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An overview of an education innovation embedding drama-based workshops into undergraduate adult nursing to embody 'Care'.

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Abstract

Background

This paper provides an overview of an innovative drama-based approach in the form of workshops which have been embedded into undergraduate nursing curriculum in a Higher Education Institute in the United Kingdom (UK). Drama-based approaches are gaining increasing recognition in nursing education particularly around the way in which they can support the learning of communication and interpersonal skills in a multi-sensory approach.

Innovation

The drama-based workshops have become an integral part of the nursing curriculum by being delivered alongside the curriculum-based clinical simulations. The workshops embed the use of physical theatre techniques with an emphasis on 'Care' that are aligned to the specific learning outcomes of the clinical simulation.

Implications

The workshops were further developed in response to student feedback which demonstrated how drama can enable students to develop self-awareness, empathy, communication skills and self-care.

Conclusion

The Drama based workshops have enabled students the opportunity to explore and reflect on their own interpersonal communication as well as the embodiment of care to their patients, colleagues and themselves.

Key words: Nursing undergraduate education, Drama based approaches, Care, Innovation, Collaboration.

Context

A drama-based approach is one that uses exercises taken from the education of drama students (Dawson and Lee 2018). The integration of such approaches into nursing education both in academic and clinical settings, is being used to enable learning in areas such as the nurturing empathy, professionalism, confidence and communication (Kerr and MacDonald 1997, Lightblau 2014, Arkeklev et al 2018). Evidence indicates drama-based approaches are often being adopted in the early stages of undergraduate nursing programmes and are situated in the context of communication skills education (Arkeklev et al 2015, Jefferies et al 2021, Ljunggren 2021). The World Health Organisation (WHO) scoping review on arts and health (Fancourt and Finn, 2019) and the UK All- Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Creative Health Inquiry Report (CHIR

2017) both emphasise the merit of drama-based approaches to support professional values in healthcare and the delivery of sensitive and person-centred care. Furthermore, they recommend that arts-based approaches should be more systematically embedded in healthcare education demonstrating how these approaches are a developing area of curriculum innovation, effective at supporting a range of interpersonal and communication skills. The arising endorsement for healthcare education was ‘...to recognise the need to introduce into curricula a stronger arts and humanities dimension’ (CHIR, Chapter 10, p156, 2017).

However, despite recognition of the need to embed a stronger arts element in health care curricula, challenges in the implementation do exist as the literature (Arkeklev et al 2015, Arkeklev et al 2018, Jefferies et al 2021, Ljunggren 2021) show there is often little detail about the approaches taken when incorporating drama into the curriculum, with many drama-based approaches being standalone projects with delivery to small groups of students or qualified healthcare professionals. In this paper we aim to add to the existing knowledge by providing insight into the process of integrating drama-based workshops into an undergraduate adult nursing curriculum over a sustained period of time and to large numbers of students.

How drama fits into learning in nursing

Adult learners are more likely to be receptive to learning and for that learning to be retained when multiple senses are engaged using a multisensory perspective to remember and learn (Broek et al 2023). Such is achieved when learners are moved to a new understanding by engaging emotions, self-reflection, hearing stories, and being in touch with thoughts and

experiences (Quak et al 2015). Further, recognising how these different sensory modalities interact and affect each other can in turn influence memory and learning. The multi-sensory integration of role-play and clinical simulations is commonplace in nursing education. This experiential way of learning through the progression of simulated clinical experiences within a safe learning environment, which is designed to bridge the theory- practice gap within nursing (Kolb 1984). In drama-based approaches, exercises used in the education of drama students can be modified to enable nursing students to explore emotions that either the patient or they may feel in the health care environment. Such as using techniques from physical theatre as a dynamic way of exploring what is happening in a situation, putting the human body at the centre, it includes looking at a range of body language, expression and choreography (Murray and Keefe 2016). Though these ways of learning often do not associate with nursing there are similarities to clinical simulations in the way they use the art of learning through rehearsal, exploration, deconstruction and the visualisation of issues and experiences. (Cahill 2013)

Development of the drama-based workshops in the nursing curriculum

The development of the workshops came from an interprofessional collaboration between academics at the School of Drama and School of Nursing: Simulated Learning and Clinical Skills team at the same UK Higher Education Institution (HEI). The collaboration was formed due to a shared interest in health and drama within education. The drama lead at the time was developing a physical theatre production with an emphasis on care using physical actions, movement, expression, and music rather than spoken work. She wanted to work with nursing students to explore care from the nursing student's viewpoint. As part of this work a series of half-day pilot drama-based workshops were designed and implemented.

The aim of the workshops was to acknowledge a range of emotions nurses experience when in their caring role that may impact not only on their work fulfilment but also on their own wellbeing and health (Radcliffe 2016). Students were invited to notice physiological effects of emotion in their own bodies being aware of heart rate, breathing, physical tension, bodily position and to employ simple techniques of breath control and muscle relaxation to manage them. In drama this is known as The Neutral Body (Abercromby 2022).

The nursing students' evaluations from the pilot workshops were overwhelmingly positive and highlighted students having raised awareness of empathy, self-care, and of oneself within their environment (See table 1).

Table 1 : Feedback from pilot workshops.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Putting yourself in the patient position gives you more empathy skills to be able to ensure safer care'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Session was great made me think outside the box'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Awareness of self and colleagues space'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Importance of self-care'

The positive response led to the initiative being reviewed by the drama and nursing teams for further development/refinement and the enhanced workshop was then integrated into the first year nursing curriculum for adult nursing students.

The drama based workshops were embedded alongside the end of year clinical simulation for Bachelor of Science (BSc) and Master of Science (MSc) adult undergraduate nursing students. The programmes are aligned, with the BSc students doing three parts over three

years and the MSc students doing three parts over two years. Each combined cohort had approximately 200 students. Positioning the workshop alongside but separate from the clinical simulation provided context, as although drama is a distinct way of learning, we see it as complementary to simulation-based approaches. The workshops were planned to complement the learning outcomes of the year one simulation which included verbal and non-verbal communication and clinical patient assessment, with the overall aim to provide deeper learning and reflection on care. The workshops were designed and led by drama academics with a senior lecturer from the simulation and skills team present to ensure nursing context. Although the workshop exercises do not look like the clinical situation, they aim to induce the same feelings and emotions that students might feel in the clinical environment.

The students were divided into groups of 20-25 and attended for one and a half days and rotated through the clinical ward simulation, the debrief and the drama-based workshop. Each part was two-hours and was repeated ten times over the simulation week. The workshop was named the 'Art of Communication' and focused on non-verbal communication and the link between bodily comportment (stance, gesture, physical tension) and emotion in the delivery of care and care of oneself. In the first exercise, students were guided to achieve the 'neutral body' which tends to convey to others within the drama context a calm and open professionalism (Abercromby 2022). Importantly, 'the neutral body' is both relaxed and alert, so in it, students feel both calm enough to observe what is going on around them and ready enough to respond quickly and appropriately (Willson 2016). Exercises of greeting each other and saying their name clearly allowed them to observe and understand their own and others body language as they spoke to the group.

This was followed by exercises of ignoring each other and then acknowledging each other and discussing how that felt and linking this to the clinical environment. Space awareness and trust were explored which led to thinking about their personal space, and how these boundaries within nursing are challenged. Doing exercises which confront space and trust can create a sense of vulnerability which can be felt by both the patient and nurse within the health care setting (Angel et al 2017). In nursing, a sense of trust must be developed quickly as personal space is often intruded between nurse and patient due to the nature of caring with the patient being silently asked to trust the nurse as they take on many different caring activities. The final exercise focused on working as a team (critical within health care) using Lecoq (2022) techniques about engaging the whole body, having an awareness of space and working as a collective to instinctively stop and start movements at the same time with no obvious cues. Reflections offered by the students from all the exercises provided insights of body language, interactions with others and non-verbal behaviour. See table 2 for evidence of learning.

Table 2: Feedback from students Workshop Year one:-Art of Communication

<p>‘for me body language is very important...And this is something I saw in the drama workshops, because they want us to be connected with our body, standing tall and try to be confident but at the same time be soft in the tone of the voice...’.</p>
<p>‘sometimes we don’t listen to ourselves properly...actually, what we are doing in the drama workshops, it makes you reflect on what you do every day’.</p>
<p>‘Practical exercises made me more aware of how people feel about my communication and my body language.’</p>

The overall positive feedback regarding student learning led us to repeat the workshop the following year and design another workshop for year 2. This followed the same logistics across a week rotating between clinical simulations and the drama-based workshop. The year 2 simulation learning outcomes focus on team working in a ward environment and in an emergency (cardiac arrest) situation. The drama-based workshop aligned to this and was entitled 'Drama out of a crisis.' It was designed to link behaviours and responses in a 'crisis' situation and the feelings this can evoke. It aimed to support the students' ability to act effectively in emergency situations - responding quickly to unexpected events, working in ad-hoc teams and remembering learned procedures. Based on Jacques Lecoq's (2002) levels of tension, students participated in a series of practical activities that used time-pressure, physical challenge and/or competition to gently stimulate an adrenaline response and required them to channel and 'work through' these feelings while focussing on care delivery (Farmer 2016).

Table 3: Feedback from students workshop Year two:- Drama out of crisis.

'Keep calm, take a moment for yourself'.
'Slowing myself down'
'Be aware of your surroundings and other people'.

The continued positive impact on student learning meant a third workshop was introduced for final year adult field BSc and MSc nursing students again designed and delivered logistically in the same way as the previous workshops to accommodate student numbers. This was aligned with the final year simulation in that part of the programme which focuses on distinct aspects of leadership and teamwork with a focus on care in challenging circumstances including "Challenging Conversation" scenarios, advancing hospital team

resuscitation skills and ethical discussions. The drama-based workshop was entitled 'Voice at back' with the aim to encompass the learning outcome of everyone having a voice and the importance of 'speaking up,' clearly and with authority when delivering patient care. The workshop included 'voice work' - the training that actors undertake to allow them to project and articulate their voice without straining their vocal organs. The workshop included an introduction to anatomical organs used in vocalisation linked to how to prepare and relax the upper airways with physical exercises. Practice in giving clear and precise instructions, persuasive speech including saying 'no', and reciting The Drugs Song (Kay 2016) to learn how to use the mouth to articulate consonants and vowels clearly and confidently. In nursing it is important students are supported to ensure their voice is heard and to develop qualities of leadership, thus enabling students to feel confident and empowered to advocate in the care for their patients, their colleagues and themselves (as evidenced in table 4).

Table 4: Feedback from students workshop Final year: - Voice at back.

To be able to express myself and speak out'
'Take a step back to find my voice'
'The exercises gave me a safe place to express things I'm less confident doing'

Funding and Ethics approval

To ensure this was not a standalone, one-off project, funding was required to embed it into the nursing curriculum. Funding for facilitators to design and deliver the workshops is the main cost of the project. The costs were reduced initially for the first year of the project because the academics involved worked at two Schools within the same University. After

this time, the drama expert moved to a different HEI and dedicated her allocated research time to the project, on an in-kind basis. As the project continued, funding had to be sought from external bodies (successful bids were gained from Arts Council England and UK Research and Innovation). The positive impact of the drama-based workshops, documented by the nursing student evaluations, and supported by the responses at conference presentations means the costs for the ongoing delivery of the workshops is now being met by the School of Nursing they are delivered at. The project was approved by the Higher Education Institute ethics committee to enable collection and use of students' views.

Future implications and potential limitations

The funding for projects such as the one we have presented can require repeated applications for funding. This can be a burdensome and daunting aspect of initiating projects of this nature; however, the fact that we were successful in competitive bids and now have substantive funding, suggests growing interest, value and support in arts-based approaches to healthcare professional education.

Addressing these challenges through funding applications has enabled an unusually sustained drama-based initiative within nursing education. Drama based projects can often be standalone projects which can limit their longevity. The workshops have become part of the curriculum by alignment with the clinical simulation-based learning already embedded into the modules and the collaborative relationship between academics in drama and nursing. Its scale and permanence has allowed for substantial evaluation from the drama based workshops with the aim to carry out a longitudinal evaluative study in the future to look at impact of drama based workshops in the embodiment of care. With the potential to

also undertake further follow-up surveys of participating students who have since gone into professional practice.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges, we have highlighted that it is possible for drama-based approaches to become an integral and sustained component of the nursing curriculum. It is essential the drama based workshops are designed and led by drama specialists with nursing academics facilitating alongside to ensure the link to nursing care in healthcare settings. The collaboration in the design and facilitation of the multi-sensory drama workshops ensured the context, learning outcomes and relationship to practice was clear, as many students might be unfamiliar with these approaches or even resistant to them. It also ensured the workshops always had 'care' at their core, from patient, to the team and self-care. The student feedback from all workshops indicates subtle, meaningful change to behaviour from enhancing empathy and interpersonal communication, to awareness of oneself in their environment and in the delivery of care.

This project provides an overview of how the Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing. (CHRI 2017) challenge can be met to not only introduce into curricula a stronger arts and humanities dimension but to embed it firmly into the curriculum to embody 'care'.

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