Using an interpretive research group to teach communication and understanding in undergraduate psychiatric/mental health nursing students

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Seeing is Believing: Learning about Mental Illness as Portrayed in Movie Clips

The challenge for faculty to not only teach but “entertain” students in order to maintain students’ attention in the classroom is a common theme discussed in the faculty workroom. For psychiatric-mental health nursing, this is particularly challenging. Many of the 20-something-year-old students have grown up in suburbia. They may have never seen, or their naïveté may have prevented their recognition, of “street” people as possibly people with mental disorders. This project uses brief clips from popular movies to bring the textbook description of a symptom or intervention to life.

The movies provide students with vivid portrayals of mental illnesses that accurately exemplify DSM-IV criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The students are very familiar and comfortable with this medium. In the comfort of their dorm rooms, the students are able to relate to and analyze the characters shown in the movie. When learning is fun, the goals of retention of information and application of knowledge are maximized.

For this project, students are encouraged to select a movie that corresponds with the theory content from an faculty-approved list of movies or select another film with the instructor’s approval. The list of movies distributed by faculty is published in Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing (Frisch & Frisch, 2002). If the theory content is anxiety disorders, students could select the movie Analyze This, then refer to the textbook for information about panic attacks. If the topic is substance abuse, specifically alcoholism, then When a Man Loves a Woman could be viewed. The project is worth 5% of the students’ final grades.

First, students are asked to sign-up to present their movie project, so their presentation topic matches the theory topic for the class period. Students work in groups of two or more, depending on class size. Then students select a movie from a list that relates to the course content outline. The students watch the movie, select an appropriate clip, and complete the written assignment. In class, the group gives a 5-minute presentation, during which the students introduce the topic to the class, provide a brief overview of the movie, describe the symptom or intervention being depicted, and identify the appropriate textbook chapter and page number. Students show a 2-3 minute clip that demonstrates the symptoms of a mental illness or an intervention by a nurse or health care provider.

The written assignment is a critical thinking activity for the presenting students and requires the following information, which is either given to the instructor the day of the presentation or sent as an e-mail attachment:

- What traits of a specific psychiatric disorder are portrayed in the characters in the movie you watched?
- What societal or cultural attitudes are reflected in the portrayal of mental illness, treatment, and the role of the nurse?
- Describe your reaction to the characters in the film.
- Does your knowledge of psychiatric nursing change your reaction to the movie or the characters?
- How can you use the movie to help clients, families, populations, or health care staff better understand mental illness or its treatment?

Students’ reactions indicate that they have a better understanding of the theory content after watching the movies, and that it is a fun way to learn. Students have said, “This film helped me to examine myself for personal biases;” “It [the movie] will help clients and families see that these mental illnesses can happen to anyone;” and “Having never met anyone with schizophrenia, this video helps me to understand how this illness interferes with daily activities.” Seeing is believing!

References

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An interpretive research group based in existential phenomenology is used to facilitate student learning about skills central to nursing—communicating, listening, and a genuine understanding of “the other”—in an undergraduate psychiatric-mental health nursing course. Students and faculty meet in small groups to analyze interview transcripts from ongoing research. This teaching strategy is consistent with the Educative-Caring Model of nursing education in which student-faculty interactions are egalitarian and active learning is necessary (Bevis & Watson, 1989). A goal of the interpretive research group learning activity is to facilitate the students’ integration of theory and research into practice. For exam-
ple:

- **Active learning strategy:** Student and faculty participation in an interpretive research group.
- **Theory:** Existential phenomenology.
- **Research:** Data analysis in an interpretive research group.
- **Student practice:** Students will “collect paradigm experiences, develop insights, see patterns, find meaning in ideas and experiences, [and] examine assumptions...with the moral ideal of the caring scholar-clinician” (Bevis & Watson, 1989, p. 277).

### Procedure

A maximum of eight students and two faculty from the undergraduate psychiatric nursing course comprise the interpretive research group. A transcript from a faculty research project that has been approved by the Institutional Review Board is photocopied for each student. An overview of the research is provided. The process of analyzing meaning and themes from the interview is discussed. Each student signs a confidentiality pledge, witnessed by the faculty. Students are seated around a table with two readers in the middle (sitting across from one another) and one faculty member at each end. The first reader reads aloud the initial interview question, which is open ended and seeks an in-depth description of the research participant’s experience. The second reader continues with the transcript, reading aloud the participant’s response. This process continues until a student or faculty member stops the readers for a group discussion of meaning, themes, communication strategies, or process. At the conclusion of the interpretive research group, transcripts are collected by the faculty and shredded.

The interpretive research group meets weekly for 4 hours at an off-campus site in a reserved meeting room at a local coffeehouse. Students sign up for a minimum of four sessions during the semester in lieu of 2 clinical days. Students are expected to learn about communication and the interview process through their direct participation in the analysis of interview transcripts. Each student is required to write a 1-2 page reflective paper after each interpretive research group, addressing the following two areas:

- The content of the analysis (i.e., what was the research participant’s experience?).
- The process (i.e., what did you learn about communication, meaning, patterns, and group work?).

### Outcome

Student papers have produced encouraging results, showing that this active learning strategy is valuable. Students have gained a deeper understanding of communication, a greater appreciation for the first-person perspective of the patient/study participant, and a positive experience of research. One student said, “I didn’t think about this kind of stuff being research; I would enjoy doing this.” Learning was also evident in the following student’s comment: “I think every member present left with a better understanding of just how important communication, and especially listening and comprehension, is essential in the art of the interview.”

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### References


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