

Using Wheelchair Simulations to Teach About Inclusion

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Introduction

Despite improved access to recreation programs and facilities since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and other legislation, there remains a need to teach the importance of inclusion and ways to facilitate inclusion to undergraduate recreation students. The authors offer similarly structured courses designed to teach future recreation and leisure service managers to design programs that are inclusive of people with disabilities. One of the main assignments for each course involves an activity that requires students to simulate a mobility impairment and use a wheelchair.

Common barriers to inclusion are a lack of understanding of: the needs of people with disabilities (Williams, Vogelsong, Green, & Cordell, 2004), the need for inclusive programs (Devine, 1998), and ways to facilitate inclusion (Dattilo, 2002). Each student enrolled in the inclusion courses must complete a wheelchair simulation and write a paper about the experience.

Description of the Learning Activity

The simulation consists of students spending a minimum of a half day in a wheelchair provided by the course instructor. Prior to the start of the simulation, the instructor obtains wheelchairs from a local health equipment distributor and spends time in class explaining the purpose of the simulation, the expectations of the assignment, and the basic functions of the wheelchairs. Students reserve blocks of time to use the wheelchairs on a list maintained by the instructor. For safety, students are encouraged to ask a friend or classmate to accompany them during their simulation.

During the simulation, students are required to spend time in their homes, in public, and engaged in a recreation activity. Although students are encouraged to remain "in character" during the simulation, they are instructed to break character if they ever feel threatened by circumstances. For instance, students have stood and pushed their chairs if they became wedged in large cracks in busy roads.

The instructor provides a detailed description of the expectations of the paper that students write about their experiences in the wheelchairs. Each paper is to include a description of (a) environmental barriers, (b) reactions of other people, (c) personal reactions to having a temporary disability, and (d) potential implications for the student's future professional practices. Typically, students carry small notebooks to record their observations during the simulation. Often the insight gained by students surprises them in its intensity.

Outcomes of the Learning Activity

The reactions of students to the wheelchair simulations have been remarkably consistent over the years. The most typical outcomes reported by students are: (a) heightened awareness of the challenges experienced by people who use wheelchairs, (b) an enhanced appreciation for their own abilities, and (c) newly-found empathy for people with disabilities.

Heightened awareness of challenges

Almost all students completing the assignment have reported their time in a chair was more physically (and often psychologically) demanding than anticipated. One student described his first hour at home in the chair.

Being home alone was not a fun experience. Lucky for me, the freezer wasn't too high up for me to reach, and I settled for a microwavable meal. If not for our dish rack, I would have been without a plate. Since our bar was too high for me to reach, I opted to eat in the kitchen with the food in my lap. It was very depressing. I decided to throw darts after lunch, but my game was ruined after I eventually threw all the darts too high for me to reach.

Students invariably noticed environmental barriers that they had not noticed before they spent time in the wheelchair, such as heavy doors, thick carpeting, and sparse curb cuts.

The first thing I noticed was that it can be a huge production trying to get out of your car and into a store. Trying to lift your body out of the car and into a chair is hard enough but then you have to navigate the parking lot. Many shopping centers and apartment complexes have inclines or slight hills that you wouldn't even notice if you were walking.

Although physical challenges appear to make an impact on the students, it is the social reactions that seem to make the greatest impressions on them. A student described the reaction of his girlfriend.

Once we were done eating we quickly went home. She never really said anything, but I could tell that she was a little uncomfortable with the situation. I think this was good because it really opened up my eyes to what people in wheelchairs must feel. This shows how easy it is to feel out of place and uncomfortable even if there is really no reason to. I am not really in a wheelchair, and I was uncomfortable. I can only imagine what it is like on a day to day basis. Especially for a person of a very young age.

Most students encountered changes in the attitudes of others to them, and many were startled to be treated as if they had a cognitive impairment. A varsity athlete wrote:

It was hard to maintain self-confidence when people were looking down on me-literally. I didn't feel that I was getting the respect that I deserved as a person. I felt like a little kid. People assumed that since I had a disability, they had to speak to me on another level.

Students seemed especially aware of the reactions others have to them, often being torn between receiving too much or too little attention.

In the mall, I saw two very attractive girls. One looked at me then just kind of shrugged me off like there was no way she would ever be interested in me. The other one didn't even look in my direction as I passed her. She just kept looking straight ahead. A little kid looked at me with very curious eyes. He sort of pointed and asked his mom about me, while she just smiled towards me.

Students have reported that restaurant servers asked others at the table for the students' orders. Other service personnel have seemed overly friendly and students commented that the added attention annoyed them.

Enhanced appreciation for abilities

Another consistent reaction by students is a new-found gratitude for their abilities and a heightened respect for the abilities of people who use wheelchairs. After describing the pleasure he felt being able to stand up at the conclusion of his experience, a student reflected on the experience and expressed the limitations of his understanding:

After spending a four-hour period in a wheelchair, I have totally acquired a new perspective on what life is like with a disability. I know I only scratched the surface but it was enough for me.

To their credit, few students appear to believe that a short experience such as this assignment provide them with anything more than a small sample encountered by people with disabilities. As one student said:

I will never understand their (people with disabilities) point of view, as I am able to get out of the wheelchair and walk away at the end of the day. But I do feel that I understand on a deeper level the barriers they experience in everyday life.

Newly-found empathy

An important benefit of this simulation is that it challenges students to consider the daily experiences of people with disabilities. One student reported:

This proved to be a very interesting experience for me. I had no idea what I was getting into. This is the first time I have ever thought about what a person in a wheelchair goes through on a day to day basis.

Often the simulation leads to dramatic changes in the way students think. For example, a student commented, "Taking part in this has really opened my eyes to what they go through." The same student expressed what he learned from the experience. This exercise is great... to get students like myself to understand that these people are not any different from us. They just can't walk, which gives them unique lifestyles, and there is nothing wrong with that.

He concluded his paper with the following observation: "All they need is for society to treat them the same and let them enjoy life and take part in everyday activities without feeling they don't belong."

Another student described how his discomfort during the simulation led to new insight. "There were many incidents that occurred during my four hours in the chair that helped change my way of thinking and gain a better appreciation of people with disabilities." He described his feelings while visiting a shopping mall.

When I was at the mall I had one of the worst feelings I have ever had. Usually I can walk around the mall and look at all the different people, but when I was in the wheelchair I didn't have that same comfort. I felt like I had to look directly in front of myself at all times because I could feel the people staring at me.

Such experiences may have a lasting effect on the students. It was common for students to write that the experience forced them to notice things long after their time in the chair ended. One student reported:

Now that I have experienced a little bit of what it is like to be different just about everywhere you go, I will think about my reactions when around someone in a wheelchair or another disability. I will also think about access when I go to different places. I have found that I already do this. I will notice little things that might be a little difficult to get past or over or inside.

These observations are not limited to appreciation of physical barriers. Expressing his new understanding of social barriers, a student explained his past awkwardness and how he planned to interact with people with disabilities in the future.

I was a little nervous when I first got into the chair, but I am glad I did. It taught me to treat people with disabilities like normal people. You shouldn't stare at them or act in any different towards them because they are normal people just like you. I believe that if more people could be forced to participate in this experience, people with disabilities would be more accepted in our society.

Clearly the assignment affords students the opportunity to experience the world in a way most of them had not experienced previously, and the vast majority of students gain important insight into living life with a disability.

Recommendations For Its Use

There are a number of actions that instructors can take to help increase the likelihood that students' participation in a simulation requiring them to use a wheelchair will be an effective learning experience. Safety should be given a high priority. For example, students are taught to use the wheelchair (e.g., how to move the wheelchair from side to side and how to stop), and they are told to get out of the wheelchair if they ever feel they are in danger. Additionally, students are encouraged to find a person to escort them during their simulation in case they need assistance.

Processing experiential education experiences via a debriefing is an important way to help students integrate newly-gained knowledge into their ways of thinking. Thus, it is recommended that students write a paper about their simulation experiences and that the instructor provide them with written feedback on their observations. In addition, it is helpful for the instructor to spend class time allowing students to verbally share their impressions with other students and for the instructor and students to connect their comments to course objectives. Perhaps above all else, students are asked take the assignment seriously and to maintain respect for people with disabilities at all times during the simulation. A more thorough description of the facilitation of this type of simulation can be found in Dattilo (2002). Properly facilitated and processed, this assignment can have a profound and lasting effect on students.

References

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