Poetry of Pharmacology

Learning pharmacology in nursing school demands students to understand a range of concepts and remember a huge number of facts; both tasks are challenging to many students. To help students think differently about drugs through multiple means of presentation, expression, and engagement of the course content consistent with Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2011) I instituted a “Poetry of Pharmacology” assignment. Students created an original poem demonstrating analysis and understanding of the essential aspects of a given pharmacological agent. A secondary benefit was to help students remember facts about drugs using creative writing as the vehicle to deliver the technical drug information.

On the first day of class, students were assigned a drug to write a poem about due in 2 weeks. Poems were to be 50 words or less using either an established form (e.g., Haiku, iambic pentameter, or limerick) or free-style. Poetry forms were named, but not reviewed, as awareness of these was assumed to be part of the general fund of knowledge in a baccalaureate degree program; no students asked for clarification. After composing several poems, for artistic and space considerations, required information was limited to: (a) generic name and major indication(s) for the drug and (b) at least three of the following: mechanism of action, adverse effects (common and/or serious and/or notable, as allowed by word count), contraindication(s), and class. Given that shorter poem styles make including more information difficult in the future, I would limit the style to a few choices, increase word limit and require all the above information. Examples of poems were provided (Figures 1-2).

Grading checked the accuracy of poems, and only one student had to revise the poem after grading. Students submitted poems to Blackboard Learning Management System for grading, then to a secure shared cloud-based folder. The assignment was worth 2% of final grade. A brief rubric was created for Teaching assistant (TA) grading, where 3 points were possible with 1 point for both the presence and accuracy of the two required technical sections and 1 point for “good faith poetic effort.” The TA, a PhD student in nursing, forwarded incomplete or inaccurate poems to the instructor for grading. Partial credit was given in only a few cases.

The primary outcome was to introduce a novel way of thinking about pharmacology, making the first assignment creative writing set a tone of multimodal learning for the semester. Observationally, a few students later in the semester made comments privately or during presentations about knowing a given drug well because it was their poetry assignment. The secondary outcome was to provide a creative study resource for students leveraging the poems of all students into a shared folder. The utility of this was inferred when a group of students volunteered to create an iBook compiling the near 100 poems as a study guide for the final examination.

This activity capitalizes on the Universal Design for Learning key principles of providing multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (CAST, 2011). Providing a different way of engaging and representing material than typical NCLEX-style questions, coupled with the opportunity to choose the level of creative expression appropriate for themselves, each student could have a meaningful learning experience that helped generalize knowledge while focusing on a single drug. Many of the poems were clever with funny or meaningful graphics included in the submission; it is hoped these elements would help students recall aspects of the medications during stressful testing.

Combining poetry and pharmacology is a unique pairing that asks nursing students to engage challenging material in a novel, creative modality. Recognizing that nurses draw on a range of skills in the practice of nursing, injecting creative thinking into a course with clear “right” and “wrong” answers helps prepare students for the creative thinking that expert nurses use in caring for patients in practice.

Reference
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