and values, more so than any time in history. The power of the media to shape thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors should not be underestimated, especially when it comes to portraying issues concerning sexuality. The student was asked to choose and watch a popular movie that was released between 2009 and 2014. Cable TV original movies were also acceptable. After reviewing the movie, the student was asked to write a 5-7 page, APA-style reactionary, integrative paper (not including references page). The reactionary portion was the student's reaction to what they had seen in terms of human sexuality and public health. The

integrative piece was designed to weave in the student's observations and reactions to the material in the text and the material discussed in class.

**Journal Assignment** - For the entirety of this semester, the student was asked to keep a journal of their own thoughts about human sexuality and health, and the related topics that were discussed. These can be musings, observations, ideas that might become manuscripts, questions, or conversations with yourself, or ideas and thoughts you may have while watching a TV show or movie with sexual themes or scenes for example. The goal was not the production of a journal per se, but the learning and understanding that comes from a rich and frequent internal dialog. This assignment was also designed to help the student develop a heightened sense of self-awareness that is so critical to a practicing public health professional.

**Professional Oral Presentation** - This assignment required the student to prepare an oral presentation as they would for a Texas Public Health Association (TPHA) Annual Education Conference. The student was to choose a topic that they desired to do further research on either on a topic from the text or on a topic that was not covered in class. The student was strongly encouraged to go as deep with that topic as possible. The topic presentation was required to tell the audience something that they didn't know about that topic. Five judges from the community at large were invited to attend and judge the presentations.

**The 3-2-1 Purposeful Reading Reflection** - The 3-2-1 Purposeful Reading Assignment is designed to encourage students to read, reflect, and write about readings assigned for class. Research (Roberts and Roberts, 2008) and experience tell us that supporting students' reading, writing, and reflective practices is one of the most challenging aspects of learning and teaching.

Although this assignment appeared to be simple, it has proven to be an influential tool for learning and has increased engagement and participation in my class. The basic assignment, also called the 3-2-1, has three requirements:

- **Requirement 1: Students read** what is assigned, then choose and describe the three most important aspects (concepts, issues, factual information, etc.) of the reading, justifying their choices.
- **Requirement 2: Students identify** two aspects of the reading they don't understand, and briefly discuss why these confusing aspects interfered with their general understanding of the reading. Although students may identify more than two confusing elements, they must put them in priority order and limit themselves to the two most important ones. Students seldom understand everything in a reading and, knowing that they must complete this part of the assignment, will reflect on their level of understanding of all the reading's content.
- **Requirement 3: Students pose** a question to the text's author, the answer to which should go beyond the reading content and does not reflect the areas of confusion in requirement 2. The question reflects students' curiosity about the topic and reveals what they think are the implications or applications of the reading content. This last requirement lets you know how well students understood the article's intention.

## Appendix B

### Addition of Course-Level Objectives to Syllabus

#### **COMPETENCIES, LEARNING OUTCOMES & ASSESSMENT METHODS**

<b>COMPETENCIES</b> This course will address the following competencies:	<b>LEARNING OUTCOMES</b> Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:	<b>COURSE-SPECIFIC LEARNING OUTCOMES</b>	<b>ASSESSMENT METHODS</b>
<p><b>MPH Core Competency 1</b> The MPH student will apply basic knowledge and skills of the core public health sciences that include: biostatistics, epidemiology, health management and policy, behavioral and community health, and environmental and occupational health, to the prevention of illness and injury and the promotion of population health.</p>	<p>LO1. recognize the importance of a social ecological approach to health promotion planning.</p>	<p>1. describe the bio-psycho-social dimensions of human sexuality as they relate to public health.</p>	<p>In-Class Activities Research Proposal Journal Article Critiques Media Analysis Assignment Professional In-Class Presentation Journal Assignment Purposeful Reading Reflections</p>
<p><b>MACH Competency 1</b> Comprehend, apply, and evaluate multi-level and interdisciplinary theories and models used to solve MACH problems, including the Life Course Model.</p>	<p>LO1. define and apply theories and models used to explain human behavior on individual, community, and population levels. LO2. explain initiation, maintenance, and cessation of risk behavior using theoretical constructs and other variables.</p>	<p>1. describe and discuss major theoretical perspectives that influence the scientific study of human sexuality.</p>	<p>In-Class Activities Research Proposal Journal Article Critiques Media Analysis Assignment Professional In-Class Presentation Journal Assignment Purposeful Reading Reflections</p>

## References

- Ewell, P. T. (1997). Organizing for learning: A point of entry. Draft prepared for discussion at the 1997 AAHE Summer Academy at Snowbird. Retrieved October 21, 2009, from [http://www.intime.uni.edu/model/learning/learn\\_summary.html](http://www.intime.uni.edu/model/learning/learn_summary.html)
- Oden, M. (2011). *Bridging the gap between theory and practice: Preparing students for practice in counseling, social work and public health through internships* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). A.T. Still University, Missouri.
- Roberts, J. C. and Roberts, K. S. (2008). Deep reading, cost/benefit, and the construction of meaning: Enhancing reading comprehension and deep learning in sociology Courses.” *Teaching Sociology* 36(2):125-4.