



[Emails between group members week of Feb. 15, 2005, earliest first]

Hi all,

I am now starting to get muddled about our topic. Maho and I talked on the T last night, and the more I thought about it, the less I could actually see how other people's attitudes to death constituted a murky PROBLEM, in which there could be stakeholders who were seeking solutions.

For example (Devil's advocate here) what's wrong with being reluctant to talk about death, necessarily? Our topic implies a judgment already - that we SHOULD be more open; that we SHOULD communicate better; that other cultures or traditions have a BETTER GRIP or a more WHOLESOME ATTITUDE to death. That's kind of like saying that natural childbirth is best and people should get on board and stop the drips and the epidurals and just see it as a natural thing and the pain is part of it. I don't think our 'solution' should be prescriptive, in other words.

There are all kinds of ways people die and all kinds of circumstances - are we going to equate a death by murder or mud landslide with death in a nursing home from old age - in terms of trying to get people to talk about it and grieve openly? Except for 9/11 and the Oklahoma bombings, in our country we have not suffered the kinds of horrible multiple deaths that other countries routinely experience, e.g. Iraq, Sudan, Israel/Palestine, Haiti, etc. It seems kind of self-indulgent to be trying to think of ways to get people to look at death differently - UNLESS we are just talking about deaths from sickness/old age.

As it is presently written - *American culture does not cope well with death* - we are looking at something in a very subjective manner and the implication is that people would be better off changing their ideas about death and dying. I just can't see this as a "problem" in the same way that the Wind Farm controversy was a problem, for example, or even the snow shoveling/parking issue was a problem.

Instead, what about a different take on the topic, such as "The business of dying" - where there could be many aspects to look into, e.g. the costs of dying; the taboos about death; the lack of communication or education about what happens when you die; making decisions about medical treatments or leaving that up to your family members, etc. The stakeholders in this scenario could include: relatives of people who have terminal diseases (how to cope); elderly people who have to sell their homes to afford medical care through Medicare; the "death" industry -- funeral homes, crematoria, cemeteries, religious workers; grief counselors, etc.

I know I've re-worded it closer to the take on it that I personally have, but the other way just wasn't working for me! What do you all think? We can just keep hitting "Reply All" until we get something that we all feel comfortable with. 😊

--Jan

> Hello all,  
> I personally feel that I need to listen to lisa one more time because she  
> has brought this issue as her problem. I would like to understand more  
> about why lisa has brought and what kinds of emotions she has. I am >thinking  
that if someone who has lost family members or friends suffer  
> from emotional and psychological (like depression, negative thinking, fear,  
> or anxiety) difficulties, and if the one does not have any support from  
> anybody (we need to analyze why, but let's say, it's because culture and  
> society does not respond, or whatever the reason), that might be a >problem.  
> Like Jan said, the person who suffer might be elderly but also might be  
> youth or young adults. In this context, the person would claim the lack of

> emotional support.  
> I try to think more about 'problem', and need a time to think about Jan's  
> idea of 'business'.  
> Even though the topic/problem seems messy and big, I am excited to work on  
> this project for learning PBL with all of you. I couldn't stop laughing  
> yesterday because the class was so much fun.  
> Take care, have more smile,  
--Maho

Hello, Jan, Maho and Lisa,

I am so not sure about this problem of death. It is a sure thing, you know, "Death and taxes", but other than that, I am not sure. Yes, we have a problem with the way this culture deals or does not deal with death, but what else, how to solve it, I am not sure. I feel muddled in the murky water of death and am not sure where to go from here or what to say.

Death for me for a long time has been a natural process, so I do not fear it or have taboos about talking about. I know life goes on and we continue as lie without our bodies on the other side. Being around the dying is when we are closest to spirit/the other side, so can be a wonderful time. As you can see it is hard for me to view it negatively, but I know most of our culture does. Again, as I am writing I am thinking out loud, maybe we should focus on one sector of our society, the children or elderly and how death negatively impacts them and then we can solve a problem like that.

I am really open to anything. Maybe we need Nina's guidance here. I will check my email tomorrow. I am happy to go with the flow of the group. I agree with Maho, we have a great group and it will be fun finding the death problem and solving it.

Take good care and stay warm.

Amy

***LGartner37@aol.com*** wrote:

Hey Folks

Sorry about the delay in responding. I am actually at my parent's house in Illinois. The issues here are sometimes murky and sometimes crystal-clear.

I'm glad that Jan has tried to take a hold of this. I like to spew ideas, but organizing and focusing are not my strong points. Although, we all probably need to work on the parts of ourselves that are not as strong, I think it is the beauty of group work that we have a mixture of skills and talents.

You're right. Our statements do imply judgment - not to mention those pesky cultural assumptions. The whole subject is a Pandora's Box. There are so many interesting directions we could go.

My personal and current concerns would be well addressed by Jan's re-take on things. I don't think it contradicts anything any of us has mentioned, it just starts narrowing a vast topic. Calling it "the business of death" does not take away the emotional parts that we all have responded to.

I still would really like to figure out a way to work in the idea of exploring other cultures and religions.

We have the built-in resource of Maho in our group for another cultural perspective -plus the fact that we each have our own spiritual and experiential differences. I am not sure how this will work specifically in coming up with our problem. It may not be the major thrust, but can it be part of it? This is Jan's list again:

the costs of dying; the taboos about death; the lack of communication or education about what happens when you die; making decisions about medical treatments or leaving that up to your family members, etc.

The stakeholders in this scenario could include: relatives of people who have terminal diseases (how to cope); elderly people who have to sell their homes to afford medical care through Medicare; the "death" industry -- funeral homes, crematoria, cemeteries, religious workers; grief counselors, etc.

Part of this process is winnowing and honing. Since all of us will eventually deal (or have dealt) with our parents, grandparents, our own!! - elderliness, I would vote for this emphasis. It's also very connected to current events. With the aging of the population here in the U.S., it will continue to be a large issue.

What does everyone think? What about another round of input on this and then some more winnowing? I think we can get it in better shape before emailing Nina. No matter what we send her, I'm sure she'll tweak it more.

I also think we have a great group and am excited to keep muddling through with you all.

--Lisa

Lisa - it's good of you to be thinking about the class while you're out at your parent's house!

I think you bring up a number of good points - I agree that we need to address the cultural and religious perspectives about death. How about if instead of calling our topic "The Business of Death and Dying" -- we go for something like "What is a good death?" or, "What would a 'good death' look like in America - and is it possible?" That broadens it a little, but I still feel that we haven't exactly defined it as a PROBLEM - you know what I mean?

--Jan

***LGartner37@aol.com*** wrote:

Hello everyone

What about creating hypothetical people? Couples, people with and without support, groups of friends with different backgrounds and figuring out what would help their transitions through different stages of aging, illness and death? How to deal with all the things Jan brought up?

Or talk to real people dealing with things to find out what all the issues are and try to figure out what would improve their experiences?

--Lisa

I like the idea of hypotheticals, but I'm not sure how it would fit into the PBL process. I think it may be time to ask for Nina's help!

p.s. let's just use this one email - I have pasted all our communications so far into it - so that we have a record of what we have been mulling over. You just have to be sure to hit "Reply All" on your email program, instead of just replying to me (or whomever you received an email from).

-- Jan

***yogaamy@comcast.net*** wrote:

Hello!

I like Lisa's idea of groups and how to improve the dying process. Can we do case studies? Do we need Nina's guidance here?

--Amy

Hi everyone,

I think it would be a good idea to consult Nina. I am still not exactly sure what we are looking at (although I guess that's a good definition of a murky problem!), although we do have some ways to go about tackling it now!  
--Jan

Jan,

Can you take care of contacting Nina or have you already? Thanks for acting as head emailer. Not sure if that is correct grammar, or what ever.

--Amy

Hi Nina,

You will see from our email that we are having a bit of trouble with how to approach the general topic of death and dying in America. It almost does fulfill the definition of a murky problem, but is it really the problem itself that is murky - or our thoughts about it? We will be glad of your input when you have time to think about it!

Thanks,

--Jan

**Hi Jan et al,**

***Your group is on its way, rather impressively (!), to grapple with the first stage of PBL. For now, don't worry about how your scenario sounds. JUst send me something to work with and I'll send it back with my own "ill-defined" touches. Appreciate having this as soon as possible.***

**Good work!**

**--Nina**

Hi Nina and fellow DeathEd members,

Our problem is so murky that so far we don't have a very concise way of describing it, but our basic ideas are these:

Death and dying in "American" culture - itself very diverse - is a multi-faceted social issue. We are concerned to look at the **religious and cultural** aspects surrounding death (i.e. are there cultures that have a more positive (or even a neutral) view on it that we could learn from?); the **emotional and communication** aspects (can people be helped by a more open discussion of death and dying? Can they learn strategies to better prepare themselves and their families for the end that will come to us all one day?); the **business** aspects of death and dying (Medicare, funeral costs, being able to afford a decent casket or burial plot, etc.); the **medical issues** (how do family members make decisions about end-of-life measures for their parents/siblings/relatives? Who is there to help people grapple with the implications of complex medical procedures?) We are also interested in the many issues surrounding **aging** in a culture that relentlessly favors youth, and how that intersects with the issues of death and dying mentioned above.

I think that pretty much covers our topic!!

--Jan

**Hi Jan,**

***Thanks for sharing this with your group!***

***or..... how bout this?.... (enjoy!)***

*When it comes to grappling with the difficult issue of death and dying, there's a great deal that's lacking in understanding in our culture. There's no question that religious, political, psychological, and and who knows what other factors interfere with prioritizing death and dying as an important thinking/learning issue. As a result, rarely, if at all, is death and dying given priority as an educational issue. It remains one of those "taboo" aspects of life to stay away from, better left up to each person or family to cope with at the time in whatever ways they are able. Ultimately, such "ostrich" behavior on the part of our culture leads to more, not less problems, for people.*

*Can people be helped by a more open discussion of death and dying? Can they learn strategies to better prepare themselves and their families to become better problem solvers and decision-makers with respect to this inevitable part of the life cycle? What kinds of proactive roles can be taken by whom in preparing our citizens for addressing this key societal issue? For openers, just a few key questions that need to asked.*

*--Nina*