

Distinction Through Diversity: A Career Health Educator's Story

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Abstract

No matter the setting or framework within which we work, health educators dedicate time, energy, and effort to enhancing the public's quality of life. Each job - indeed, each task - performed by the health educator is of value, no matter its specific purpose. In light of our profession's overall objective, each undertaking represents a single thread within an enormously diverse, richly textured tapestry. Our communities need us to work alongside them - now more than ever before - and bring our skills, hearts and minds "to the table." During the last 17 years I have been on the receiving end of many a lesson. A key factor that keeps me solidly and cheerfully ensconced in this profession is the knowledge that the lessons and challenges will just keep on coming! It brings me great pleasure to share a few of my eye-opening experiences with others who share a similar passion for public health education.

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In my experience, the belief that health educators are secondary school teachers who educate kids about topics such as birth control and drugs is commonplace. Not many people are clued in to how far health educators can stretch professionally. Those who have embarked on the health education career path realize, of course, just how vast the possibilities are.

Throughout my 17-year career as a health educator I have been amazed at the depth and breadth of employment options percolating within the health education profession. A health educator can certainly teach eighth graders the warning signs of alcohol abuse. But it is also possible for a health educator to conduct epidemiological research, craft tobacco control legislation, manage a primary prevention program, perform tailored community outreach, develop a physical activity program, write health promotion grants, evaluate social marketing campaigns, develop culturally-appropriate educational materials, and work overseas building water delivery systems. In fact, one

health educator's career could encompass teaching, consulting, administration, research, community-based work, and more!

I have held nine distinctly different health education-related positions since 1987 when I began my master's degree program in Community Health Education at the University of Oregon. Each job was eye opening and challenging from a personal and professional perspective. The common threads linking each of these positions are familiar to the trained health educator. At the core of each experience lies the application of health education principles, theories, and best practices toward the development, implementation and evaluation of multi-level, collaborative efforts to improve the public's health.

As I have worked in various programs and settings, I would like to share a little bit about each challenge, as well as some of the lessons I've learned along the way. In so doing, I hope to impart some knowledge or wisdom, affirm health education as a laudable career choice, and

stimulate a sense of pride in our diversity as health educators.

Letting Go of Fear in Order to Meet Students Where They Are

I was offered a graduate teaching fellowship at the University of Oregon in 1987. This was my first job as a bona fide health educator. While studying for my degree I taught a course entitled, "Personal Health and Nutrition" to undergraduates. When I was told that my teaching load would only be two classes a term throughout the length of my program, I remember thinking to myself, "This will be a cinch!" As it turned out, this part-time job, combined with the other demands of graduate school, amounted to the most overwhelming and demanding work experience of my life. Never having formally taught in the classroom before, stepping into large lecture halls to face 50 new faces was rather daunting. But as I got accustomed to teaching, I became more at ease in the classroom. I found myself getting in touch with the energy of exchange and feeling uplifted by the dynamics of this kind of human interaction. For those two hours of classroom time, no matter how thorough my lesson planning or how deep my own knowledge of the subject matter, it was a "blank slate" of time filled with action potential. Anything could happen!

Lesson learned: Even if you consider your lesson plan to be both a labor of love and a work of art, you may end up setting it aside completely if things go differently than you planned. Meet your students "where they are" and roll with it. That's what you're there for.

Surprised to Find Myself a Manager

With my graduate degree behind me, I moved from Eugene to Honolulu and accepted a position as manager of a comprehensive hospital-based health education center. The opportunity presented itself and I jumped at it. The center offered a wide array of programs and services geared toward meeting the health promotion needs of the diverse island community, hospital staff, and corporate clients and their employees. From Day One on the job, my learning curve resembled an EKG strip.

Overseeing the daily operations of a fast-paced, diverse program, supervising 25 people, and occasionally getting to teach some classes kept me alert and on my toes. I explored with fascination the complexities of employee relations, and experimented with different ways to facilitate teamwork among my staff, including the use of humor. Managing the program components – even that mass of figures called a budget – was easier for me than managing people, perhaps due to my lack of supervisory experience. I tended to be overly sensitive to personnel dilemmas and found it a challenge to gain perspective at times. Fortunately I found something to laugh about at the end of most days, and Hawaii's climate and lifestyle helped me let go of stress. If you can swing it, I recommend taking on your first management job in the tropics!

Lesson learned: A manager spends a huge amount of time and energy achieving or maintaining perspective. With multiple issues and people competing for attention each day, managers need to take a step back on a regular basis to process everything that's going on. As the boss, staying focused on the mission and priorities of the program is easier if you avoid immersion in minutia and chaos.

On the Rural Health Bandwagon

In my book, there aren't many arenas of public health more fascinating than rural health. I accepted the charge to start up a rural health program with two missions. First, it aimed to expand and in some cases centralize the continuing education opportunities for rural healthcare workers in central and southeastern Oregon. The second objective was to develop recruitment programs to lure health professionals, particularly recent graduates of medical and nursing schools, to practice in these rural regions. I was on the road constantly, driving to dozens of hospitals, clinics, and health departments each week in order to assess the education and training needs of many incredibly dedicated and talented health care workers. Although the lack of a home base eventually proved too disorienting for me, I marveled at the dedication, caring spirit, and talent of those who work in rural healthcare settings.

Lesson learned: If a job doesn't feel right, for whatever reason, it is OK to move on to something else. Although allowing time to get a feel for a new job is generally good advice for anyone, it's important to pay attention to how the job affects you personally.

A Powerful Lesson in Cultural Differences

Managing a clinic-based AIDS prevention program in the rural Native American community while simultaneously collaborating with San Diego State University on a research grant was my next challenge. The research aim was to determine the HIV and AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of Native Americans living on six reservations and then use the results to help develop a culturally-appropriate AIDS prevention curriculum. Interestingly, I learned the most from the cross-cultural dynamics. Never before had I had a job that caught me so off-guard or provided me with so many teachable moments. I was in charge yet the outsider. I was educated, white, privileged, yet the only way the program would thrive is if my staff of four indigenous community members led while I followed. Humbling, riveting, frustrating, eye opening. These are the words that come to mind when I reflect on this unique job experience.

Lesson learned: Some jobs feel akin to being placed in the middle of one of those snow bubble toys that has just been vigorously agitated. If you have the stomach for it, there is great learning potential here!

The Most Fun I Ever Had!

My most favorite position involved coordinating a health promotion program for older adults in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. This was my first intensive foray into both the geriatric arena and nonprofit community-based work. I absolutely loved it. I worked out of one of the most progressive, vibrant senior centers in the nation. Besides the program planning and evaluation piece, I was responsible for developing and implementing a training program for peer educators, teaching workshops on multiple topics, and conducting the majority of the center's outreach. Wearing several hats kept

things interesting, but what enthused me the most were the older people I interacted with each day. Not only did I learn more from them than I ever thought possible, but they brought out the loving, playful part of me.

Lesson learned: Older people have what it takes to turn this world around and make it a much more humane, enjoyable place: wisdom, humor, deep caring, experience, insight, passion, and so much creativity!

The Grinding Gears of Bureaucracy

In 1996 I was back in California, and joined the ranks of my fellow "government-based" health educators. I worked at a large county health department for five years in two primary areas: HIV/AIDS prevention and Tobacco Control. These jobs required intensive community engagement, a lot of multitasking, continual report writing, and more patience than my previous jobs. In the beginning I was rather naïve about the workings of government and how large a role politics tends to play, but that rapidly changed as I watched how elements of projects were re-shaped as the hierarchy took hold of them. Adjusting to my role as liaison between the community and the powers that be at the health department was a new challenge, especially since my background at that point was more management.

Lesson learned: Sometimes a new job requires a significant shift in responsibilities from the last job. I didn't realize that trading the leadership role for more of a follower role would be so frustrating, especially when I was working very hard and assuming a lot of responsibility in my follower role. It took awhile for me to identify the source of my frustration. Once I acknowledged to myself that I'd be better off in a position that required me to use all my skills and knowledge and that would challenge me to grow, I was able to move on to something that was a better fit.

Last Stop on the Health Educator Highway?

My current position as health education consultant in the breast and cervical cancer early detection program (California Department of Health Services) draws heavily on my program

planning, implementation, and evaluation skills and experience. Even though my previous work was not focused on breast and cervical cancer early detection, it is exciting to be able to bring so much of what I have learned over the years to the “table” that I share with my colleagues. County-level work helped to prepare me for state-level work in the sense that I developed a good grasp of how public health services are orchestrated and delivered. In many ways this is the most intellectually satisfying position I have held; however, I do miss teaching and working closely with community groups.

Lesson learned: One thing I didn’t – and couldn’t – imagine when I left my county job for my state job was how satisfying it would be to have the freedom to weave into my work so much of what I have learned in the past. Add to

that intellectual freedom the unobstructed intermingling of my colleagues’ diverse experiences and you have fertile ground for high job satisfaction.

In closing, I’d like to give homage to the health educator, for what we contribute to society often goes unnoticed or unrecognized by those outside our profession. In our mission to help others live lives of highest quality, we walk the paths of knowledge, sensitivity, cooperation, and good will. These paths constantly cross and inform one another, no matter what we do or where we practice. As the overall objective of our work grows evermore critical, we must continue to bond together in our diversity and pride as health educators and rise to meet the vast challenges we face as a society. Three cheers for health educators!

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