Adapting US service learning projects to other cultures: dementia and memory care in the Dominican Republic

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BACKGROUND

- Caring for those with dementia is a **global challenge**
- *Dementia doesn’t discriminate*

As advances in medical science and technology help us live longer, the elderly populations of all countries are increasing in size.

• The **cultural context** in which ageing occurs is an important factor that influences treatment strategies and daily care strategies:
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**THE US MCSL PROJECT:**
- Required component in HLTH 335: Human Diseases
- ~180 students each semester
- 2 or 3 sessions per week throughout semester at two local assisted-living facilities
- We conduct memory care activities with residents with dementia
- Result: a long-term sustainable volunteer system for the facilities and the residents

**Overall Goal of DR Pilot Test:**
...for students do observe, actively participate, and learn about ageing in a different culture.
MEMORY CARE

• Fast-growing sector of health care in developed countries

• A long-term care option for patients who have been diagnosed with a memory loss condition or have problems with at least two Areas/Activities of Daily Living (ADL)
  – Mobility (walking and transferring)
  – Personal hygiene, grooming, dressing
  – Managing medications
  – Nutrition
  – Navigation (finding dining room, bedroom, etc.)

• Also includes brain-stimulation activities that have been shown through research to slow the progress of dementia
Spice-Painting (a.k.a. scent painting)

Sense of smell strongly correlated to memory…..

• Olfactory input is processed in a different region of the brain than input from other senses (e.g., visual, hearing, and tactile)
  – The olfactory region is closely associated with the memory and emotion processing centers of the brain (amygdala and hippocampus)
Anecdotal Evidence of Positive Impact of Repeated Exposure to the Scent-Painting Activity in the US MCSL Project.....

• Based on observation and comments from family & staff:

After several years of repeated exposure:
– Several residents *speak more* than they used to
– Several residents *show fewer signs of anxiety* (less hand-wringing, trembling, and vocal expression of concern/worry)
– One resident now expresses that she *remembers* having done the activity previously (when we enter, she’ll say “oh, we’re going to paint again!”
– One resident *began writing* his name again (after one year of not being able)

*Reducing the severity of symptoms that commonly accompany dementia increases quality of daily life*
What we already knew about ageing in the DR

- Most elderly live with extended family and are cared for by family in the home setting for life

- Although there are some geriatric centers (assisted-living facilities), this is a relatively new phenomenon, as more and more women are receiving higher education and becoming professionals
METHODS

• May, 2017, 18 health majors from Texas A&M participated in a special topics course dedicated to culture, ageing, and dementia.

• We spent two weeks in the DR immersed in the culture and volunteering at a local assisted-living facility

• We conducted five 3-hour memory care sessions (scent-painting) with the same 25 residents over the two-week period.
FINDINGS – IMPACT ON STUDENTS:

• Student evaluations of all aspects of the experience demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction (100% “extremely satisfied”):
  
  – the trip logistics and activities
  – appreciation for the cultural immersion opportunity
  – personal growth levels
FINDINGS – IMPACT ON RESIDENTS:
FINDINGS -

INFORMAL FEEDBACK FROM FACILITY STAFF:

• Expressed a great appreciation for our presence and the activities, and they participated along with us on a rotating basis as able (which we don’t see in the US)

• Reported that they do not have the human resources necessary to conduct activities of this type

• Reported that within the Dominican culture, most elderly are cared for in their homes, and that there is a stigma associated with this type of facility, which affects the resources available to the facility (such as community volunteers)
FINDINGS – Our Observations

• The facility in the DR had a much more “homey” atmosphere than the facilities in the US

• All staff in DR interacted with residents at higher levels and treated them like “family”

• We did not see any evidence of local volunteers coming in to the facility (and staff confirmed that nearly all volunteer activity in the past had been from outside groups)

• The residents in the DR reacted with as much enthusiasm for the memory care activities as they do in the US
IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE PLANS

• Creating a sustainable service learning project that focuses on memory care year-round in the DR is important, given the shift in women’s roles and the likelihood of a growing demand for institutionalized living for the growing elderly population.

• In May 2018 we will return and partner with the regional campus of a Dominican university in Nagua, with the goal of creating a sustainable volunteer system.

• We will also expand to include families in the area that are caring for their elderly with dementia in the home, by
  – conducting home visits
  – community education sessions,

……with the hope that family members will be motivated to conduct these types of low-cost memory care activities at home.
CONCLUSIONS

• Worldwide, we are living longer and our elderly population with dementia is increasing.

• **Memory care activities** that stimulate the brain have been shown to help **slow the progress of dementia**, and may also **decrease symptoms that** commonly accompany dementia, such as anxiety and withdrawal.

• In many **developing countries**, the trend towards higher education and employment for women may result in an **increase of institutionalized living for the elderly**, and the need for sustainable volunteer systems.

• **University service learning projects** can create a sustainable volunteer system in assisted-living facilities, while providing students with an excellent real-world experience.
Questions, Comments?