

Rude Old People: using drama to develop learning materials on sexuality and intimacy in later life

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Course details	
Course title	Degree in social work
Level	All levels
Year	All years
Module title	Suitable for any modules addressing services for older people
Discipline/Subject areas	Social work/ interprofessional studies.

Activity details	
What I did	<p>This project was an intergenerational initiative developed via a partnership between London South Bank University Faculty of Health and Social Care and '1st Framework, 3rd Thought', an older people's drama company. Through the use of drama and film making, a small group of social work students worked together with older actors and film makers over a period of two days. As a result they developed a digital resource of 16 short clips that can be used as stimulus material in teaching and learning in health and social care on the theme of intimacy and sexuality in later life.</p>
Why I did it	<p>To equip students with the right knowledge and skills and attitudes to work with older people and their representatives using learning and teaching strategies which positively promote independence. The issue of intimacy and sexuality is at the centre of meaningful personal life in social care but learning materials in this area tend not to acknowledge older people's needs. These silences are further enshrined in social policy and the management of care practice. A body of evidence has been developing in social care that shows that crossing the boundaries between the social sciences with the arts and humanities can help to communicate service user's experiences more powerfully (Schweitzer, 2006). This also provides a mechanism to free those involved in delivering care from traditional categories and lenses through which they view service users. Older people tend to be one of the least involved groups in social work education yet are more likely to be the 'objects' of managed care where the terms of assessment of assessment or provision can promote professional power and subjugate knowledge of older people's social and emotional experiences (Grenier, 2007). Intimacy and sexuality for example are integral to life experiences and the importance of intimacy, love and sexual pleasure for wellbeing in later life is one of the keys to promoting the importance of social relationships and social contacts with family, networks and friends as crucial influences upon older people's overall quality of life.</p>

	<p>Silence surrounding older people's sexuality is overwhelming, and can also mirror older people's invisibility in other areas of society. Greater acknowledgement, by including these issues within the social work curriculum, may also provide a vehicle to professionals looking at older people differently. This starts by recognizing that learning with older people rather than about them which requires a two way transaction.</p>
<p>What I wanted to achieve</p>	<p>To stimulate a dialogue between older people and professionals about how sexuality and intimacy is still relevant in later life and its contribution towards quality of life.</p>
<p>A short description of what I did</p>	<p>Engaging with the arts was felt to be a good way of taking this concept forward. Partnership between the university and an older people's drama company facilitated the process of developing learning materials through experimentation and negotiation, leading to a variety of learning insights. It involved sharing power, being innovative and active learning. Drama was used as an alternative method to enhance communication between groups of intergenerational learners whose individual and group experiences of life and culture may be very different. Based on a small grant, an initial 'specification' was drawn up with '1st Framework, 3rd thought'. The project was exploratory and improvisatory. The project team initially met to chew over themes using some stimulus material. Eight students volunteered to participate. A blog was provided throughout the project where discussion, photos and feedback was posted. Participants were divided up into small teams comprising an arts/film director, 2 older actors and 2 students in each team. They met on two occasions over two days and began filming pretty much immediately. Outputs included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social work students interviewing two older people and inviting them share their inner most thoughts about sexual desire and needs for intimacy in later life. A question was posed about whether public funds should be used to enable people to meet their sexual needs, revealing some of the issues that older people face in making intimate relationships in later life. • Two older people reflecting on what sex and intimacy means to them in the context of their own relationship. This was interspersed with an expression of eroticism through movement and dance. • Head to head where two scenarios about sexuality and culture were presented. Firstly, the family conflict arising from a relationship between an older white woman and younger Muslim man. Secondly, the impact of cross-dressing issues on an older man's life in a sheltered housing scheme. • Where do our attitudes to sex and sexuality come from? People of different generations reflected on the sexuality of those close to them and on their own personal awareness. Speakers revealed some of their discomfort and humour around these issues from different cultural viewpoints.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joke telling where humorous responses to sexuality can serve to conceal the true nature of older people's sexual needs and desired. • A poem which expressed images of identity and life experiences and raised issues about opportunities for expressing personal identity in care settings. • Asking difficult questions in assessment for care services; a challenging look at whose needs are being met when asking questions about sexuality in the assessment process. • Vox pop - interviews with the everyday public on their attitudes towards older women and to explore myths about sexual attractiveness about women in later life. • We generated more material than we were able to edit resulting in a digital resource with 17 clips which can be used as stimulus material in learning and teaching.
<p>What worked well</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The students reported a number of positive changes in their own practice following the workshops which they directly attributed to the experiences of being involved in such a project. • All participants were involved in the filming process, directing and writing material which enabled them to develop a range of different skills. • Students were also involved in viewing the 'rushes' and discussing how the material could be used.
<p>Problems and/or issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The older actors felt that the project never went far enough and that some taboo topics such as masturbation were not addressed or discussed. • The subsequent learning materials were mostly heterosexual in their orientation despite our initial good intentions to avoid this. • We generated more material than we could possibly edit. • Some people were unable to use the blog and training is needed to make sure everyone can engage with it.
<p>What students thought about it</p>	<p>Extracts from final evaluation:</p> <p><i>I enjoyed the diversity in the group, mix of young and older people, the different views and it was all so honest. Made me think how as a social worker how people are put on the spot by asking such questions, the embarrassment, the intrusion, need to be more aware. Fantastic, loved the whole experience.</i></p> <p><i>Felt shy at beginning about mingling – now 'Yeah, bring it on'! Became aware of so many issues usually subconscious but this brought them to conscious level so could discuss, e.g. transvestite scenario – realised that social workers don't really know about transvestites and their needs.</i></p> <p><i>Loved it, thoroughly enjoyed it all: finding out about sound, cameras, doing something different and getting ideas going.</i></p> <p><i>I discovered a creative part of me -- don't have time for me in the day job and now need to decide what to do with it.</i></p>

	<i>The immediacy of it. Very raw material, no sense of it being 'scripted' or rehearsed</i>
Key messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the direct leadership of older people working in this particular project, a number of alternative methods were piloted and evaluated which facilitated active engaged learning in a more collaborative way and which emphasized increased participation and empowerment of those involved. • There were a number of spin offs for all the participants in terms of improved and for some the development of new skills in learning to use technology for example through involvement filming and editing. • Don't be afraid to try something different and spontaneous as long as people are involved in the process and decision making throughout, a fixed learning agenda isn't always required. Experiment! • Having fun and using humour is a great aid to learning about sensitive and challenging issues.
Related documents or links	<p>To see the blog: http://rudeolderpeople.blogspot.com/2008_04_01_archive.html</p> <p>First Framework website http://www.1stframework.org/rude.asp</p> <p>References: Grenier, A. (2007) 'Constructions of frailty in the English Language, care practices and the lived experience', <i>Ageing and Society</i>, 27, pp 425-45.</p>
Any other comments	Written permission was obtained from participants at several stages along the way in line with ethical procedures as this topic and approach can raise a number of ethical and confidentiality issues for those involved and they were encouraged to be in control of the process throughout.