Performance Pedagogy in Nursing

As we seek different pedagogies to convey important concepts of nursing to our students, we must not forget the contribution of the arts when it comes to interpreting and relating human experience. The preeminence of nursing’s commitment to social justice issues (American Nurses Association, 2010) continues to be an important concept that is threaded through nursing curricula at various levels. Educators continue to seek ways that will spark discussion and reflection on this important concept. Performance pedagogy comes from the framework that students learn initially from an academic culture; however, that discourse can be promoted by engaging in performance art that uses memory and cultural history to expose and critique dominant cultural assumptions in the spirit of post-modernism (Garoian, 1999).

The index course referred to in this student learning experience is one that contains content pertaining to women’s health issues, as well as the psychiatric implications of abuse and violence on the individual; 28 students were enrolled. Discussions in the course included reflections on clinical experiences that may or may not have been personally encountered by all students. A common ground for discussion was sought that would allow for discussion of specific concepts and tenets of social justice.

The university theater/dance program, in collaboration with a religious studies professor, designed a performance of an original dance-play, titled Weaving Our Sisters’ Voices (Schearing, Ostersmith, & Spittal, 2010). This original production presented the lives of several female biblical figures from the Old and New Testaments. Issues of rape, slavery, leadership, and childbirth were represented by dance, along with actual scripture outtakes. The music was dramatic and provocative. The performance was a type of ethnography that was experienced on various levels by the audience.

All students in the course were required to attend. The cost of the performance was minimal, but scholarships were awarded to students with limited funds who were able to provide the department of nursing. More than 95% of the students attended the same performance, in which seats were reserved. The remaining students attended another performance.

Before the performance, students were provided with reflection questions to help them key in on selected aspects of the stories portrayed. These questions tied in with issues of personal violence, specifically addressing course content, as well as social justice. An example of one of the reflective questions was, “How does the concept of motherhood play into the issues of power in women? Relate it to the performance, as well as the societal influences that we see today.” This particular question raised issues of matriarchal societies, as opposed to those that may be more patriarchal, and how this plays into issues of social justice for women.

During the class session following the performance, discussion ensued regarding the students’ reactions to the performance. Most of the students were glad they had the opportunity to attend the performance. One or two students did not see the value of attending, as expressed by the comment, “There was nothing new.” The majority of students were moved by the performance on an affective level that is not normally experienced through reading or even watching a film. One male student commented, “Now I think I really understand how deeply a woman is affected if she is raped.” Other students were brought in by the dance and music associated with birth, whereas others remarked on the power displayed by the woman who was in a leadership position within her tribe. The students related a humanistic perspective on the classroom content surrounding violence and repression.

Through the use of performing arts, as educators, we can continue to expose our students to the rawness of human experience and varying perspective. The ethnographic background provided a canvas for discussion that brought the content of experience to current times. The use of the various senses involved with participating in live performance provided a deeper meaning of the humanistic perspective (Jackson & Shapiro-Phim, 2008).

References

Regina M. Prindle PhD, APRN, CNE
rmprindle@nic.edu
North Idaho College

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