



Focal Points

the College of Arts & Sciences
Tennessee Technological University

Vol. 14, No. 1

A Newsletter Supported by the Terry Martin Stonecipher Fund

November 2009

Innovative Teaching Issue 2009

Each Spring semester, CAS faculty members are nominated for the Dean's Award for Innovative Teaching. A faculty committee, chaired by the Associate Dean, selects the annual recipient, and this year the award winner is Professor Jachelle Norris, Department of Sociology & Political Science.

~~Kurt Eisen, Interim Assoc. Dean



Sociology &
Political Science

fears, inhibitions, uncertainties, joys, happiness, etc. you currently have in general AND regarding this course and what might obstruct your ability to examine "death and dying" more honestly.

Death and Dying

Joffer an undergraduate sociology course entitled "Death and Dying." This presents unique challenges for both professor and student. Research suggests that Americans are reluctant if not determined to avoid the topic of death, so you would not expect to find college students rushing to sign up for a course titled "Death and Dying." I have found, quite unexpectedly, the opposite to be true.

I set out to develop the course to include a sociological approach to this topic. We have a traditional textbook from which to examine death from a sociological perspective, learning about the economic, political and cultural dimensions of death and dying in our society. Among other topics, we analyze beliefs and attitudes about death, incorporating a cross cultural perspective while assessing socio-cultural forces that influence how we think, feel and act around death. We also critically examine the death institution, which includes the health care and palliative care issues and the legal, political and ethical ends of life debates. On a more personal level, grief and bereavement, wills and funeral planning are discussed and analyzed sociologically.

I announce on the first day of class that we have only four months to live.

From the first day until the final exam period we not only examine death sociologically, but we experience and examine our own lives as someone with 105 days to live. Students are required to keep a journal of this experiment. Homework assignments are designed to assist the students as they make the journey from being given the news to the "final" day. These assignments require the students to dig deep emotionally and reflect on their attitudes and beliefs toward death and dying while preparing for their own eventual death by planning funerals, writing wills and getting their affairs in order.

For example, upon hearing the news students are asked to respond to the following:

- What is your state of mind right now, today, in general?
- What is your state of mind regarding death and dying?
- What emotions did you experience this week knowing you have less than 105 days to live?
- Write a brief letter to yourself describing your state of mind. Discuss any

Fears are explored; materials and guest speakers teach us to work through these fears mindfully and honestly. We practice living each day as though it were our last and examine what prevents us from doing so. As we continue to work toward our final day, students are asked to review their lives:

- Reflect on events and people in your past, especially those you

(cont. p. 2)



(continued from Page 1)

feel were of special significance for some reason. What memories surface? Who or what are the significant moments in your life, and why are they significant?

- Are there people you would like to forgive? Are there those from whom you'd like to seek forgiveness?
- What are you most grateful for? Is there someone you would like to thank?
- If you could tell the important people in your life one thing each, what would it be?
- Is it possible to make peace with our lives at this point?

We draft our wills with the help of a lawyer, plan our funerals, make final arrangements, and write our eulogies. We work through issues of guilt, grief and bereavement with others who are gifted in this regard. We examine our own grief issues by constructing an "altar" in memory of those who have been most important to us.

As the last night approaches, we strive to make peace, work toward an acceptance of death. During this last week students are asked to:

- Say goodbye to loved ones in the center of your heart.
- Thank your body for its perseverance under difficult circumstances you may've encountered thus far in your life.
- Have mercy on your body.
- With kindness and clarity say farewell to this life and prepare for the renewal of death.
- Create your own heart song and death chant.
- Write a summary of this exercise and include your "song" or "chant."
- Are there any "last things" you need to do?
- Any unfinished business before tonight? This is your final chance

On the last night, we are released from our sentence due to our perseverance in facing fears and working through them to a deeper, more sociological understanding of death and dying. We celebrate with a "last supper" to which friends and family are invited.

This intensive four-month role playing exercise/experiment has been very successful. The class reaches capacity shortly after registration begins, rarely do students drop the course once enrolled, and I am always being asked when I will be teaching the class again. The evaluations reflect to me that the students find the course educational, enlightening and personally relevant. The students are motivated and committed to make this journey once they start. Some students have stated that the course should meet "more than three hours a week," or "continue after the class is over." And most telling to me as to the impact of this course is the alum that continue to contact me through the years because of being reminded of the class. I have had previous students contact me to tell me that they only recently realized the full import of the course.

Why such a dramatic pedagogical approach? The curriculum offers a variety of opportunities for students to make the course their own and the freedom to examine the issue in their own way. Yet, the four months to live experiment brings an air of seriousness to the course. We examine the subject matter sociologically but experience dying on a personal level. In no other way can students so fully experience the wide range of emotions regarding death and dying in such a safe and nurturing environment. This approach allows the students to bond as they complete and share the assignments. In this way they are better able to understand their own feelings, through the feedback and support of others. Facing death together brings home the fact that everyone dies, and there is no way to escape this. In coming to terms with their own deaths, they have learned how to more fully live their lives. ✓

Focal Points is published once or more per year by the College of Arts and Sciences at Tennessee Technological University, a Constituent University of the Tennessee Board of Regents. The newsletter is designed to foster community within the college and to inform friends and alumni.
TTU: /An EEO/AA/Title IX/Section 504/ADA university 358-505-07

Editor, Paul Semmes, Interim Dean
Editorial Assistant, Glenda Pharris

College Staff

Kurt Eisen, Associate Dean
Colleen G. Harris, Executive Aide to the Dean
Susan Maddux, Coordinator of General Education Events
Edith Duvier, Director, Student Success Center

College of Arts and Sciences
Tennessee Technological University
Box 5065
Cookeville, TN 38505-0001
(931) 372-3119
Fax: (931) 372-6142
e-mail: FocalPoints@tntech.edu



Works Cited

¹This experiment is adapted in part from the work of Steven Levine's *A Year to Live*, 1997

²IDEA evaluations for Fall, 2008 are attached

³An alternative plan is in place should the material become too difficult for a student to attend due to an unforeseen death or reaction to the subject matter.

⁴A paper was written and presented at the 2004 Southern Sociological Society meetings on this first class experience and their reactions one year later and can be made available upon request.