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“I would have switched off if it was just government legislation.”

The Simpsons and the Teaching of Public Health Policy

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Overview of paper

1. The Challenge; why health policy?
2. The Problem; student interest
3. Informal Education; using life's learning
4. Using *The Simpsons*; a justification
5. Example of a Teaching Plan
6. Student Feedback
7. Conclusion



Teaching Public Health Policy

The Challenge

- The importance of public health policy in undergraduate education
- ‘Create an NHS that helps people to stay healthy’
(Darzi, 2008, p.9)
- Diversification of professional roles
- Encourage lifelong engagement with public health policy

The Problem

- Students often find health policy uninteresting as it is a different intellectual exercise from practical health issues
- We also wanted to introduce some underlying principles upon which one can judge policy (J.S. Mill's 'Harm Principle' in this instance)
- The problem was how to do this in a manner that students would find engaging
- *The Simpsons* provided us with an opportunity



Informal Education

- Informal education is the learning that an individual does outside of a formal learning environment (school, university etc.)
- The learning one does in everyday life
- This can mean learning from everyday situations, or using television, films websites etc.
- Part of what government calls *The Learning Revolution*



The Simpsons

- *The Simpsons* is the longest running feature length cartoon whose first episode was aired in 1989 (an 18 year old undergraduate student could have been born in 1991) – it is their cultural backdrop!
- Academics have published on using it as a teaching tool for, amongst other subjects Politics, Law, Maths, Religion and Sociology



Sweets and Sour Marge (DABF03)

- In this episode Marge is horrified when Springfield, to much pride from its residents, is dubbed 'fat city USA'; the fattest town in the world
- Marge manages to get sugar banned in Springfield for the sake of health
- This episode allowed students to examine what health policies 'in action' looked liked, consider how we could apply Mill's 'harm principle' and the barriers health professionals face when trying to promote public health



Teaching Plan

Sweets and Sour Marge

Watch Sweets and Sour Marge

- Task 1: List Marge's justifications for banning sugar
- Task 2: Introduce students to J.S. Mill's 'Harm Principle'
- Task 3: Students consider what can and cannot be banned by the state, with regard to health, according to Mill's 'Harm Principle'



Sweets and Sour Marge

- Task 4: What would Mill have thought of 'Marge's law'? Ask students what they think and if sugary foods constitute a poison?

Plenary session on health promotion

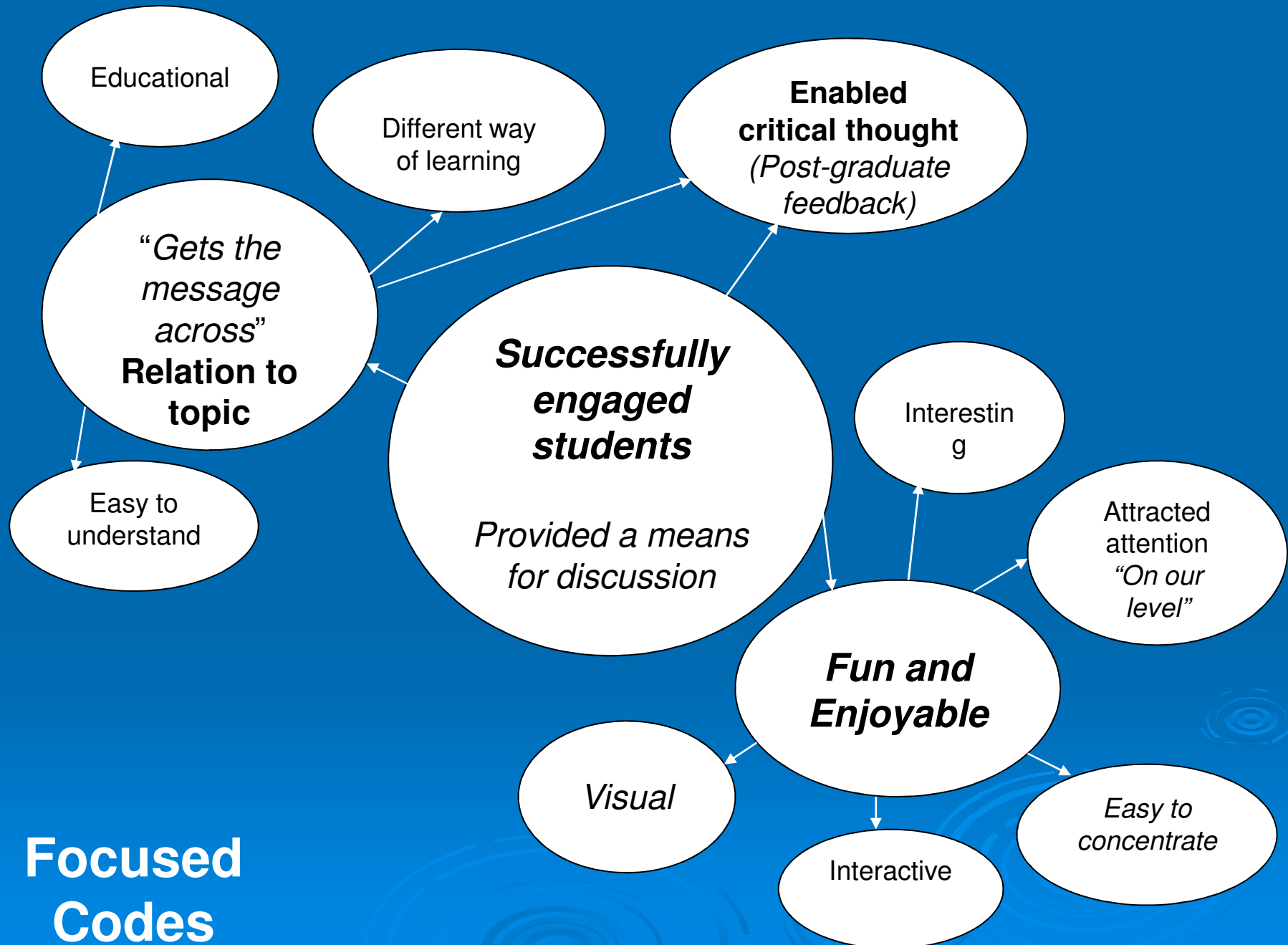
- Task 5: Consider the barriers Marge faced when trying to promote health
- Task 6: Conclude highlighting issues faced by health professionals



Student Feedback

- Success! Learning objectives achieved and considerable debate raised within the class
- Successfully engaged all students
- Students asked for written feedback
- The Simpsons episode complemented the discussion of the 'Harm Principle', aided critical thought and was felt to be a very effective teaching tool





Conclusion

- Informal education can be used successfully to engage students in academic learning of less favoured topics
- Carefully chosen episodes and well structured classes can provide a different way of '*getting the message across*'
- Allowed students to critically consider some of the underlying ideas that inform public health policy
- Caution- avoid over-use of cartoons so the 'novelty doesn't wear off'



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