The Role of Attitudes in Secondary School Alcohol-Traffic Safety Education

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Discussion of alcohol-traffic safety education can focus on many issues, including objectives, content, instructional strategies, subject area relevance, evaluation, student interests, teacher training, and community involvement. In this paper I want to touch on yet another aspect of drinking-driving education: the role of attitudes.

What attitudes? Attitudes toward alcohol-traffic safety education, toward drinking, and toward driving. Whose attitudes? Teachers', students', and school administrators' attitudes. Why attitudes? Answering this latter query constitutes the essence of this paper.

ATTITUDES TOWARD DRINKING AND DRIVING

We can begin to answer the question, "Why focus on the role of attitudes in alcohol-traffic safety education?" by considering the following data. Any survey of any typical audience will usually elicit a wide diversity of responses to the following two questions: 1. At what age should youngsters be permitted legally to drink alcohol in bars or purchase alcohol in package stores? 2. Should advertisements for whiskey, wine, and beer be permitted on television?

In response to the first question, comments will generally vary from stipulating no minimum age to a twenty-one-year-old minimum age. In answer to question two, recommendations will include permitting television ads for all alcoholic beverages, for just wine and beer, and prohibiting any ads for alcoholic beverages. Clearly the wide disparity in opinions reflected in the responses to these two questions points to the existence of a variety of underlying attitudes on the part of the respondents. Some examples of attitudes that may have given rise to these diverse opinions include the following:

Nobody should drink alcohol: abstinence is the only justifiable posture toward drinking because (a) drinking is sinful; and/or, (b) some, many, or all people who touch any alcohol will become alcoholics; and/or, (c) alcohol, even in moderation, is physiologically and/or emotionally damaging.

People should not drink because they will abuse alcohol; therefore, we must not
promote alcohol use at all either through advertising or legalization for teenagers because these potential alcohol abusers, a relatively small group though they may be, will be unable to resist the blandishments of the advertisements and will abuse their access to legal alcohol. We must protect these weak-willed individuals, even though they may constitute a minority of society and of drinkers.

Alcohol use in moderation is perfectly acceptable — but why promote it? What adults and teenagers aren’t aware of won’t hurt them.

Allow people full access to alcohol; if they abuse it, that’s their fault. Everyone is responsible for his or her own personal behavior, including drinking behavior. It’s not up to society, including the media and legislators, to do the people’s job of self-restraint for them.

People need to learn from “the school of hard knocks” about the positive and negative effects of alcohol. They can learn this information best through direct, personal experience, and such experience should therefore be permitted or even encouraged.

I am sure these are only a few of the many attitudes that form the basis of an individual’s opinion that the drinking age should be 21 or 13 or that television advertising of alcoholic beverages should be unregulated or prohibited. But whatever the different attitudes toward drinking and driving are held, we maintain our beliefs about drinking and driving and take appropriate action in large part because of our attitudes. Teachers, obviously, hold opinions about alcohol-traffic safety and their beliefs, too, derive from attitudes toward drinking and driving. The problem for teachers, however, is that these attitudes may seep into their lesson plans and teaching and vitiate their best efforts to enable youngsters to make responsible decisions about drinking and driving.

Teacher Attitudes in the Classroom

How do these attitudes intrude into the classroom? The example with which we are most familiar and against which we most often inveigh is the teacher who advocates for his or her students abstinence as the only viable behavior toward drinking because alcohol is bad in any amount or because any amount of alcohol will impair driving ability. While this type of teacher attitude in the classroom is not uncommon, it is less harmful than other more subtly expressed attitudes because its very openness allows students to compensate for it — usually by dismissing it out of hand. More harmful teacher attitudes that creep into teaching practices include the following:

Hostility, jealousy, or fear toward students who drink or drink and drive, felt and expressed (overtly or covertly) by teachers who are not at ease with their own drinking and driving behavior, teachers who regret not having “sown their wild oats” when they were young, teachers who want to recapture their lost youth, or teachers who secretly would like to emulate the apparent freedom and lack of inhibition their students seem to exhibit.

The attitude that “moderate drinking is all right” as long as students accept the teacher’s definition of moderate, which may be a glass of wine with dinner, or getting drunk with the boys (or girls) every Friday night, or any of a number of other drinking patterns.

The attitude that drinking and driving are personal decisions with which the teacher and public school system should not get involved, and “I’m teaching about drinking and driving only because I have to.”

These are just some of the diverse attitudes teachers, like the rest of society, are
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likely to have about drinking and driving. Everyone is entitled to his own opinion and therefore having such attitudes, is appropriate. *Expressing them in the classroom,* I feel, is inappropriate. It is the thesis of this paper that teachers should remain entirely neutral in the classroom in terms of expressing views about whether their students now or in the future should drink, how much they should drink, and under what conditions they should drive.

There are two critical reasons why teachers must keep their attitudes toward drinking and driving to themselves when teaching about alcohol-traffic safety.

1. The first reason is that students should come to their own conclusions about drinking so that they learn the process of independent thinking, a skill that can then, hopefully, be transferred to other critical problems where responsible decision-making is essential. Telling students not to drive after one or ten drinks defeats the teaching objective of encouraging the development of effective and transferable decision-making skills.

2. The second reason why teachers must not allow their attitudes toward drinking and driving to intrude into their teaching is the more important one. It is that the expression of such attitudes will *destroy the teacher's chances of producing any rational examination on the part of students of how they should drink and drive.* Telling students what responsible drinking and driving behaviors are thought to be will not, by and large, produce such behaviors however various individuals define the term 'responsible'. Why can teachers not expect to produce desirable behaviors in youngsters by telling them how to behave? There are four reasons why expressly seeking to produce specific responsible drinking and driving behaviors in youngsters won't work for many, if not most, students.

First, as John Holt (7) and others have pointed out, many students want to get good grades in school because schools, including colleges, with their heavy emphasis on grades as the principal means of evaluating learning, admitting candidates, and awarding scholarships create this overriding academic concern in students. In addition, most teachers do not sincerely encourage students to disagree actively with their point of view, especially in a controversial area like drinking and driving. As a result, students who wish to get high grades tend to replay to teachers what teachers want to hear. Most teaching materials are of little help to teachers in the encouragement of open discussion. "Curriculum guides..." laments one teacher, "seem to encourage the feeding of canned information eliciting appropriate and often parroted responses from students." (3,p.13) Students become adept at supplying these responses and in the process may spend more time exercising talents of flattery and mimicry than in developing responsible attitudes toward drinking and driving.

A second reason why direct inculcation of drinking and driving attitudes will not succeed with most students is that today's youth tend to disrespect and 'tune out' the teacher who tells them what is right and wrong, because youngsters are finely attuned to the hypocrisy of how adult behavior belies adult precepts. They know that many teachers admonish them to behave one way but fail to live up to their own advice. For example, a double standard exists between secondary school athletic coaches, who tell their pupils and athletes not to drink or take other drugs because of alleged harmful effects drug use will have on athletic performance, and coaches of professional teams who encourage their players to take drugs. Professional athletes are routinely provided with cortisone for gaining weight, zylicane for killing pain, amphetamines for peak performance, and a host of other drugs forbidden to secondary school students on the grounds that they are dangerous, habit forming, or illegal. The message is clear: it is appropriate to take drugs when money is at stake. For example, a star
hitter in baseball will have zylicane sprayed on his injured wrist so he can continue to play the game and help the team finish high enough in the standings to ensure a piece of the play-offs' financial pie. But it is totally unacceptable, the young student concludes, for him to take drugs since he is playing the game 'merely' for enjoyment. Taking drugs to make money is legitimate; using drugs to prolong the fun is not to be countenanced.

Moreover, students hear teachers warn them of the dangers of driving after drinking, knowing full well that many such teachers cannot wait until the class period ends to hasten to the teacher's room to puff on a desperately needed cigarette. The conclusion again is obvious: youngsters should not endanger their lives by drinking and driving, but teachers may risk theirs by smoking. Nor are youngsters impressed by the argument that smoking hurts only oneself, but driving after drinking endangers the lives of others. For, in fact, parents increase the risk of cancer and heart disease in their own children by smoking themselves, because youngsters, one or both of whose parents smoke, are much more likely to end up smoking themselves than are youngsters from non-smoking homes. Moreover, youngsters also listen to teachers admonishing them not to drive after drinking and then see these same teachers drive home with their seat and shoulder belts unused.

In short, youngsters have seen what they feel is too much adult hypocrisy to accept advice from teachers on how they should conduct their own lives. Adults have lost their unquestioned powers of command and moral suasion for a good part of the younger generation. The age of the teacher as a moral exemplar is over. Responsible drinking and driving behavior will not result, therefore, from teacher dictums on what to do and what not to do.

A third reason many students will not respond to teacher advice on how to drink and drive is that they are insulted by the teacher's implicit assumption that youngsters, given the facts and the opportunity to discuss their feelings, are too dumb to come to their own responsible conclusions about how to drink and drive — especially when, given the facts about seat belts, many adults are evidently unqualified to come to their own conclusions about safe driving habits. Most youngsters can, in fact, come to their own conclusions about how they should drink and drive as well (or poorly) as adults can. Condescendingly assuming they cannot only inclines them to ignore or actively reject the advice teachers give them.

Finally, and most importantly, teacher expression of their attitudes toward drinking and driving will not generally make students become responsible drinkers and drivers because it will discourage students from examining their own attitudes toward drinking and driving. Students will not examine their own attitudes when teachers express theirs because students will either parrot the teacher's opinions, reject the advice as coming from a source invalidated by hypocrisy, or rebel against the teacher's assumptions of student inferiority.

Student Attitudes in the Classroom

Now that I have stressed why it is important that teachers do not express their attitudes toward drinking and driving in the classroom, why is it so important that students do express theirs?

Students must be encouraged to express their attitudes because even the avoidance of advice-giving by teachers and an unbiased exposition of the facts about drinking and driving — that is, purely cognitive approaches — are often insufficient for producing desirable behaviors (1). For example, a study was conducted in which two
communities in California were subjected to a barrage of data through the media on how using seat belts saves lives and reduces the severity of injuries in accidents. Evaluation of the results revealed that in one of the communities the extent of seat belt use remained the same, while in the second community it actually declined a little (8). So much for the efficacy of a primarily cognitive approach. Laziness is, of course, a reason for people not using seat belts. Also, it is clear that attitudes and feelings are more powerful for many, even most, people in determining seat belt use than knowledge of 'the facts'. What these attitudes are, in the case of seat belts, is not clear, but they may include public resentment at the attempt by the Government to direct their lives (not dissimilar to students' reactions to teachers who try to direct their lives), "it won't happen to me" thinking, and the feeling among some men that using seat belts is a sign of weakness and lack of masculinity. Similar attitudes underlie the motives people have for drinking to excess and then driving. Therefore, as several educators have stressed (6, 9), if we expect to motivate students to drink and drive responsibly we must provide an atmosphere in which students can discover, reveal, discuss, and examine these attitudes. The extent to which we succeed in creating such an atmosphere will be in direct proportion to the degree to which teachers keep their own attitudes out of the classroom.

However is this refusal of teachers to express their attitudes while encouraging students to reveal theirs not just one more example of teacher hypocrisy? Not at all. For the most effective method of dealing with student attitudes is for students to express and examine them not with the teacher but with each other in small group discussions and role plays (10). Small peer group discussions and role play exercises, if properly moderated (that is, not manipulated) are much more productive than so-called class discussions and certainly lectures in which, for the most part, the teacher leads the students to foregone conclusions by manipulating the direction and content of the talk. Small group discussions and role plays are effective precisely because the teacher is not covertly guiding the class and because many students respect and trust each other's expression of attitudes, even though they may disagree with them. More than class discussions and of course lectures, small group discussions and role plays permit an open expression of student concerns about drinking and driving, including the influence of peer group pressure, search for 'kicks' and danger, the need to emulate adults and feel grown-up, and 'it-won't-happen-to-me' type of rationalizations. An example of classroom activities that stress small group discussions and role plays is provided at the end of this paper (Appendix A).

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

I have stressed that teachers must refrain from expressing their attitudes toward drinking and driving in the classroom and that students must be motivated to reveal and examine theirs. In many schools neither of these two goals can be achieved unless school administrators explicitly and publicly support them. Many teachers feel they must publicly deplore all student drinking and driving after any drinking because they fear administration reprisal at worst and lack of support at best should parents claim

they are, through their neutral stance, advocating the use of alcohol or driving after drinking.

This is not the place to discuss how these three goals of teacher neutrality, student openness, and administration support for both can be achieved. Clearly, the involvement of parents and the community is essential in any such educational approach. It is also critical to train teachers to become aware of their own attitudes toward drinking and driving, to learn how to avoid letting their attitudes intrude into the classroom, to encourage students to express their attitudes, and to gain confidence that administrators and parents support their efforts.

Several years ago we were warned by Dr. Morris Chafetz, presently Director of the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, not to expect too much from secondary school alcohol education (4). We know, too, that to date there has been no convincing evidence that students who take driver education classes drive more safely than students who have not. In fact, there is little empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of any of the different approaches to drug education that have evolved in the past several years (2). An approach to traffic-safety education, therefore, that emphasizes the suppression of teacher attitudes in the classroom, the exploration of students’ attitudes, and the support of both these goals by school administrators and the community may permit us to raise our expectations of what can be accomplished in the schools and produce evidence that education can reduce the world’s appalling number of alcohol-related traffic accidents and fatalities.

APPENDIX A

REFERENCE #: 1  
CONTENT REFERENCE: 214-216  
CLASS TIME: 1 period

ACTIVITY #: 17  
TOPIC: Safety: interpersonal  
METHOD: Discussion

Core Activity:

Students discuss best course of action to take if they are about to ride with a driver who has been drinking excessively.

Objective:

Students demonstrate knowledge of and ability to evaluate alternate responses to interpersonal situations involving alcohol use and traffic safety in order to make responsible decisions about drinking and driving.

Preliminary Considerations:

SKILLS DEVELOPED: Influencing, decision making.  
OTHER: Students need to have already studied effects of drinking on driving.

Activity:

Students write brief (½-1 page) response to one or more scenarios in which a driver who has been drinking excessively offers them a ride. Sample scenarios are on the next page.
The following class, students break into small groups and are given written instructions to discuss:

- What they would do, how, and why
- What they should do, how, and why
- How any discrepancy between what students would and should do can be resolved.

Each group reports its conclusions to class and responds to questions and comments from class and teacher.

**Variations and Supplementary Activities:**

- Activity can be conducted as a class discussion or written homework assignment.

**Evaluation Methods:**

- Students role play or write the dialogue to these or to new scenarios in which individuals are offered rides by drivers who have been drinking excessively.
- Students write a "Handbook for Passengers" on how to respond to drivers who have been drinking excessively who offer them rides.

**Sample Scenarios**

You are just finishing up hockey practice and your brother has come to pick you up. He hates this task and you know it, but the rink is several miles from home. A taxi would be expensive and your father is working and your mother taking care of your brothers and sisters. This time your brother is roaring drunk but insists he's able to drive OK. You have about 25 cents on you. What will you do? What should you do? Why?

You and four friends have been drinking in the park. Three of them start walking home, but the one who owns the only car and is really drunk stays to drink a little longer with you. You live a good four miles away and there is no public transportation. You know your friend will insist he drive you home. You have about $5.00 on you. It is 2 a.m. What will you do? What should you do? Why?

You baby-sat tonight with three children while their parents went to a party. You need every cent of the money for new school clothes, so you don't want to take a cab. The lady, who is your mother's best friend, offers to drive you home. But she is so drunk she had trouble getting in the house at 2 a.m. What will you do? What should you do? Why?

New scenarios can be created by varying:

- the amount drunk by the driver
- the relationship between the driver and the rider.
- the amount of money the potential rider has, the distance to his home, and the availability of other forms of transportation.

**REFERENCES**


