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Using Technology for Alternative Assessment in Health Education

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As the 21st century carries on, so does our reliance on being able to use technology as a teaching tool in the classroom. Technology is now embedded in our National Standards, equipment, supplies, curriculum content and national testing. It is a world that is constantly changing, requiring us to adapt quickly or fall even further behind our students. The world of technology in education has its benefits as well as its shortcomings. We can now offer virtual learning academies to students who may not fit into a “normal” classroom. There are apps for almost everything in the world, many geared toward education and helping students learn. If we can get past the omnipresent glitches in the Internet, dead batteries and slow computer devices, technology can greatly assist educators in reaching their goal of teaching and helping students learn.

Every student learns differently, plain and simple. Some are visual, auditory or even tactile learners. Getting to know your students and finding out their preferred method of learning is the first step in helping them maximize their achievement. Not every student is going to respond to assessment in the same way, either. Some prefer written, others oral, and some will prefer hands-on practical assessments. In health education we have the opportunity to use technology to assess our students in alternative ways that help demonstrate their learning. While this is not a comprehensive list of tools, the purpose of this article is to shed light on a few programs and assignments the author uses in his classroom that have shown great results in the learning of all types of students.

Teaching the sensitive health units is not always an easy task for educators. Most students are reluctant to speak up in class for fear of being judged, exposing their self-image, or revealing information deemed too personal. Mental health is a great example. Talking about anxiety, depression and even suicide prevention can be very hard for some students, especially given recent tragedies in the news. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance data from 2013, 29.9 percent of students in grades 9–12 admitted to feeling sad or hopeless every day for over two weeks (Kann et al., 2014). This is the same amount of time required for someone to be clinically diagnosed with depression. Unfortunately, depression has been proven to be a factor in many of the teenage suicides in recent years.

If asked their least favorite unit in health, most high school students would probably say drugs and alcohol. When asked why, the typical response is “We have heard it 100 times... Just say no to drugs and alcohol.” While this is certainly not a bad approach, students need to take the front seat in their drug and alcohol prevention. The “Natural High” series is a great resource for high school students. It is an online-based drug prevention program designed to help adolescents find some activity in life that makes them say “no” to drug and alcohol use. This program has several videos made by celebrities talking about their lives and how they got to where they were because of saying “no” to drugs and alcohol. The founder of the organization lost his two brothers to drugs and was inspired to create the “Natural High” series. It has currently reached over 20,000 classrooms and 8 million students. Watching the “Natural High” series with your students is great, but one way you could alternatively assess your students is by empowering them to create their own videos. Before filming, it is the students’ responsibility to identify their natural high and to reflect on how drugs or alcohol use would interfere with it. The students write their own scripts and then have the opportunity to film them. It is suggested that they record their videos in a safe environment, such as their bedroom or another location. This allows the students to feel comfortable opening up in front of a camera. After recording, students have the chance to share with the class if they choose, or simply have the teacher view it.

Feedback from the project has been very positive. Students liked the ability to create videos and edit them using software programs such as Movie Maker. A couple of other students enjoyed being able to record anywhere they wanted because there was no risk associated with talking about sensitive topics. A select few even liked showing their videos to others, as opposed to standing up in front of the class and talking about their natural high because recording allowed them to rehearse and say exactly what they wanted. From an assessment standpoint, students used media to advocate their healthy lifestyles. All types of students have been able to successfully accomplish this assignment due to the open nature of the task. No two videos will ever be the same, and every student has different reasons for choosing their natural high and saying no to drugs and alcohol.

Typically, final exams in high school are either cumulative or unit-based tests where students are asked to demonstrate knowledge of material at one time of one specific day of the year. Not every student is 100 percent healthy every day and thus will not necessarily assess in the same way. Online classrooms are still relatively new, and more schools are integrating them. Programs such as Moodle, Edmodo, MyVLE, EDU2.0, OpenClass and NEO all allow teachers to create...
web sites for their classes where they can store calendars, assignments, grades, email and so on. What is particularly useful about online class pages is the ability to create online portfolios. Instead of showing knowledge on one day, portfolios show learning over time. Teachers and students can see growth in skills and see just how many gains were made over the course of weeks, months or years.

In the author's class, students have created online portfolios as their final exam. Started on the first day of class, students create a web page from a template that has them set up an introduction page, giving a summary about who they are, hobbies, and any other information they want to include. Photos are added to make the page more visually attractive, and a spot for their natural high videos is left for later when the assignment is completed. The sub-pages of their portfolio are the National Health Education Standards. Each one has its own page and a definition of the standard. Students are assigned to upload artifacts throughout the course to each of the pages that embody the particular standard. After uploading an assignment, a reflection about how it relates to the standard is created and uploaded next to the artifact. By the end of the class students will have evidence of work that demonstrates successful completion of the National Standards and their reflections. One other piece to the portfolio is a “Health in My Life” essay response. The seven areas of wellness are stressed during classes, and this page of their portfolio enables the students to indicate their performance within each area of wellness and to offer suggestions for maintaining or further developing their wellness.

Portfolios have been a part of education for a long time, but the ability to use technology to showcase them is still evolving. Students like how visually attractive portfolios can be and that they have the ability to edit web pages and personalize them. Some of the more unorganized students especially liked the fact that they did not need to keep track of all their artifacts in a paper folder and instead could be assured that their work was on their computer or in cloud storage. Students with individualized education programs were accustomed to this type of assessment, as portfolios are an alternative for standardized testing. With portfolios they were producing the same work and demonstrating knowledge for all health standards and areas of wellness.

Class participation in health education can also be a challenge when talking about sex education or other sensitive topics. It can be very awkward and too personal for some students, but it is also something that needs to be taught and discussed in health education. Standards 4 and 8 of the National Health Education Standards are based or founded on the idea of getting students to vocalize and advocate their healthy behavior choices (Joint Commission on National Health Education Standards, 2007). Making the classroom a safe environment is a great start for any teacher to support open conversation, but fear — of being judged or of personal self-image — is sometimes too much of a reason to not speak up in class.

Over the past 10 years there have been a few programs created to deal with getting feedback and generating discussion among students, all while keeping their security and feelings a top priority. These programs allow the student to answer questions anonymously in class, with the responses instantly appearing on a whiteboard in front of the class. One such program is PollEverywhere (www.polleverywhere.com). The teacher creates an account and sets up questions to be asked in a future class. The questions can be multiple-choice, true/false or open-ended. When it comes time to ask the question, students can respond via computer or by texting answers to the number on the board associated with the particular question. Most students today have cell phones with texting capabilities and will choose to use this as their preferred device, but some may not have a phone and will need to use a computer. A positive aspect of PollEverywhere is that the free version allows for up to 40 responses per poll, which is more than the typical number of students in a class. Another positive aspect of the program is that students do not need an account — therefore, no personal information is needed.

Teachers who want the ability to offer more than one-time polling could look into a program called Socrative (www.socrative.com). Socrative offers the same basic polling as PollEverywhere but also allows for the teacher to set up assessments, interactive games and exit slips. Socrative requires a free account for teachers, but no account for students, to use. Both Socrative and Socrative Student are available as apps, making this a very user-friendly and convenient tool. Students who use this app need only the “room number” given by the teacher to be able to answer questions or assessments. Another cool tool of Socrative is the ability to make the assessments teacher or student paced. This can allow for the teacher to go slowly through an assessment and check for understanding along the way, or it can allow the students to work at their own pace and then reflect and discuss after everyone has finished.
Making assessment fun and interactive helps keep students engaged, focused and able to do their best. Kahoot (https://www.getkahoot.com/) is a relatively new program very similar to Socrative and PollEverywhere. Teachers set up questions, discussions or surveys ahead of time and then have the students answer through any device they may have — everything from cell phones to iPads to Chromebooks. Kahoot is game based, with each student creating a nickname to protect their identity and then compete to have the best scores, which are listed on the board and updated after each question. If a discussion or survey is taking place, scores are not used, but teachers can see if everyone is participating. Collaboration among teachers around the world is one thing that Kahoot has invested a great amount of energy and effort on. When a teacher creates an assessment in Kahoot, they can choose to have it private or publicly accessible to other educators. This allows for educators to see what others are doing and helps them learn from one another.

The way students learn and engage today is vastly different from how they learned 50, 25 or even 10 years ago. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) learning is increasing nationwide, with an emphasis on students learning more about STEM subjects. Technology is a major part of all aspects of our lives today. We know as educators that students like technology and using any and all devices in the classroom. Our opportunity is to take their interest and incorporate it into our classrooms. Assessment, once seen as dreadful, can now be viewed with a new set of eyes. Student performance would most likely improve if the motivation and effort levels improved as well, due to a more positive outlook on the task at hand. While there are more and more resources available within technology every day, now is the time to begin the learning process and make teaching and assessment more productive, for the student and for the teacher.

References

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