issues

Building empathic practice through transformative learning theory

An educational framework that embeds and applies transformative learning theory to deliberately and repeatedly stimulate, prepare and empower students to develop empathy as future nurses is being used at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC).

Nursing academics at USC are aware of the pressing imperatives facing nursing practice and the need to work out educational strategies to both prepare graduates for the workplace and to inspire them to become productive and informed world citizens.

An essential ingredient in the caring work of nurses is empathy. Whilst the concept may be clear, its presence within hospitals, client care experiences, clinical teams, and amongst health professional students is not always evident. Empathy is a sophisticated human relating skill that can be eroded but it can also be developed, particularly through concerted educational strategies. Transformative learning theory provides the pedagogical basis for cultivating empathy (Mezirow 2000).

In 2011 an action research study was implemented to examine and apply a simple educational framework termed S.T.A.R. (McAllister in press). The framework focuses on an educator’s attention so that they: assist students to become Sensitised about pertinent issues; to Take Action; and to Reflect.

S.T.A.R has helped several educators to renew their teaching approaches so that they deliberately and repeatedly develop in students a transformed perspective.

Learning from errors: on observation, many students initially thought that errors could be prevented through individual competence and supervision. A film recreation of a fatal vincristine overdose (WHO 2008) was paired with questions to prompt content and process reflection. Students saw that in this particular case, errors were caused not through one person’s incompetence, but because of communication failures and the reality of complex environments, where sometimes chaotic events occur that cannot be controlled. The lesson objective is for students to learn that an important way to avoid contributing to a “blame” culture, is to practice empathy for all affected individuals, provide support and be open to self-critique so that systemic errors can be minimised.

Appreciating the subtleties of “Being with”: some students viewed that recovering patients no longer need nursing care. This dilemma is revealed for students through a client-lecturer interview. The lecturer modelled active listening and students observed. The client related his experience of suddenly receiving the news, first that he had cancer (when he thought he was having an appendectomy), and later learning that his prognosis of having a terminal disease had been upturned. He spoke of nurses who took the time to moisten his lips and to offer him listening time, even though they could not take his distress away. Students were able to appreciate the importance of, and skills in:

- active listening as the client reveals feelings of overwhelming distress and the paradoxical experience of feeling grief in response to good news; and
- taking value in the “little things” and the time to help the client feel valued and connected.

Assessment that motivates learning: students often view performance-based assessment tasks as stress inducing events, activities that must be endured to show others what they already know how to do. A challenge posed for students became anything but distressing. The task was set: “You have an assignment, but it’s going to be fun! You should demonstrate health education competence. You can take as long as you like to practise until you feel competent. You are to prepare a five minute video demonstrating aspects of your competence. These will be assessed according to a pre-set criteria”. Students were surprised to find how enjoyable a challenging assignment can be.

Repetition of skills to reach competency was self-motivated. Students willingly and openly critiqued their own performance and responded well to feedback. They also learned that health education is enhanced through finely honed communication skills.

Professional transformation: some students view that discussion on a blog simply requires open expression of personally held and unedited impulsive thoughts. As a learning tool, students are challenged to develop and express professional thoughts. Students examine provision of care to people whose values differ markedly from their own. The personal self is transformed during the process of professional learning. Students learn that being accepting, open and non-judgmental are attributes relevant for building civility in nursing culture, and for being a better human being.

Nursing academics at USC have embraced the framework to help develop students who will value and know how to build strong therapeutic relationships.

REFERENCES

PROFESSOR OF NURSING MARGARET MCALLISTER, TERESA DOWNER, ANN FRAMP, JULIE HANSON, JANICE COPE AND TARA GAMBLE: ALL WORK IN THE SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND SPORT SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST.
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