The Use of Film in Teaching Concepts of Qualitative Inquiry to Graduate Nursing Students

Qualitative inquiry has gained momentum within nursing throughout the past 2 decades (Munhall, 1994). Despite its growing popularity, many graduate students who are interested in these pursuits must “learn qualitative methods on their own” (Munhall, 2007, p. 155). Graduate programs that integrate formal education of qualitative methods, either as a separate course or within a larger research course, are on the rise (Creswell, 2006). Concepts of qualitative inquiry are complex and are often difficult to grasp. Therefore, nurse educators are challenged to implement teaching strategies to facilitate understanding while at the same time engaging adult learners who thrive on real-life examples.

Edmonds (2011) used film to teach the concepts of multiculturalism and cultural competency to future nurse educators. After viewing scenes from the film Freedom Writers (DeVito & LaGravenese, 2007) in class, those graduate students were surveyed, and “all students reported that the film provided a realistic example with 95% indicating that their knowledge of this topic had been enhanced as a result” (Edmonds, 2011, p. 544). In addition, those participants reported that the film appealed to their learning preferences and that they preferred viewing film over traditional lecture for this content (Edmonds, 2011).

The purpose of our learning activity was to identify a teaching strategy that incorporated the concepts of qualitative inquiry into an engaged learning opportunity for one class period within a semester-long graduate nursing research course. The film The Help (Barnathan & Taylor, 2011) was selected, rather than the novel by the same name, given the time constraints within the course and the existing amount of assigned reading. This film exemplar demonstrated important key concepts of qualitative inquiry.

Twenty-eight graduate nursing students watched segments (approximately 54 minutes total) of the film The Help (Barnathan & Taylor, 2011), which is a realistic account detailing the lives of African American women in the early 1960s who were working as nannies and housekeepers in Mississippi. At the central focus is a young White woman, Skeeter, who returns to the area after college, wanting to write a book about the struggles faced by these women who work for White families during the time of segregation. Although the subject of the film was not intended as rigorous research, many concepts of qualitative inquiry are exemplified throughout as Skeeter interviews the African American women for her book.

Clips of this film were shown to the graduate nursing students in the Nursing Research course. Afterwards, the graduate students discussed prompts posed by the nursing professor to stimulate further dialogue on the topic and focused on the main learning outcome of the activity of identifying key concepts of qualitative inquiry, such as various approaches, sampling technique, and interviewing. Prompts were first discussed in small groups of five to six students and then discussed as an entire class. Sample discussion prompts included:

- Write an example of a qualitative research question, as exhibited in the film.
- What type of qualitative approach is being demonstrated? (Explain).
- Explain what types of interview techniques you saw demonstrated.
- Were there any ethical dilemmas identified as a result of the “research?”
- Was this a vulnerable group? (Explain).
- What type of sampling occurred for this “research?”
- Did you see any examples of bracketing by the journalist?
- How well was the voice of the participants heard?
- What other concepts of qualitative inquiry were represented in the film?

Examples of phenomenological questions posed by the graduate nursing students included several from different perspectives: “What is it like to raise your employer’s child while you leave your child at home?” “What are the perspectives of ‘the help’ on working for White families?” Most students correctly identified that the film was an example of the phenomenological approach, although a few thought it might be ethnography, as it focused on a particular cultural group. This idea gave rise to good discussion about the amount of field immersion required for ethnography and that it was only minimally demonstrated in this film. Students correctly identified that there were some implied references to bracketing on the part of Skeeter, but they were not explicitly stated. One student posed hypothetical questions for Skeeter about bracketing, asking “What was your experience with Constantine (Skeeter’s African American nanny)?” and “Has she influenced your life?”

Students also recognized additional concepts of qualitative inquiry, including purposive and snowball sampling to recruit additional participants to be interviewed; vulnerability of the African American nannies and housekeepers, who risked losing their job or their life and the ethical dilemmas this posed; and semistructured and unstructured interview questions.

Finally, one of the most important concepts appreciated by the graduate nursing students was the idea that the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to illuminate the voices of the participants. This was brilliantly demonstrated in the film when Skeeter tells one of the African American participants, “What I think isn’t important. This is your story!” The nurse educator introduced additional concepts of qualitative inquiry during discussion, such as participants as co-researchers, researchers honoring reciprocity, and social justice advocacy.

The graduate nursing students who participated in this learning activity met the identified learning outcomes. They correctly identified answers to all of the questions posed by the nurse educator in the group discussion and written responses. The students communicated their satisfaction with the learning activity, both during class and after class. The use of film not only provided an effective way to present the concepts of qualitative inquiry but it was also an engaging opportunity for the adult learner. The learning activity highlighted in this article adds to a growing body of knowledge regarding the use of film as a teaching strategy in nursing. Film was preferred over traditional lecture by both the stu-
dents and the professor, and it provided a realistic example for graduate nursing students to experience ideas related to qualitative research.

Recommendations are to continue the use of this teaching strategy for future offerings of this course and to explore additional ways that film can be used as an active teaching strategy for a variety of topics in nursing, including ethical dilemmas, cultural topics, and interpersonal communication.

References


Michelle L. Edmonds, PhD, FNP-BC, CEN, CNE
medmond@ju.edu
Jacksonville University School of Nursing

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