

# Using drama to teach interpersonal skills

Role of theatre in the education of health professionals and the opinions of nursing students involved in a post-show workshop

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## Abstract

This article describes and evaluates an educational intervention that used a drama and theatre workshop to foster communication and interpersonal skills in mental health nursing students. Thirty-nine (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop was an excellent way to teach these skills. Arguably the workshop was a pedagogically effective, innovative and emotionally powerful attempt to develop communication and interpersonal skills in nursing students. Consequently, it may be effective to use drama and theatre to train nursing students for the nuanced, dynamic interactions that take place between nurses and patients in clinical practice.

## Keywords

communication skills, drama, interpersonal skills, mental health, nurse education

## Introduction

Developing and nurturing communication and interpersonal skills in mental health nursing students has long been recognised as an essential element of nurse education. However, Middlewick *et al* (2012) identified gaps in nursing education in the provision of training in communication and interpersonal skills. The quality of interaction between carers, multidisciplinary teams and patients has a significant impact on the quality of care, and the negative effect of poor interdisciplinary and cross-organisational communication has been highlighted by several inquiries (Laming 2003, Francis 2013).

In light of this, it is appropriate that nurse education offers students the opportunity to develop and practise effective communication and interpersonal skills. Watkins (1990) argues that nursing

curricula need to employ more creative ways to teach communication and interpersonal skills. Reilly *et al* (2012) argue that 'theatre offers a unique strategy to engage students' sensory, emotional, kinesthetic and cognitive processes by increasing awareness of both verbal and non-verbal communication that is essential to patient care'. This article describes and evaluates an educational intervention that used a drama and theatre workshop to foster nursing students' communication and interpersonal skills.

## Background

The use of drama and theatre in the training of health workers is not new, and responses to it, to some extent, rely on the quality of the work and the openness, and background, of the participants. Duespohl (1984) discusses the use of role-play and dramatisation as simulation methods that could help nursing students to meet learning objectives from communication skills. McClimens and Scott (2007) argue that forum theatre is an effective way to address topics from learning disability nursing practice within an educational setting. Cox (1989) discussed how professional actors took on the role of patients to allow nursing students to practise nursing interventions in the nursing arts laboratory. Reilly *et al* (2012) described how a theatre workshop was an effective method for fostering empathy in medical students, and Watkins (1990) described how drama was used to enact numerous critical incidents from nursing practice that allowed nursing students to explore how they might respond to the emotional experience of patients and their families.

## Design and methods

**Context** Undergraduate mental health nursing students ( $n=51$ ) at a UK school of nursing, midwifery

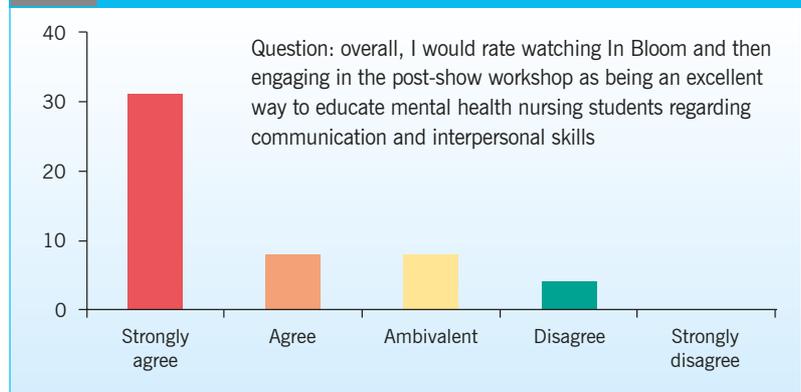
and social work watched the play *In Bloom*, written and produced by the Mad 'Ed Theatre company which specialises in producing new art that aims to educate the public and challenge perceptions regarding mental health. The students then took part in a post-show workshop. *In Bloom* is a monologue play performed by a professional actor. It is about a young man who has been transferred to a forensic unit, telling his story to the nurse who admits him, represented by the audience.

The character describes how his failing grip on reality drove him to extreme measures. He describes how he was adrift in a world of crime and violence, and his only anchors to an identity were his son and the man he considered his best friend. The play explores the terrifying effects of episodes of psychosis on an individual and their loved ones. It was the theatre company's intention that the play should be factually accurate, yet artistically beautiful, and not based on stereotypes and assumptions. Author TD worked closely with the playwright, and author DLM directed the play as it was being developed and rehearsed.

**The learning experience** Once the students had watched the play, they discussed in groups what additional information they might need from the patient if they were his admitting nurse, and what questions they could ask to obtain this information. The students then directed their questions to the actor, who was still in character. They were encouraged to think about their communication and interpersonal skills as they did this. The character responded and the students asked follow-on questions, or had to adapt their communication style based on his response. The workshop finished with constructive verbal feedback given to the students by the actor who commented on his perception of the students' ability to demonstrate empathy and awareness of body language and emotion. The educational intervention concluded with the nurse educator highlighting lessons learned and recommendations for changes to future clinical practice.

**Outcome measure** The students were asked to evaluate the theatre workshop in writing by answering the following question: 'Overall, I would rate watching *In Bloom* and then engaging in the post-show workshop as being an excellent way to educate mental health nursing students regarding communication and interpersonal skills.' Students had to answer this question by marking a Lickert scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), with a midpoint answer of 3 (ambivalent). The evaluation form then asked the students to

**Figure 1** Histogram of the students' responses to one question



explain their answer; data from these answers were subjected to thematic analysis. The evaluation form did not request any demographic information and was completed anonymously. This study was given exemption from necessitating ethical approval by the university research ethics committee as it was classed as course evaluation.

## Results

**Quantitative data** All students ( $n=51$ ) completed the evaluation form regarding whether they perceived the theatre workshop as an excellent way to teach communication and interpersonal skills. Of those, 31 (61%) strongly agreed, 8 (16%) agreed, 8 (16%) were ambivalent and 4 (7%) disagreed. Therefore, the majority 39 (77%) agreed/strongly agreed it was excellent (Figure 1).

**Qualitative data** Analysis revealed three themes:

- Provided a safe space.
- Fostered empathy.
- Increased knowledge and skills.

The following comments have been selected to illustrate the students' views about the workshop:

**Provided a safe space** 'It would be helpful to use more teaching methods like this. It gave me a safe environment to practise my assessment, communication and interpersonal skills.'

'This was much better than the usual teaching we have. It was engaging and authentic, and more importantly, it gave me time to think about how I phrase questions to patients. This is not always possible in clinical practice, as I feel under pressure.'

**Fostered empathy** 'The workshop helped me to empathise and consider one's full story when supporting a psychotic individual in practice... It made me realise that emphasis should be on the person, not the illness.'

'It made me think how I could display that I was being empathic towards my patient. This experience made me think about it on a different level.'

**Increased knowledge and skills** 'It made me think about the way I asked questions and gave me an opportunity to rephrase them as required, thus building my confidence and skill in this area of clinical practice.'

'This drama and theatre workshop demonstrated how a person's life experiences and [the] levels of stress they're experiencing can have a massive impact upon them developing mental illness. It has increased my knowledge, which I believe will enhance my future nursing practice.'

### Discussion

Clinical simulation gives students an opportunity to build confidence with psychomotor and technical skills in a safe environment (McCallum 2007). However, Freshwater and Stickley (2004) suggest that 'nursing is becoming more and more technical at the expense of human qualities of empathy, compassion and love'. Patients, nurse educators and clinical nurses would agree that empathy is vital to effective clinical encounters. However, teaching communication and interpersonal skills to students can be challenging due to the diversity of students' personalities and learning styles (Reilly *et al* 2012).

How to develop, nurture, teach and measure empathy and interpersonal skills in nursing students is a contested issue. From an economical perspective, delivering several didactic lectures to nursing students around these topics might be seen as the best option, as it would usually only require one educator. Middlewick *et al* (2012) argue that students have a more powerful learning experience when they gain self-awareness and develop morally. The didactic, passive knowledge absorption approach that is embodied within a traditional lecture has been shown to have little effect on attitudes or values (Stiernborg *et al* 1996). And Landers (2008) states that merely sharing the theory of communication is

not enough in itself, and that students must also be able to practise physically applying the theory.

Drama has long been recognised as an innovative method to assist nursing students to develop communication skills, which are also empathic (Rolfe *et al* 1995, Love 2012). Using theatre as a teaching method arguably fosters deep learning, as students are participating dynamically in their learning and using their knowledge to solve problems (Biggs 2003). Nevertheless, there remains a perception, which was also reflected in some of the students' evaluations, that interpersonal skills, such as empathy, cannot be taught – a person either has these skills or they do not. While the majority of the students engaged with the workshop, there was a small minority who struggled to connect its relationship to patient care and clinical applicability. Some people might inherently be drawn to alternative learning and teaching styles. For this reason, it is important when introducing drama and theatre into the nursing curriculum to support students to build their confidence when working in a different way.

### Conclusion

While the majority of the students perceived the theatre production and subsequent workshop to be an excellent way to teach communication and interpersonal skills, a small minority were ambivalent or disagreed, as they did not make a connection between the play and clinical practice. This could be attributed to the difference in learning style. Nevertheless, for many this drama and theatre workshop was a pedagogically effective, innovative and emotionally powerful attempt to develop communication and interpersonal skills in nursing students. We conclude that it may be effective to use drama and theatre to train nursing students for the nuanced, dynamic interactions that take place between nurses and patients in clinical practice. However, further research is needed to recognise the type of learning that does take place using this method and ultimately assess its impact in practice.

### Online archive

For related information, visit our online archive and search using the keywords

**Conflict of interest**  
None declared

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