The Three-Question Health Literacy Experience for Baccalaureate Nursing Students

Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.
~ Benjamin Franklin

Nurse educators are increasingly aware of the impact that health literacy has on patient outcomes. This has led to the realization that health literacy should be introduced to nursing students at the undergraduate level. The focus of this education traditionally has used teaching methods such as video presentations, case studies, lectures, role-playing, and assessing the readability of current health education material (McCleary-Jones, 2012; Sand-Jecklin, Murray, Summers, & Watson, 2010; Smith & Zsohar, 2011).

A new and different approach was used with 146 students in their first undergraduate nursing class, Fundamentals of Adult Health Nursing, at a mid-sized, urban, private university in the fall and winter semesters of the 2012-2013 academic year. The aim of this new method was to have students engage in experiential learning as a means of gaining an understanding of inadequate health literacy from the patient’s perspective. This approach has not been previously reported in the literature. However, an assignment addressing the experience of health literacy was reported in a nursing and health sciences class, where students were given homework that required them to search and find information on the treatment for a common ailment that was written using unfamiliar medical terms (McCabe, 2006).

Health Literacy as a Lived Experience

Students in the traditional nursing program generally come to the fundamentals theory class without a prior medical terminology or pathophysiology course. The students were given 10 minutes to complete a surprise quiz at the end of the first day of class. The quiz consisted of three questions that were written using medical terminology at an advanced medical–surgical level. Students were provided with a medical diagnosis and were asked why the patient was admitted to the hospital. They also were asked to provide the source of pain related to a medical diagnosis. Finally, an example of documentation was given, using approved abbreviations, and the students were asked to describe the nursing care priorities for the patient. Although the purpose was not revealed, after the quiz was completed, the students were assured it would not be graded in an effort to alleviate their fear and anxiety.

Students were not told the purpose of the quiz, only that an assignment and a reflection paper was due related to the surprise quiz. The students’ assignment was to watch a module prior to the next week’s class. The module discussed health literacy and included actual patient interviews (McCune, Springfield, & Pohl, 2006). After viewing the module, a graded reflection assignment was due by the beginning of class the following week. The reflection was to include what they felt was the purpose of the quiz, their experience of taking a quiz filled with unfamiliar medical jargon, and how this experience would impact their nursing practice.

The Reactions

Content analysis of the reflections revealed that student’s initial reactions in the classroom ranged from panic and fear of failure to anger and frustration for being given an unfair quiz. Students expressed that they thought they should have known the material and felt “dumb,” thinking they were the only ones who did not understand the language on the quiz. Many students did not want to reveal this lack of understanding to their classmates and wrote that this must be how patients feel when they do not understand their providers. Several students revealed that they contemplated walking out of the lecture immediately after the quiz was distributed due to feeling overwhelmed by their lack of knowledge of the quiz content. After completing the module, most student reflections indicated they understood that the purpose of the quiz was to allow them to experience how patients with inadequate and marginal health literacy feel. Nearly 100% of the students indicated that as a result of this experience they could now empathize with patients who struggle with health literacy and that this experience will greatly impact their communication with patients throughout their nursing career. Two examples of student comments are:

• The impact this module has bestowed on me was tremendous. It has taught me to not only be thorough but empathetic to my patients and notice the signs of literacy.
• After experiencing this overwhelming feeling (and mine was not even regarding my life or health, but simply a grade), I will do my very best to help my patients comprehend their health care by using the skills taught to me in this lesson.

Students were debriefed after the reflection assignment was completed, which was 1 week following the surprise quiz. They were engaged in a discussion at the beginning of class regarding the purpose of the previous week’s quiz and the health literacy reflection assignment. Students were asked how they felt taking the quiz, how they think patients feel when they do not understand health information, and what they learned from the experience. They had an opportunity to share the impact of the assignment, including the potential effect of inadequate health literacy on patient understanding of health information and compliance with treatment regimens.

The introduction of health literacy content is essential and should include activities that will help students to apply health literacy concepts into their professional practice (Cormier & Kotrlik, 2009). This innovative method of teaching students about health literacy, having them experience it firsthand, and introducing it in their first nursing course will provide a foundation for excellent patient communication. Experiencing the vulnerability of patients struggling with health literacy may produce a greater understanding for students of the importance of health literacy assessment in all aspects of nursing care (Scheckel, Emery, & Nosek, 2010). This method of teaching nursing students about the importance of health literacy should be repeated, without changes, in future classes.
References


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