Blending the liberal arts and nursing: Creating a portrait for the 21st century

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A B S T R A C T

The liberal arts and sciences serve as a core part of the educational discipline in nursing curriculum and are believed to undergird abilities for critical-thinking, creativity, and holistic care (Hermann, 2004; Mckie, 2012). Over time, science has taken on a more central role in nursing education, despite the acknowledged importance and contributions of liberal arts. The humanities are an essential part of liberal arts education and generally include disciplines such as history, literature, religion, philosophy, architecture, or fine arts (e.g., music, painting, sculpture, drama, or film) (Hermann, 2004). Nursing students identify that liberal arts improve their skills to communicate, think globally, navigate diversity, make decisions, and improve their human selves (Mckie, 2012), therefore the purposeful inclusion of liberal arts and humanities into nursing pedagogy should be assured. Schools of nursing seated within liberal arts universities are in a position to take advantage of campus environments that seek to improve student knowledge, skills, abilities, and values (Scott, 2014). When caring for patients with complex medical, psychosocial, spiritual, and economic concerns, the ability to differentiate between what is true among a myriad of competing issues, and to identify solutions to these problems, are critical skills (Scott, 2014). This manuscript describes one type of focused effort by school of nursing (SON) faculty to integrate the humanities on a small, liberal arts campus into the nursing curriculum. The desire to do this led to a large, interdisciplinary project intended to enhance campus, community, faculty, and student opportunities to understand and ponder the complexities involved in caring for patients with Alzheimer’s disease (AD).

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Background

Project inception and overview

The project began when the university provided funds for the first author to travel to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement’s (IHI) International Forum on Quality and Safety in Healthcare in Paris, France (Institute for Healthcare Improvement, 2014). One focus of the conference was France’s response to AD. The first author’s imagination was captured by a presentation which centered on the work of William Utermohlen; an American portraitist who continued to paint, nearly to the end of his life, after his diagnosis of AD, and summed up in ways words could not, the experience of AD.

At its inception, the project sounded simple: Nursing faculty wanted to bring to campus an exhibit of William Utermohlen’s paintings, which demonstrate how his art changed over the course of time; before and after his diagnosis of AD, and summed up in ways words could not, the experience of AD.

The faculty from the School of Nursing (SON) was encouraged by the Director of the School of Nursing, the Provost, and the Grants Manager, to expand the initial view and think more broadly, and to invite colleagues in the liberal arts to participate. What resulted was a year and a half long project that spanned across the campus and extended to the local community and beyond. The expanded view of the project deepened its meaningfulness and helped with wise resource allocation. The diversity of the disciplines and community agencies engaged in the project contributed to the projects’ complexity and its success.

In planning and coordinating this project, the mystery of how to integrate all parties involved was of epic proportions and the SON faculty had absolutely no idea of the depth or breadth involved in the amount of, and complexity of work when deciding to lead this project. The planning needed to pull the components together, required time and effort outside of the traditional academic year. Many people spent their off-contract time working on aspects of this project and contributing to its success. Since it is rare for this many disciplines to be involved in bringing an exhibit like this to campus, the learning curve was high. Complexities that contributed to the length of the project included working internationally to procure the art, applying for internal funding, working with another university to coordinate exhibits, and working with a large group of interdisciplinary colleagues and community members in planning and carrying out the exhibit and events surrounding it.

To provide a powerful experience, the authors felt there was no replacement for students and others having the ability to interact with
the actual art. Exposure to art, in person, as opposed to just seeing computer or print versions, has potential to increase students’ critical thinking and empathy, both of which are concerns in nursing (Greene et al., 2014). Thus, having the actual art in an exhibit on campus and having many disciplines see and interpret the art from their unique perspective was influential. Being surrounded by Utermohlen’s art created an experience of beauty and distress. Viewers could go back and forth between pieces in the exhibit, examining clues that demonstrated the degradation of skills in the execution of art caused by the deterioration of his cognitive condition, which could not be experienced by viewing images on the internet (Personal communication, Dick Folse, May 4, 2017).

Understanding William Utermohlen’s work

So that students and others engaged in viewing the exhibit could understand the breadth, richness, and meaning of Utermohlen’s work, they needed to understand a little about his work before AD and what happened in his work, both before and after he knew he had AD. In many ways, William Utermohlen was no different from any person, and was reminiscent of the students that faculty teach each day and each year. As a young man, he was educated at a university and set off to find his fortune as a painter, learning his craft, taking risks and going new places. The authors believed that sharing Mr. Utermohlen’s works on-campus would allow faculty colleagues across the university to broaden students’ worlds and focus on the seeds of potential all humans have.

Before William Utermohlen had AD, he painted portraits of people, often of himself, alone or with others. Even before he knew he had the disease, his portraits changed. As those with this devastating disease often do, he began to remove himself from social circles and from his own paintings. Trying to understand his changing experiences, and urged on by his nurse, Utermohlen continued to paint, offering a rare glimpse into the ravages of this disease on his sense of self and his relationships with others. Fig. 1 is an example of one of his early self-portraits, and one he painted in the last stages of this disease, before he stopped painting, about ten years before his death in 2007.

The value of interdisciplinary perspectives

Alzheimer’s disease is too complex for any one discipline and touches people no matter what their profession is, whether they are the individuals with Alzheimer’s, family members caring for that individual, or members of the community that are impacted by the loss of that individual’s function and contribution to society. No one of us, including nurses, can deal with the burden of AD alone. Colleagues from nine disciplines on campus (Music, Philosophy, English, Dance, Nursing, Library, Psychology, Art, and Chaplain Services), one community agency (Alzheimer’s Association), and another university (Loyola University) collaborated to make this project a success. Nine, separate events were held over a two-month period, each using the Illinois Wesleyan University Wakeley Gallery exhibit as the background to examine interdisciplinary aspects of AD. Members of the McLean County community, as well as many Illinois Schools of Nursing and healthcare agencies, were invited to the exhibit and the co-curricular events.

By inviting a wide audience to participate in the exhibit, nursing faculty wanted to highlight the intricacies of what nurses do and how other disciplines can help nurses strive for better outcomes. While the general public might picture nurses from the external perspective of scrubs, syringes, pills, dressings, and bedpans, nurses approach their work through an amalgamation of disciplines that inform the treatment of individuals and families with complex needs. Nurses need psychology to help them understand the cognitive and perceptual changes that affect the identity of those with AD. Nurses need experts in philosophy to inform them about the ethical aspects of this disease. Nurses need the fine arts; music, dance and poetry, to help them express feelings about and experiences with caring for people with AD. Nurses need a faith community to assist them in exploring the spiritual aspects of the disease and the suffering that is integral to the losses in AD.

Funding interdisciplinary projects

Fortunately, Illinois Wesleyan University had internal funds from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that could be used to bring the art to campus. Faculty representatives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Art worked with the SON faculty to secure a $24,000 grant from those funds. The grant partially supported the transportation and insurance of the artwork, in addition to a small honorarium for the artist’s wife. However, there were other costs to consider; such as gallery installation costs, funds to design and print the catalog, and marketing materials for the exhibit and other on-campus events. The curator suggested there was a possibility to collaborate with another university that also wanted to exhibit Utermohlen’s work. Ultimately, this collaboration paid off, as Loyola University Museum of Art (LUMA) shared some of the expenses involved in bringing the art from Paris and from private collections in the city of Chicago to both Illinois Wesleyan University in the city of Bloomington, IL and the Loyola University campus in the city of Chicago. While the relationship with LUMA was limited to sharing the cost of transporting the art, the collaboration with LUMA saved both Illinois Wesleyan University and LUMA several thousand dollars. In the 21st century there are realities and financial constraints that can be resolved through this type of collaboration and this financial solution was a win-win.

Therein lay the lesson for students and ourselves. Nursing faculty have to reach out to people in other disciplines to help explore and form the questions and to answer those questions to solve problems. In doing so, a rich palette of interdisciplinary color is applied to nursing’s disciplinary canvas which strengthens the framework of professional nursing practice. So, the story of this project is about the convergence of excellence and opportunities that literally spanned the globe. Because the university offers an excellent academic/intellectual environment, faculty attended the conference in Paris, France, and the framework which supported the canvas of this project, was prepared.

The importance and complexity of interdisciplinary collaboration

As faculty in the SON, the authors wanted to develop an interdisciplinary, collaborative project that would showcase cooperation between the liberal arts schools and the professional schools at the university. Liberal arts education is focused on increasing critical thinking, and critical thinking is fundamental to good clinical decision-making in nursing. Bachelor’s prepared nurses produce better outcomes...
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