



## Original research

## Nursing students experiences of learning about nursing through drama



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 10 May 2016

Received in revised form

1 April 2017

Accepted 8 September 2017

## Keywords:

Drama

Learning

Nursing

Nursing education

Phenomenography

## ABSTRACT

The ability to understand, interact and create a caring relationship with the patient is a core component in nursing. A shift in nursing education from traditional classroom teaching towards more experiential approaches should be encouraged as this will support learning that links theory with practice. The aim of this study was to describe nursing students' experiences of learning about nursing through drama. This qualitative study was conducted at a university in Sweden. Four focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 16 nursing students and the data was analyzed using a phenomenographic approach. Three themes with their attendant categories emerged through the analysis: "To explore the future professional self", "To develop an understanding of the patient perspective", and "To reflect on the nature of learning". In conclusion this study shows that the use of drama in nursing education can provide opportunities to explore interactions with others which can increase students' self-awareness and ability to reflect on their future professional identity. Acting in role as a patient can provide an opportunity to experience the patient perspective. Also clear was the importance of commitment and engagement of the students as a prerequisite for optimizing this form of learning experience through drama.

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## 1. Introduction

Nursing students need to develop competency and professionalism to be prepared for daily encounters with patients, relatives and colleagues. The importance for nurses of being able to collaborate with various individuals is highlighted in the definition of nursing stated by the International Council of Nurses (ICN): "Nursing encompasses autonomous and collaborative care of individuals of all ages, families, groups and communities, sick or well and in all settings. Nursing includes the promotion of health, prevention of illness, and the care of ill, disabled and dying people. Advocacy, promotion of a safe environment, research, participation in shaping health policy and in patient and health systems management, and education

are also key nursing roles." ([www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch), 2015). Nurses' ability to understand, interact and create a caring relationship with the patient is emphasized as a core component in many nursing theories (Benner and Wrubel, 1989; Eriksson, 1994; Travelbee, 1971; Watson, 2012). Through a caring relationship, nurses can decrease patient's experience of vulnerability and maintain their dignity, prevent illness and promote health (Berg, 2006). Knowledge of how to communicate, understand and empathize with other individuals' life situations is therefore an important component in nursing education. Benner et al. (2010) stresses the importance of enabling nursing students to integrate theoretical knowledge, skilled know-how and ethical components in nursing care. However, nursing students often find it difficult to link nursing theory and practice together (Benner et al., 2010; Crookes et al., 2013; Riksaasen Hatlevik, 2012). Benner et al. (2010) suggests that there should be a shift in traditional nursing education practices from classroom bound teaching toward support for more integrative and experiential learning.

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## 1.1. Background

Educational drama can be used for integrative and experiential learning in nursing education. *Integrative learning* is about making connections between knowledge and skills from many different sources and using theory in practice, thereby enabling students to learn how to put pieces together and transfer knowledge into a whole - a skill which prepares them for complex situations in their personal and professional life (Huber and Hutchings, 2004). *Experiential learning* is a process where knowledge is constructed by experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. Concrete experience works as the basis for observing and reflecting, and allows abstract concepts to form new implications. These concepts and implications are then tested and new experiences are created (Kolb and Kolb, 2009).

Benner et al. (2010), states that nursing students must learn how to approach patients in order to help them manage their illness and to express their needs. These kinds of skills can be learned through experience and reflection. Drama has been implemented in nursing education to achieve various aims such as: bridging the gap between theory and practice (Ekebergh, 2005; Levitt and Adelman, 2010); making students more involved in their own learning (McClimens and Scott, 2007; McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013); helping students discover knowledge gaps (Newcomb, 2007; SmithBattle, 2012) and to enable deeper levels of concept learning (Middlewick et al., 2012). Drama has been used to enhance communication skills (Lewis et al., 2013; Reams and Bashford, 2011), as well as develop ethical and relational skills (SmithBattle, 2012). In addition, drama has been utilized to support students to become more reflective, and to develop their critical thinking (Ekebergh et al., 2004; McAlinden, 2010). Drama has been seen to enhance the personal and professional development of nursing students, increase their self-awareness (Ekebergh et al., 2004; Lepp et al., 2003), and develop their confidence and self-assurance (Buxton, 2011).

Nursing students must be given opportunities to test and study how their behavior affects others in order to increase their self-awareness and learn how to use their own personality in nursing (Travelbee, 1971). Arveklev et al. (2015) found that there is a need for further research regarding the use of drama from the students' perspective. A lack of research regarding nursing students' experiences of exploring the patient perspective became clear, and so the opportunity to develop this understanding through offering experiences for nursing students to explore this perspective through acting in role as a fictional patients, became a key objective.

## 2. Aim

The aim of this study was to explore and describe nursing student's experiences of learning about nursing through drama.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Study design and approach

This study was undertaken using a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography was first described by Marton (1981) and is suitable when the aim is to describe the qualitatively different ways a group of people make sense of, experience, and understand phenomena in the world around them. The approach is founded on the human cognitive disposition to create meaning in order to make experiences understandable. The empirical outcome of the approach consists of the participants' individual description of their understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Wenestam, 2000). In this study the phenomenon under study was learning about nursing through drama.

According to Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002) a phenomenographic approach is suitable for understanding nursing student's various ways of conceiving central concepts in health care. Developing an awareness of difference and variation in student understanding is an important tool for enhancing the quality of education.

### 3.2. The drama workshop

The background of constructing the drama workshop builds on earlier research in the field of drama and conflict management (Burton et al., 2015). A mandatory one day drama workshop was implemented in the third semester of a six semester long Bachelor nursing education program at a university in western Sweden. A total number of 80 students participated. Each workshop included a maximum of 22 students and was facilitated by a drama teacher and a lecturer in nursing. In total four drama workshops were conducted.

The workshop was constructed to support students learning about nursing, nursing competency and central concepts in nursing. After a set of introductory drama activities designed to build collaboration and trust across the group, participants were introduced to role play and developed improvisations. The role plays included opportunities for participants to work in role as both nurse and patient. In one example half of the student group was separately instructed to take on the role of a nurse who interacts with a patient suffering from a sleeping disorder. The other half of the group was instructed to act in role as the patient with a sleeping disorder, and informed that this stemmed from a difficult life situation. In the improvisation the nurse was at first interested in the patient's story, but when it became clear that the patient had problems sleeping, the nurse changed approach and started to give concrete advice on how to improve sleep, instead of listening to the whole story and what the patient was really expressing.

### 3.3. Participants in the interviews

In 2014 all nursing students in semester four at the university were asked about voluntary participation in a focus group interview. The inclusion criterion was that they had finished the course "Nursing in health and illness" (University of Gothenburg, 2014), undertaken in semester three and accounting for 30 higher credits. The drama workshop described in this study is a mandatory component of the course. In all, sixteen nursing students, thirteen women and three men, 24–30 years old, were recruited as participants in the interviews.

### 3.4. Data collection

Four focus group interviews, with three to five students in each group, were conducted. Focus group interviews are suitable for collecting data when the aim is to describe different views and produce a variety of experiences (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews were held in a small room at the university, directly after the last lecture of the day. The participants were asked to describe their experiences of learning about nursing through drama. No other main questions were asked, only follow-up questions to deepen the answers, keep the discussion going and ensure that no unnecessary digression from the topic occurred. The first interview was carried out by the authors ML and LB and the remaining three interviews were carried out by SHA and ML. The interviews were recorded and lasted for 50–82 min. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by SHA.

### 3.5. Data analysis

The transcribed text was analyzed using a phenomenographic

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