Health and Media Literacy in the Wake of H1N1

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Abstract

Objectives:

Objectives for this teaching technique are as follows: students will (a) apply media literacy skills to evaluate a health-related news article; (b) differentiate between health literacy and media literacy; and (c) describe the influence of media literacy on health. *Target Audience*: This teaching technique is intended for high school/college students enrolled in personal health and/or disease prevention/control courses.

Introduction

Health educators, particularly those employed in educational settings, may use the recent H1N1 pandemic as a teachable moment experience for students. For example, two key concepts—health literacy and media literacy—especially are relevant to the pandemic and can be introduced or reinforced to students already familiar with those concepts. According to the American Association for Health Education,[1] health literacy is "the capacity of an individual to obtain, interpret, and understand basic health information and services, and the competence to use such information and services in ways that are health enhancing."[(p. 100)] Poor health literacy is a leading contributor to health disparities, rising health care costs, and inadequate disease management.[2]

Health literacy increasingly is becoming important as more and more Americans consult media sources for health information. Although the media serve to inform the public about health issues like H1N1, selected information may be inaccurate, biased, and/or distorted. Incumbent upon health educators is the need to inform consumers of media about these potential misrepresentations.

One of the National Health Education Standards is that, "Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors." [(p. 8).3] This standard is achieved, in part, through students' introduction and development of media literacy. According to Aufderheide,[4] media literacy is the ability "to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce both print and electronic media." As articulated by the Kaiser Family Foundation,[5] "A media literate person can think critically about what they see, hear, and read in books, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, movies, music, advertising, video games, the Internet, and new emerging technology."[(p. 1)]

Media literacy frequently influences health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. In the case of H1N1, media literacy has been essential to behavioral awareness and disease prevention. The recent H1N1 pandemic has sparked media frenzy and challenged Americans to evaluate health information and preventive measures for their health (e.g., vaccine utilization, personal hygiene practices, and so forth). The purpose of this teaching technique is to introduce students to fundamentals of health literacy and media literacy through examination of H1N1 and related health topics.

Objectives

At the end of this teaching technique, students will be able to:

- apply media literacy skills to evaluate a health-related news article.
- differentiate between health literacy and media literacy.
- describe the influence of media literacy on health.

Materials and Resources

- Computer with video projection
- Chalkboard/whiteboard
- Handouts with H1N1 discussion questions from Table 3
- Handouts with grading criteria for the written reflection

Target Audience

This teaching technique is intended for high school/college students enrolled in personal health and/or disease prevention/control courses.

Procedure

Prior to the class period, instruct students to bring a health-related news article from a media source to class (note: These articles will be used in the Assessment Technique on p. 5). Approximately 90 minutes should be allotted for completing this teaching technique. To begin, poll students to determine how many of them have heard of the concept, health literacy. Solicit one or more volunteers who have heard of health literacy to attempt defining the concept. Follow students' comments with the formal definition of health literacy provided in the Introduction. Present the following film clip to reinforce the definition of health literacy: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39A9oU-gOOA

Instruct students to select a partner and identify characteristics of a health literate person. Solicit volunteers to share their responses with the class and incorporate additional examples from Table 1 as needed. Record all responses on the chalkboard/whiteboard.

As a transition for discussing media literacy, reiterate to students the importance of understanding and interpreting health information from media sources. Inform students that media literacy constitutes accessing and critically evaluating health messages communicated through media sources including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and other related outlets. Pose the following discussion question to students: "What factors should be considered when evaluating the efficacy of health information presented through the media?" Record students' responses and refer to Table 2 for the Center for Media Literacy's key words/questions for deconstructing messages presented through the media.

Ask students to verbally brainstorm examples of recent health-related topics that have captured

attention of the media. Next introduce students to the topic of H1N1 by presenting the following video parody: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbt_PuVAVTU. Distribute a handout with the discussion questions regarding H1N1 and the media in Table 3. Divide students into small groups and instruct each group to identify a spokesperson for sharing responses with the class. Allot approximately 15 minutes for the small groups to answer the discussion questions. Subsequently, facilitate a class discussion. Refer to http://www.flu.gov and http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/ for information about H1N1. Conclude the class period by soliciting volunteers to share with their peers the health-related news articles from selected media sources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and so on) they brought to class.

Assessment Technique

At the end of the class period (i.e., before students share their articles with students in the class), instruct students to assign a letter grade (i.e., A, B, C, D, or F) to their article and write a brief, yet meaningful rationale for the assigned grade using criteria discussed in class (see Table 2).

As a culminating assessment, distribute to students the grading criteria for a written reflection presented in Table 4. Subsequently, instruct them to (a) describe the connection between health literacy and media literacy, and (b) describe the influence of media literacy on health in a written reflection. Encourage students to incorporate health-related examples into their reflection.

References

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5. Kaiser Family Foundation. Key Facts: Media Literacy. Available at: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Key-Facts-Media-Literacy.pdf. Accessed May 17, 2010.

6. Jolls T. Literacy for the 21st Century: An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education, 2nd ed. Malibu, CA: Center for Media Literacy; 2008. Available at: http://www.medialit.org/pdf/mlk/01a_mlkorientation_rev2.pdf. Accessed May 17, 2010.

Table 1

Selected Characteristics of a Health Literate Person[2]

Differentiates between reliable and unreliable health information
Accesses health information from reliable sources
Possesses proficient reading skills
Understands basic math operations (e.g., for nutrition labels, prescription labels, and so on)
Understands basic health information and concepts
Exhibits effective communication skills (i.e., listening and speaking)
Processes health information in ways that are health enhancing (i.e., health information gives rise to healthy behaviors and decisions)
Effectively navigates the health care system (e.g., health care providers, health insurance companies, medical forms, prescriptions, and so forth)
Evaluates the influence of cultural factors on health

Table 2

Key Words/Questions for Deconstructing Media Messages[6(pp. 23-24)]

Authorship: Who created this message?

Format: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Audience: How might different people understand this message differently?

Content: What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Purpose: Why is this message being sent?

Table 3

H1N1 Discussion Questions

- What have you heard about H1N1?
- What do you know about H1N1?
- Did the media "overdo it" with regard to coverage of H1N1? Explain.
- Who seeks to benefit from media messages regarding H1N1?
- How has H1N1 been portrayed by the media?
- To what extent has media coverage of H1N1 contributed to increased awareness and/or confusion among the public?
- To what extent has media coverage of H1N1 influenced preventive behaviors among the public?

Table 4

Grading Criteria for Written Reflection

	0	**1**	**2**
	Does not meet expectations	**Meets expectations**	**Exceeds expectations**
The student articulated an understanding of health literacy.			
The student articulated an understanding of media literacy.			
The student differentiated between health literacy and media literacy.			
The student described the influence of media literacy on health.			
The student incorporated at least 1 health-related example to support his/her reflection points.			

Total: _____
10