

Recreation Activity Prescription

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Introduction

Students generally gain professional education course work and practical experiences through their formal academic training. These are the primary tools through which students gain an understanding, acquire the skills to practice and adopt values, attitudes and principles that are advocated by a profession. Born out of this is the development of professional behaviors that assist in the transition to the workplace (Kasar and Clark, 2000, p.157). Many students lack the necessary professional experience required to work with participants that often comes with age and or provision of opportunity. Hence, students find themselves making recommendations or suggestions to their participants without really fully understanding why an activity or intervention is appropriate or therapeutic and without having ever participated in an activity that they have recommended. The following tale helps to illustrate the notion that we are all a product of our experiences and our exposure to different situations.

There is an Indian fable about six blind men and an elephant. The blind men were confronted with the opportunity to interact with an elephant. Being blind they had to rely on their sense of touch, smell and hearing. Each touched a different part of the elephant and based it on his own past experiences. Each perceived something different, the one who felt the tail thought it was like a rope; another felt the animal's smooth, broad side and thought it was a wall, one touched a leg and thought it was similar to a tree trunk; one touched it's tusk and claimed it was like a spear; another felt it's long trunk and thought it was like a snake; another heard and felt the rush of air as it was brushed by the elephant's flapping ear, he thought it was a fan. All had contradictory descriptions and different interpretations of the elephant based on their own personal experiences with the animal.

In many ways our students are similar to the blind men described in the Indian fable. These are the very same students that are providing recreational opportunities in the community or recommending community activities to enhance a person's quality of life, assisting them in gaining functional independence within the community or assisting them in belonging socially. We do not fault students for lacking experience, what we try to do is create and present multiple practical experiences for them to understand concepts and theories. This in turn helps them to understand limita-

tions, assess needs, and provide empathy, etc. so that they can apply this understanding to programming for their participants and patients. We have found that most of our students are employed part time at various agencies in addition to attending school. It may be idealistic to believe that while a student is employed he is well supervised; if this is the case a student may be left to determine which activities will meet participant needs in order to achieve their desired expectations and outcomes. Students sometimes have limited experiences to draw upon and may also have different interpretations and orientations to numerous activities and interventions which in turn would affect programmatic offerings and suggestions.

As recreational professionals we are concerned with enhancing a person's quality of life, we strive to meet participant's personal needs through purposeful recreation activities and interventions. In *Quality of Life in Health Promotion and Rehabilitation*, it is indicated that no two people, from their own perspectives, think of excellence and superiority in exactly the same way. The same can be true for the meaning of quality, it may be understood, but when related to one's own life it may have multiple interpretations. Interpretation varies as illustrated through the fable about the elephant and the six blind men. This being the case it is imperative for educator's to provide students with numerous practical experiences that will help them understand, empathize and relate to what it is they are asking participants to do. Making good recommendations will optimize the recreation experience and enhance the quality of one's life.

“My Personal Recreation Prescription”

Throughout the curriculum, recreation and recreation therapy students are given opportunities to complete numerous learning modules which involve recreation prescription. Often the recreation professional or recreational therapist is quick to recommend that the participant/patient become involved in various activities after a program ends or upon discharge. Participants are told that they need to be active, stay busy, learn new skills, meet new people, attend a special interest group or join a club, etc. This encouragement may be necessary, but sometimes it is much easier said than done and on some occasion we have all been guilty of making recommendations without being fully knowledgeable of the parameters of our recommendations. The activity that best points out how difficult a task this may be for a participant or patient is called, “personal recreation prescription.” This activity requires every student to attend an organized group or club with a defined purpose (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, Chess Club, Ski Club, Book Club, etc.). The student is given two weeks to find an organization of interest. The following stipulations apply to the assignment: It must be a special interest group that the student has never attended before nor has had any previous experience with; the student must attend the group alone; it must be a group that the student is somewhat interested in; the student must stay for the duration of the meeting and complete a worksheet after attending the group.

The worksheet asks a series of questions related to the experience; e.g., what type of group did you choose and why? Was it difficult to find a group to attend? Why? Why not? How did you find out about this particular group? What method of transportation did you use to go to the group meeting? How comfortable or uncomfortable were you in the group? Did you feel like a part of the group? Describe the behaviors of others in the group that made you feel comfortable or uncomfortable. Would you return to this group in the future? Why? Why not? What was the most difficult task of this assignment?

This activity is utilized and processed in our recreation and group leadership class and students are asked to self disclose their feelings about the assignment and their experience. This activity provides the student with the opportunity to internalize and realize what it is like to do something alone or to do something that is new. The activity also requires locating resources to obtain information and requires the student to plan something and fit it into his personal schedule. These tasks while they may appear trivial can be very frightening and difficult for a participant or former patient, this activity assists the student in gaining a better understanding of how difficult these tasks may really be.

The majority of the students that have participated in this activity have indicated that they were very nervous planning to attend the special interest group, had difficulty making a decision, and experienced discomfort when they arrived and didn't know anyone. Some of the students related that they could understand how difficult this task might be for a former participant or patient upon discharge from a facility. They also indicated that they had a greater appreciation for how someone would feel. This activity also teaches about community reintegration, leisure education, discharge planning, group dynamics, social interaction, etc. The students consistently indicate that this activity is a very valuable tool in understanding that it is easier to tell the patient/client what to do than to do it.

Outcomes

If one were to stop and think about it, recreation professionals sometimes "prescribe" activities. We are viewed as persons of authority with a specific expertise that we impart upon others when either asked or when we are assisting individuals in discharge planning. Those of us that have been in practice for awhile are very familiar with resources, where to go, how to get there, what the pricing structure is, what equipment is required, what the quality of the equipment is, etc. So a student's or young professional's prescriptive recommendation might be too idealistic or unrealistic, but only because of a lack of experience or understanding. Therefore the activity, "my recreation prescription" provides another opportunity for the student to learn and internalize at the same time, thus providing additional insight.

Activities such as the one previously presented provide an opportunity for students to take action, reflect on it and learn from it. While firsthand experience may generate knowledge, it is not a substitute for instruction. We have found that this activity elaborates on knowledge that the students have obtained in the classroom and it provides experiences to the student such as: being a member of a group; being a participant-observer; learning about social interaction; empathy; hidden agendas; leadership; trust; decision-making; controversy; self-disclosure, etc. The class actually takes on the role of a Group@ inside of a group (class) and examples from the group itself are also applied to illustrate concepts throughout the semester.

Recommendations

Our activity, "My Personal Recreation Prescription" can be utilized in group dynamic, recreation leadership and programming classes. It provides a realistic learning experience for the student and assists the student with internalization and introspection as it relates to what participants might encounter or feel when we prescribe activities to enhance the quality of their lives. As educators we can't measure and grade internalization or introspection, but I think we are astute enough to identify it and understand it when students describe it. "Recreation Activity Prescription" provides the student a venue to experience it.

References

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