

## **HEALTH LITERACY SEMINAR**

HCOM508, January 2008

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Deborah Dean, M.S.P.H., Guest Lecturer

Dharma Cortés, Ph.D., Guest Lecturer

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Better understanding of the relationship between health and literacy is essential to the development of effective health communication strategies and outreach. National assessments of adult literacy have raised serious concerns about the ability of nearly half the adult population in the U.S. to access and use health information and services (NALS 1992, NAAL 2003). According to Healthy People 2010 low health literacy is a barrier to effective health communication and contributes to health disparities. To address these issues Healthy People 2010 recommends that health service providers develop and use plain language health communication skills (DHHS, 2000). The Institute of Medicine calls for increasing “knowledge, awareness, and responsiveness to health literacy among health service providers” (IOM 2005).

To raise awareness among health professionals regarding health literacy as a public health priority, the Health Communication Program at the Tufts University School of Medicine offers a skills oriented seminar in health literacy. The course explores the link between literacy and health in the U.S. and how poor health literacy impacts access to health information and quality health care services. Students practice writing and speaking in plain language, and consider the Internet as a vehicle for achieving consumer health information literacy. The course provides an overview of the adult literacy system in the U.S. and explores opportunities for collaboration across fields.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The Health Literacy Seminar is an intensive five-day, skills oriented course. The course will provide students with the opportunity to develop and practice their plain language health communication skills to meet the health information needs of patients and consumers with a broad range of health information and literacy needs.

At the conclusion of the course students will be able to:

- Articulate how poor health literacy impacts patient and consumer access to health information and quality health care services
- Assess written, verbal, and on-line health information for readability and usability
- Use plain language in both verbal and written health communication
- Identify supports that aid health communication across cultures
- Compare and contrast health literacy initiatives in the education and health fields
- Apply health literacy research to health communication efforts in practice

## **COURSE MECHANICS**

The course will meet over five consecutive days, January 7-11, 2008, from 8:30 am to 2:30 pm, Tufts University School of Medicine campus, classroom to be announced. The seminar is limited to 12 participants to meet the learning needs of individual students and to allow for in-depth feedback from the instructor. Students are required to read two books and four journal articles for the course. The novel by Fadiman and the practical guide by Osborn may be purchased using Amazon.com or at the Tufts University Medical School Bookstore. Copies of the required journal articles will be provided by the instructor.

## **REQUIRED READING**

Andrulis, D.P. and Brach, C. (2007). Integrating Literacy, Culture, and Language to Improve Health Care Quality for Diverse Populations. *Am J Health Behav*, 31 (Suppl1):S122-133.

Fadiman, A. (2001). *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. New York, NY, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Osborn, H. (2005). *Health Literacy A-Z: Practical Ways to Communicate your Health Message*. Sudbury, MA. Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

Sableford, S. and Mettger, W. (2007). Plain Language: A Strategic Response to the Health Literacy Challenge. *Journal of Public Health Policy*. 28, 71-93.

Singleton, K. (2004). An Adult Educator's Journey into Health Literacy: Developing Health Literacy Curriculum for ESOL Learners. *Literacy Harvest* II(1): 30-34.

## **GRADING**

Because this is a skills oriented course much of our time together will be spent building and practicing plain language communication. For this reason, *attendance is required and absences will affect your grade*. Please see the course instructor if you have any conflicts with the schedule.

Students are expected to read all the assigned articles and books. To get the most out of the course students must complete all assigned reading. I recommend that students begin the novel *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman prior to the start of class. We will have extensive discussion in class related to the assigned reading. *All students are expected to participate*.

Late assignments will not be accepted without prior approval from the instructor and will result in a zero for that assignment. All assignments should be kept in a portfolio and handed into to the instructor at the end of the session. *Missing assignments will affect your grade.*

Final grade for the course will be determined as follows:

### **Class Room Participation: 10%**

This course is designed to be highly interactive. Class participation is expected from all students. Ten percent of your final grade will reflect an assessment by the course instructor of your attendance and participation in class discussions.

### **In-class Assignments: 40%**

In-class assignments include: Readability Plus, an online health information activity (day two), Communicating Across Cultures: a discussion (day three), Plain Language Practice: a role play activity (day four) and Health Literacy Study Circles, a group project and presentation (day five). *See detailed description of assignments below.*

### **Portfolio Assignments: 50%**

Each portfolio assignment is worth 10% x 5 assignments = 50%. If the work is deemed unsatisfactory you will be asked to resubmit. Assignments include: 1) Approaches to Health Literacy, a 2-page paper, 2) Readability Assessment, take home practice using readability formulas, 3) Write It Easy-to-Read, a rewrite activity, 4) Creating a Wordlist, using plain language to define technical terms, 5) Communicating Across Cultures, a 2-page paper. *See detailed description of assignments below.*

## **COURSE OUTLINE**

<b>Day</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>
1	Monday, 1/7/08	Introduction to Health Literacy
2	Tuesday, 1/8/08	In Plain Language
3	Wednesday, 1/9/09	Working Across Cultures
4	Thursday, 1/10/08	Health Communication and Adult Learning Theory
5	Friday, 1/11/08	Health Literacy Study Circle Presentations

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

**Approaches to Health Literacy.** Students will view two videos describing health literacy. One from a clinical perspective, the other from an adult literacy perspective. Both videos show interventions to improve health literacy. A discussion of the similarities and differences in approaches and the potential for collaboration will follow.

Students will compare and contrast the two videos in a 2 - 4 page paper. Papers will include the following: a brief introduction to health literacy; description of what adult

literacy practitioners are doing to address low health literacy; description of what health care providers are doing to address low health literacy; discussion of how the two fields can work together and what might be the benefits and challenges. Students will:

- Demonstrate familiarity with health literacy interventions in practice
- Conceptualize health literacy collaboration across fields

**Health Literacy Study Circles.** Students will work in small groups to focus on a specific area of research (i.e. measures of health literacy, health literacy and health outcomes, etc). Each group will be assigned key journal articles and a sample study circle guide. Students will meet at least once outside of class to discuss the research, develop a study circle guide, and prepare for their presentation. In the final class, study circles groups will present an overview of the assigned literature and facilitate a discussion based on their study circle guide. All students will be expected to read all articles and have an in-depth understanding of the research assigned to their group. Students will:

- Demonstrate familiarity with the health literacy research
- Identify gaps in knowledge / areas for future study
- Apply health literacy research to practice

**Readability Assessment.** Using the SMOG and Fry Readability Formulas, students will work in pairs to calculate the reading grade level of a health education material designed for patients and consumers. A discussion of the pros and cons of using readability formulas will follow. Students will:

- Practice using the SMOG and Fry readability formulas to calculate the reading grade level of written material
- Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of using readability formulas

**Rewrite It Easy-to-Read.** In this exercise students will apply plain language writing guidelines to develop an easy-to-read health education material. Students will rewrite in plain language a public health service announcement. Students will:

- Practice writing in plain language
- Consider graphic design and visuals to improve reading ease

**Readability Plus.** Students will identify and apply criteria for assessing the readability and usability of print and online health education materials. Broad categories for criteria development include language and tone, graphics, layout and design, cultural appropriateness, usability, accuracy, and source credibility. Students will choose a health topic, search for health information websites on that topic, apply the assessment criteria, and present their findings. Students will:

- Apply criteria for assessing the readability and usability of print and online health information resources
- Assess online health information resources for consumer use and appropriateness

**Plain Language Practice.** Students will create a health communication role-play. In the role-play students will communicate three key pieces of information and concepts in plain language. You will highlight at least five technical terms or jargon and how you translated them into plain language. Students will:

- Identify five technical terms or jargon commonly used in health care settings
- Demonstrate the ability to translate technical terms or jargon into plain language
- Communicate health information and concepts in plain language

**Communicating Across Cultures: Discussion and Paper.** Students will read *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman. Through a discussion of the novel, and 2 – 4 page paper, students we will identify barriers and supports to clear health communication across languages and cultures. Students will:

- Identify three misunderstandings between health care providers and patients exemplified in the novel
- Articulate what could have been done differently by the providers described in the novel to bridge the gap they experienced in communicating and understanding the Lee family
- Consider the role of interpreters and translators in health care settings

**Creating a Word List.** Students will choose 10 technical words related to a specific health topic, such as diabetes, asthma, cancer, etc. With these 10 words students will create a mini-dictionary, with easy-to-read definitions and phonetic spellings to clarify pronunciation. Students will:

- Define 10 health related words in easy-to-read terms
- Apply phonetic spellings to aid pronunciation

## **DETAILED OUTLINE**

### **Session 1: Introduction to Health Literacy Monday, January 7, 2008**

This session will begin with an overview of the course content and assignments. Students will explore the link between literacy and health in the U.S. and how poor health literacy coupled with the demands of the health care system impact consumer access to health information and quality health care services. We will consider the application of adult learning theory and practice to public health and discuss emerging approaches to addressing health literacy barriers in the U.S. By the end of this session, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of course objectives, content, mechanics, and expectations
- Define literacy and health literacy in the U.S.
- Review the literature linking low literacy and poor health outcomes
- Consider the application of adult learning theory to public health

- Demonstrate an understanding of the emerging health literacy interventions in practice
- Conceptualize health literacy collaboration across fields

**Session 2: In Plain Language**  
**Tuesday, January 8, 2008**  
**Deborah Dean, M.S.P.H., Guest Lecturer**

In this session students will look at written, verbal, and on-line health information. We will use readability formulas to assess the reading grade level at which materials are written and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Students will also get a chance to practice writing in plain language. We will consider the Internet as a resource for consumer health information and apply criteria for assessing the readability and usability of health information websites for consumers. By the end of this session students will be able to:

- Use readability formulas and describe their pros and cons in practice
- Describe audience centered plain language materials development process
- Write health information in plain language
- List six criteria for evaluating the readability and usability of print and web-based health information resources
- Discuss the importance and challenges of online health communication

**Session 3: Working Across Cultures**  
**Wednesday, January 9, 2008**  
**Dharma Cortés, Ph.D., Guest Lecturer**

This session will focus on the relationship between culture, health and literacy. We will consider culture as a factor in health communication through a discussion of the novel *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman. We will discuss issues related to interpreting and will identify supports that aid health communication across cultures. By the end of this session students will be able to:

- Identify three misunderstandings between health care providers and patients in the book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman
- Articulate what can be done to improve communication between the health care system and patients from diverse backgrounds
- Describe process for working effectively with an interpreter

**Session 4: Health Communication and Adult Learning Theory**  
**Thursday, January 10, 2008**

In this session students will apply adult learning theory to health education and communication in practice. Students will engage in a project-based learning activity and practice communicating health information in plain language. Students will learn how adult literacy teachers are engaging adult learners and using health information

websites to build health literacy skills in adult basic education and English for speakers of other languages classes. By the end of this session students will be able to:

- Define three adult learning theories and related methods
- Demonstrate plain language health communication skills
- Describe ABE and ESOL approaches to health literacy using the Internet
- Create a word list to support health literacy education in adult literacy and health care settings

### **Session 5: Health Literacy Study Circle Presentations Friday, January 11, 2008**

Over the past week students have participated in study circle groups focused on specific health literacy research. In this session study circle groups will present an overview of their assigned literature and facilitate a discussion and activity to engage the class in an exploration of the research and applicable to health communication efforts in practice.

By the end of this session students will be able to:

- Articulate familiarity with the research on health literacy as documented in the medical literature
- Facilitate discussion of health literacy as a public health priority
- Identify gaps in knowledge / areas for future health literacy research
- Apply health literacy research to practice

### **ABOUT THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR**

Sabrina Kurtz-Rossi, M.Ed., Adjunct Clinical Instructor, is a nationally known health literacy curriculum and professional development specialist. She conducts teacher and health care provider trainings on integrating health and literacy education, enhancing patient and provider communication, developing low-literacy materials, using print and Web-based health literacy resources, and reaching limited-literacy audiences. Ms. Kurtz-Rossi is Coordinator of the Medical Library Association's Health Information Literacy Research Project, funded by the National Library of Medicine. She was director of World Education's Health Literacy Initiative for over 10 years. She joined the non-profit adult literacy organization in 1994 to develop programs and approaches to improve access to health information and health care services for adults with limited literacy skills. Ms. Kurtz-Rossi received her Master's Degree in Health Education from Boston University's School of Education in 1988 and has worked in a variety of community-based settings developing and implementing health information outreach programs.

**Contacting the Instructor.** Students are encouraged to contact the instructor with any questions or concerns about the course. Please send me an email [sabrina\\_kurtz-rossi@comcast.net](mailto:sabrina_kurtz-rossi@comcast.net) or call me at 781-835-6488. I do not have office hours but would be happy to meet with you after class or by appointment.