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Engaging Students in Health Literacy Through Fiction Novels

By LeAnn Olson and Kason O’Neil
As is common in many secondary health education courses, communication and discourse surrounding health topics often utilize a paradigmatic approach, using scientific reasoning and the distributing information using empirical data and facts (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). However, using narrative communication (e.g., stories, historical accounts, lived experiences) can provide an opportunity to engage students with health-related scenarios that demonstrate application of health skills in authentic ways. Narrative communication, as defined by Hinyard and Kreuter (2007), is “... any cohesive and coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about scene, characters, and conflict; raises unanswered questions or unresolved conflict; and provides resolution” (p. 778). Igartua and Vega Casanova (2016) found that personal identification with characters from a story impacted thinking and attitudes of subjects. Therefore, using narratives such as fiction novels can provide a richer and more authentic and impactful learning experience, compared to solely providing facts or short scenarios. There are a variety of ways to access and use novels to increase the depth of learning in most, if not all, content areas within secondary health education.

Considerations for Using Novels

**Identify the purpose of the text being used (skill, content or both)**

To date, there are a plethora of novels that cover the spectrum of health content areas that help to address National Health Education Standard 1: *Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health* (Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards, 2007). Many texts, especially in the Young Adult genre, have narratives and character interaction tie directly in with health topics related to alcohol, tobacco, drugs, mental and emotional health, family and sexual health, and injury and violence. The lived experiences, struggles and lessons learned by characters in the novels can be directly connected and intertwined with facts and trends learned in health class. This form of application can allow students to make rich connections to the meaning and purpose of a health topic as it is applied to real life.

Nearly all novels present some form of social, emotional or physical conflict characters navigate while making informed decisions. Through descriptive narrative and dialog, readers can understand and sympathize with the decisions characters make. These situations presented in novels allow for students to examine the decision-making process, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, and to analyze influences on behaviors. As a result, secondary health students can identify the conflict or problem within the novel, reflect on the actions of the characters, and consider alternative scenarios and potential outcomes if decisions were made differently. Using novels in health education can not only be a rich experience for students, it is an excellent way of addressing the National Health Education Standards 2–8, the skill standards (Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards, 2007).

Another option is to consider looking at both content and skill within a novel’s text. For example, after reading about bullying (mental and emotional health) and the feelings characters experience within novels, students can discuss and develop an advocacy project around what they have learned in class and through the novel. Students could also recreate dialog relating to resisting peer pressure to consume alcohol or drugs based on the knowledge and techniques they have learned in class. To do this, health students can question if the character in the novel has all of the accurate facts of the situation and can conduct a fact check accessing valid and reliable resources. Marrying up content and skills allows students to have a deeper connection to learning, being that they are engaged with the characters in a narrative text.

**Selecting texts**

Depending on the health content and skills being emphasized within a program, there are several ways to select an appropriate novel. One method would be to use a novel that students are already reading for a literature or language arts class. This provides a great opportunity for cross-curricular collaboration. Limitations to this approach are that all students may not be in the same language arts class or the content/skill being taught within the health class does not align with the timing of lessons between the two courses.

Another option for selecting texts is that the health teacher can also choose their own appropriate novels. This can be advantageous because it allows for the greatest teacher autonomy. For example, all students can be reading the same text, small groups could be reading different texts based on individual learning needs, or students could be allowed to select their own text from a preapproved list. For example, if instruction is focused on mental and emotional health and accessing valid information and products and services, the class could all read the same novel and have discussions and engaging activities revolving around the selected health content or skill. Another option would be to have small groups and each read a different novel and present about the content and skill to the entire class. The class can then compare novels and what the characters experienced, their knowledge, and how they accessed products and services, followed by how the students could access help within their own community. A third option would be to assign different texts to each student with similar assessment possibilities as small groups.

Students can also choose their own novel. This option is best suited to skill assessment, usually (1) decision making, (2) interpersonal communication skills, or (3) accessing valid information, products and services, as the majority of novels provide opportunities to students to evaluate the characters’ use of these skills and apply what they have learned in class. With students choosing their own novel, sometimes there can be more investment in the activity.
because they are more likely going to choose a genre/subject in which they are interested and can possibly identify more with characters.

**Determine evidence of student learning**

“The ideal way to ascertain whether students are proficient in a skill is to have them complete an assessment where they must demonstrate learning in a meaningful and relevant way” (Benes & Alperin, 2016, p. 211). Performance tasks provide a more authentic way for students to express their learning. Student-generated skits/role-plays, public service announcements, comic strips, extended responses, presentation, brochures, advertisements, videos, interviews, writing a song, and writing a letter to a friend/family member/editor of a paper are all examples of performance tasks. Letting them choose how to express their learning also provides students with an outlet with which they may feel most comfortable. For many teachers, this may be an unnerving concept for assessment, but it has potential to deepen student comprehension and authenticity. With a carefully designed assessment, students can choose different methods to express their learning, ones they feel most comfortable with, and give a better picture of concept and skill attainment. For example, if the class is working on content of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and the skill of interpersonal communication, after reading their novel students could choose to create a skit, public service announcement, comic strip, or write a letter to the book character utilizing content knowledge and skill cues.

**Examples**

**Example 1: Go ask Alice by Beatrice Sparks (2006)**

**Learning task 1**

- Content: Mental and Emotional Health
- Skill: Accessing Valid and Reliable Information, Products and Services
- First, students will distinguish where in the book she needs help and then decide what Alice needs (information, products and/or services). The students will then research local places that might be able to help her. They will also write a paragraph or fill out a worksheet explaining what the service is and how it would benefit Alice.

**Learning task 2**

- Content: Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs
- Skill: Decision Making to Enhance the Health of the Individual
- Students will choose/be given a part in the story in which Alice uses drugs. Students will discuss in partners and then write out—using the decision-making framework—different options with possible outcomes for the chosen situation. A whole-class discussion will follow about the different situations, along with the barriers present and supports needed to make a health-enhancing decision.

**Example 2: Foul trouble by John Feinstein (2013)**

**Learning task 1**

- Content: Mental and Emotional Health
- Skill: Decision Making to Enhance the Health of the Individual
- Sub-Task: After reading the text or excerpt, discuss in groups what role peer pressure played in Terrell making the choice to smoke weed or have drinks with his “friends”? What could he have done differently (use the decision-making framework)? What are some other ways students are peer pressured?
- Sub-Task: As a group, come up with some different ideas that Terrell could have had to avoid the situation and present them to the class.

**Learning task 2**

- Content: Family and Social Health
- Sub-Task: After reading the text or excerpt, discuss in groups how the people surrounding Terrell influenced his overall health. Identify and analyze internal and external factors regarding his ultimate decision to go with Danny to Harvard.
- Sub-Task: In groups, discuss how Terrell could have made better choices with regard to whom he surrounded himself with. What do you think would have been the outcome if he did not have Danny and Coach Wilcox as influences?

**Example 3: Wonder by R. J. Palacio (2012)**

**Learning task 1**

- Content: Family and Social Health
- Skill: Interpersonal Communication
- (In a group or partners) How do we make friends? What are characteristics of a good friend/friendship? How can people positively work through misunderstandings? Where in the text can you find examples? Find dialog that supports this, or find where better communication is needed and rewrite the scenario to exhibit healthier interpersonal communication.

**Learning task 2**

- Content: Mental and Emotional Health (Bullying)
- Skill: Advocacy
- Discuss ways in which Auggie experienced bullying. How did this impact him and those around him? Organize a schoolwide Be Kind campaign. Working in groups, students will create brochures, posters and kindness cards to be displayed and handed out to peers.
Content will include definitions and facts about bullying, as well as resources if someone wanted to report bullying behavior/incidents. The Be Kind campaign will take place over the course of 1 week during lunch periods.

Novels are a great way to get students more fully engaged in health, allowing for more authentic learning to occur with both content and skills. There is no set way to utilize narrative texts, providing educators a lot of creative freedom to develop tasks that are relevant to their students.

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References


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