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## Teaching Tips: Game of Life in a Continuum of Care

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Students in their early 20s know they will not live forever, yet many young (and older) minds boggle over the concept of a future that involves old age. In an effort to integrate theory, policy, practice, and research related to human services for elders and their families, I introduced a semester-long role play to my undergraduate students of Human Development that concluded with a variation on the popular game of Life. In this column, I provide a brief description of the student role-play in constituency groups and details of my Game of Life, which were created to convey the richly diverse, inherently ecological nature of aging.

Students in Community Services for Older Adults developed personas that they role-played in group activities targeting specific domains of functioning and community services, such as nutrition, education, and housing. Students were assigned to the role of elder, caregiver, or community service provider. Accordingly, all constituents were assigned an age, gender, and race. Elders were assigned socioeconomic, marital, and health status. Caregivers and community service providers were aligned with a specific set of care needs for their relative or client population. Students then considered how their persona's or their constituents' individual, familial, and community characteristics would influence their need for, access to, and experience with categories of community services. When discussing information and referral services, for example, constituents identified the needs of an elderly member, available services to meet his other needs, and obstacles this persona faced accessing these services.

Over the semester, constituents developed stories that explained their family networks, personal values, and preferences. The detailed personas informed students' responses to the "Game of Life" activity at semester's end. Students worked in pairs, selecting one persona to apply to the steps of the game. The pair repeated the game with the other student's persona if time permitted. First, students drew one "urgent" card from a list of 17 events (*see Table below*) that could negatively impact the health and activities of an independent or frail elder. Students considered the demographic, health, and familial qualities of their persona, along with any relevant personal details that may have emerged over the semester (e.g., being a loner or having a dense network of family members nearby). They then used the continuum of care figure, created by Wicker and Roberto (2008, p.11), to plot what services their persona could and would access to address this

urgent event. Examples of urgent events included breaking hip, being verbally abused by a caregiver at the nursing home, or failing the vision test at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Personas might seek out support services, community services, or long-term care services on the continuum to meet their needs. Each persona's path could have been different and should have reflected their individual qualities and the nature of services in the persona's fictional community.

Students next drew a "social" card from a group of 18. These events or conditions reflected a challenge to maintaining mental and emotional health. Here too, students considered what resources the persona would be eligible to access and challenges they might face accessing the service before plotting their response on the continuum of care. Examples included an inability to go to church, deterioration of handwriting, a pet dying, and living in an isolated area. To end on a more positive note, the final round of the game involved students drawing a "growth" card that allowed them to demonstrate how their persona, irrespective of material resources or health, can continue to grow and contribute to the wellbeing of self and others. Students mapped their persona to human services options that could support growth in response to the drawn card. Examples included helping peers, coping with a loss, and standing up for one's self. After concluding the game, students presented their map of responses, providing brief explanations of Adult Development and Aging News Spring 2012 how the persona's characteristics influenced their progress within the continuum of care.

Students appreciated the variation in class format. Of course, some were better able to develop persona details and consider their influence on the services available to an individual and how a person with specific qualities would access these services. Students integrated stories of their grandparents and adults at their Service-Learning site into their persona's qualities, which made the task more salient. Those playing caregivers or human services providers determined that one size does not fit all in meeting the needs of managing population. Perhaps Milton Bradley should consider an aging component in its popular board game; with my variation, the rich diversity of managing American population became more tangible to 20-year olds.

**Table 1**

*Urgent, Social, and Growth Cards for the Game of Life Personas*

**"Urgent" cards**

- You break a hip
- You lose your glasses
- You fail your vision test at the DMV
- You can't afford your rent increase
- Your roof gets a leak
- You are in a NH; the nurse yells at you every time you spill food
- You fell climbing out of the tub
- You don't have the energy to prepare "real" meals anymore
- You think there are incorrect charges on your credit card bill

**"Social" cards**

- You are lonely
- You lose your spouse or a dear friend
- You are turning into a couch potato
- Your pet dies
- Your grandchildren are grown
- You get winded climbing the stairs
- You can't understand your grandkids on the phone
- You don't get outside anymore
- There are no sidewalks in your neighborhood

**"Growth" cards**

- You join a community organization
- You volunteer to help peers
- You reach out to a friend
- You make your voice heard
- You speak out against injustice
- You are integrated with the community
- You improve your physical health
- You improve your spiritual health
- You contribute your time
- You share your talents
- Your SS check didn't come this month
- You fell climbing out of the tub
- Your dentures don't fit, and insurance doesn't cover new ones
- You can't cut your own toenails
- Your SS check didn't come this month
- Sometimes you don't take your meds because you can't keep them straight
- You need to get to the doctor's office
- The town is going to fine you if you don't mow your lawn

- You miss listening to music
- You miss reading good books
- You wish your life had more purpose
- You can't get to church
- You can't dance anymore
- Your handwriting is not legible anymore
- You live at the end of a road few people drive down anymore
- Your only local adult child moves out of town
- You live at the end of a road few people drive down anymore
- You join an interest group
- You contribute some money
- You cope with a loss
- You stand up for yourself
- You give back to the community
- You volunteer to help another generation
- You improve your mental health
- You contribute a service.
- You build your self-esteem.
- You find meaning in your life