

A Good Death? A Student-centered Method for Discussing Controversial Issues in Clinical and Medical Ethics

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Educational Goals and Objectives

At the conclusion of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Understand the key elements of the Octavian Table discussion format.
- Understand some of the ways to set the stage for a successful Octavian Table discussion.
- Discuss some of the strengths and limitations of using this approach to learning.
- Understand the andragogical assumptions of this approach to learning.
- Elaborate and defend their views about dying, palliative care, healing, and cultural values surrounding death – the cluster of subjects chosen to illustrate the Octavian table discussion format.

Brief Overview

Through the active participation of attendees discussing the topics of dying, palliative care, healing, and cultural values surrounding death, this workshop will demonstrate how to use a student-centered technique – the Octavian Table discussion format – to generate inclusivist, productive, and culturally sensitive discussions of difficult or controversial issues in clinical or medical ethics.

Structure of workshop

1. Introduction and brief description of the specifics of the Octavian Table discussion format. (10 minutes)

Note:

The Octavian discussion format that we will present is our own adapted version of variations that have circulated by word of mouth. It consists of eight chairs placed as though they were chairs at a conference table. On the sides of the “table,” there are six rotating chairs, one of which is designated as the Devil’s Advocate chair. These rotating chairs are occupied by students when they wish to contribute to the discussion. All six chairs do not need to be occupied every minute of the discussion, and any student seated

in one of the rotating chairs may leave whenever he or she wishes. Whoever sits in the Devil's Advocate chair is asked to assume the role of a devil's advocate in order to ensure that all important viewpoints are put "on the table" for consideration and receive a fair hearing. At the ends of the "table," there are two permanent chairs – one that is occupied by the Discussion Facilitator and the other that is occupied by the Personnel Director, whose primary duty is to manage the flow of people to and from the table. Students volunteer for these two positions and remain in them for the duration of the discussion – hence, their designation as "permanent chairs." The question(s) for discussion are typically provided by the instructor of the course.

2. Give workshop participants time to read an excerpt from Beth Brant's short story, "This Place," which is about a Native American gay man who goes home to his people as he is dying from AIDS. This excerpt will form the springboard for the Octavian Table discussion. (10 minutes)
3. Invite workshop participants to experience an Octavian Table discussion. Solicit volunteers to be the Discussion Facilitator, Personnel Director, and initial discussants. Ask them to begin an Octavian Table discussion in which they compare and contrast their views on dying, palliative care, healing, and cultural values surrounding death with those expressed in the excerpt from Beth Brant's story, "This Place." (25 minutes)
4. End Octavian Table discussion. Field any questions that have arisen about this method of discussion, and facilitate a large group discussion about (a) the andragogical assumptions of the Octavian Table discussion format, (b) the strengths and limitations of this discussion format, and (c) ways to set the stage for a successful Octavian Table discussion. (15 minutes)

References:

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