

USING IMMIGRANT STORIES TO ADDRESS HEALTH NEEDS

SESSION 1

OVERVIEW

Gail Weinstein, a professor in the MA TESOL department at SFSU, Rena Pasick, Associate Director for Community Education and Outreach at UCSF's Comprehensive Cancer Center, and Paul Heavenridge, Executive Director of Literacyworks, led this workshop for about 45 people who expressed their interest in attending the session because they were aware of the power of stories. Attendees included students, nurses, community advocates and organizers, ESL practitioners and students, and public health representatives.

SESSION DESCRIPTION

The workshop began with personal stories. Gail explained to the group how a thematic unit for ESL learners came through hearing Southeast Asian women in Lowell, MA share their stories about their children preferring McDonald's to their own cooking.

Rena, in her work with breast and cervical screening, expressed frustration with survey data and statistics and explained how qualitative research through collecting stories has aided her as a researcher and health educator.

The attendees were asked to freewrite about someone who had faced a health situation with strength and courage and then shared these stories in small groups. Participants discovered that they all had valuable contributions to make.

Many good suggestions were offered as the group brainstormed about ideas for potential collaborations. Some of these are listed below and reveal the fruitful interplay of the multitude of perspectives that attendees brought to the discussion.

1. Ask to write people's stories. Collect and use in many ways. For instance, use them in theatre skits and from there, pick issues and discuss.
2. A website with immigrant health stories would help all of us. Not only does it validate all of our stories, but the information could be used in so many powerful ways. Thanks to Paul Heavenridge of Literacyworks for immediately offering to make this happen!
3. Along the same lines, it would be powerful to have *archives* of video, stories, and pictures featuring the voices of immigrants.
4. Making stories significant to policy-makers is important, but both statistics and stories are needed. Telling immigration officers the immigrant's story is a way to do sensitivity training.
5. Ask patients *open-ended* questions before the healthcare professional starts talking to them. Ask "what happened?" Listen.

6. Making a special effort to advise people to self-advocate was deemed as a necessary step.
7. Ask clients and health providers to make separate lists of issues or stories and then come together to discuss these.
8. Agencies could get feedback by asking what the experience was like to work with them. Establish this feedback loop.
9. Have a student come back from a medical appointment or experience and tell his/her story. If teachers make a habit of encouraging this, classes can work with real health situations.

Participants came away from this workshop with a strong sense that through collaboration, they can serve immigrant communities much more powerfully.

REACTIONS

Attendees had the following to say when asked what they would do to follow up on the day's discussion:

"Connect with ESL instructors in our county and incorporate storytelling into class curriculum to help guide our policies and community health planning."

"Collect more stories and connect with other participants to help create a coalition around sharing immigrant healthcare experiences."

"I will collect and listen to more stories of immigrants and their needs as a way to empower them."

"Start to document stories of my immigrant clients. Schedule a meeting between community ESL programs and health care providers."

"Learn more about how to connect with different groups that might work with immigrants (i.e. American Cancer Society, lawyers, advocacy organizations, healthcare providers)."

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE FOR THEIR HELP AND SUPPORT WITH THIS SESSION

Rena Pasick, Associate Director, Comprehensive Cancer Center (facilitator)

Gail Weinstein, Professor, English Department, SFSU (facilitator)

Paul Heavenridge, Executive Director, Literacyworks (discussant)

Sally Freyberg, ESL Instructor, Canada College (notetaker)

Emily Harms, MA TESOL student (volunteer)

Amy McCarthy, MA TESOL student (volunteer)