



Nursing problem-based learning activity: Song writing and singing



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ABSTRACT

The function of song is not only to deliver individual's messages, but also to serve as a learning approach to facilitate students' learning. To observe the effectiveness of songs in facilitating students' learning, a Problem-based Learning (PBL) class with twenty students was divided into four groups with five students per group. Each group was asked to write a song based on two given scenarios, to sing the song out loud, and to participate in a follow-up focus group interview afterwards. The four songs reflected the students' understanding of academic knowledge and their perspectives toward the protagonists in the presented scenarios. Two songs are presented in this paper to demonstrate how the approach was carried out in the nursing PBL class. This paper aims to show the implication of song writing and singing in PBL and shed some light on teaching and learning.

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Introduction

Overview of songs

According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, a song is a set of short lyrics for singing (Soanes and Stevenson, 2005). More precisely, a song can be defined as a short vocal composition that can be accompanied, or solo. It is a natural and innate way for human beings to express themselves through music, along with rhythm and the inflections of speech (Kennedy, 2007; Latham, 2002). John Cage was an American composer and musician whose compositions deeply influenced mid-20th-century music (Davies, 2011). Writing music allowed him "to recognize beauty, to pay attention to it, to encourage and admire the individual expressions of it all around us" (Swed, 1993, p. 142). He paid attention to a song's harmony, which had a social purpose in helping people to understand their societal predicament and demonstrated how they might better get along (Swed, 1993).

According to the styles and forms of music, songs can be classified into different types. The more common types are folk, blues, jazz, soul, rock, rap and pop. Folk is a natural expression and its essence lies in its simplicity, with strong, repetitious, uncomplicated choruses that everyone can sing along to (Borthwick and Moy, 2004; Citron, 2002). Blues is important in the history of popular culture, with its origins in the expression of sorrow (Citron, 2002; Martin, 2003). Jazz is a quintessential American music with

the spirit of spontaneous creativity, risk-taking and discovery at its core. Soul is a vocal-led, crossover style that combines gospel, jazz and blues with lyrics from a mostly social and political context. Rock music, along with the attitudes of its performers and its lyrics, are often based on fighting against class, gender and ethnic distinctions. Rap is influenced by many musical styles, including soul, funk and reggae. Pop music tends to erupt in America and then exert its grip worldwide (Martin, 2003).

The content of songs written by professional composer-lyricists is another method of classification. The largest number of songs written at present are love songs with content that includes looking for love, proposing love, heart break, etc. (Appleby, 1995; Citron, 2002). Another group of songs feature social messages that allow the lyricists to describe injustices, with themes such as ecology and the fight for sexual equality among others. The content of most gospel songs presents the music of the Lord formatted as meaningful stories or expressive accounts that describe a person or a place (Citron, 2002).

Music and learning

Music is not just only for fun. Baker (2012) did karaoke in the first lecture of year one undergraduate Youth and Society to enhance new comers' learning experience and to raise their interest. The activity was a great success with students reporting reduced anxiety, uplifted personal interaction and experienced positive learning environment. Some studies suggested that singing can buoy mood and promote relaxation (Bittman et al., 2004; Cliff and Hancox, 2001; Koelsch et al., 2010). Kreutz et al.

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(2004) conducted a study to observe the correlation between singing and the release of cortisol. They found that cortisol, a hormone that increases in response to stress, decreased significantly after singing, suggesting that singing really benefits the physiology. For learning purposes, scholars suggested that singing songs could enhance a child's ability to learn from two different perspectives: speaking and reading. When children engage in singing, they could have improvement in the key tenets of language – “pronunciation, inflection, vocabulary, parts of speech, language patterning and sentence formation” (Moore, 2009, p. 57). In addition, singing songs is an effective way to integrate writing and reading because it provides a pattern that students can use to compose their own songs and modify the originals. Repetitive singing and reading allows students to develop reading fluency (Bintz, 2010). The integration of songs into teaching and learning was tried out in different subjects and programs. In addition, there are several websites cover educational songs for education need. One website even covers over 5000 science educational songs and its target audiences range from kindergarten to college level (Crowther, 2012a). Last (2009) incorporated self rewritten songs with relevant chemistry themes into chemistry class for introduction use or as a break. The activity increased students' attention and interest, as well as provided her the opportunity to raise discussion with students about lecture content. Another chemistry lecturer also taught the students through playing songs with rewritten lyric and found class attendances improved significantly (Pye, 2004). Jensen and Curtis (2008) integrated liberal arts into a baccalaureate nursing program and they suggested that analysing song lyrics could increase students' cultural awareness. Dickson and Grant (2003) performed songs with physics themes to entertain, educate and motivate students. They encouraged school children to learn through writing their own song writing as the activity could strength their knowledge and motivate them to learn. During the writing process, the matching of lyrics with the rhythm and melody often leads to tryout and repetition which have effects in strengthening students' ideas and knowledge. Moreover, song writing could provide students a new method to explain concepts and to revise and reorganise their mental model. The activity requires students to explore and sift through massive information, express their concepts concisely and organise their words and thoughts in a musical way (Crowther, 2012b).

Aims of this study

This study aims to explore the participated students' attitude towards using song composition in nursing education. Since nursing educators may adopt various activities to enhance students' learning outcomes and motivation to learn, the results is expected to assist nurse educators in designing appropriate teaching interventions to prepare future nurses.

Methods

Demonstration of song writing in a nursing PBL class

Composing and singing songs seem to be a potentially effective learning approach, therefore songs as a teaching tool was incorporated into a nursing Problem-based Learning (PBL) class. A total of 20 students were asked to form four groups of five. Each group was required to write a song based on the two case scenarios presented in the following section. Afterwards, they had to perform their songs out loud in front of the class. This activity may provide the students with a new learning approach that would facilitate and motivate their learning process. The following sections present

two songs written by the students. In addition, the presented case scenarios were adopted from the university.

Scenarios

Ling is a 15-year-old girl who suddenly felt unwell during class at school, experiencing twitching and uncontrollable movements in both hands and staring for an extended period of time without shifting her gaze. There was no fall or incontinence during the seizure episode. She was accompanied by the teacher and taken immediately to a nearby hospital. Ling was sent to a medical unit where she was admitted for close observation to investigate the cause of the seizure. Ling tells you that, “I stared at the teacher and went blank, and I did not know what had happened.” A quiet, safe environment was provided and a convulsion chart was used to monitor any further seizures. However, after settling down in the medical unit, Ling had another seizure that presented with the mild twitching of both upper limbs for 15 s.

Ling was diagnosed with idiopathic epilepsy. The doctor prescribed anti-epileptic drugs and she was discharged and referred to the epilepsy clinic for follow up. Ling is very anxious and upset about the diagnosis and the medications. She states that “It's quite 'shameful' to have such an attack at school. My classmates will probably laugh at me.” She wants to know whether her epilepsy will be cured after finishing all of the medications.

Follow-up focus group interview

A semi-structured focus group interview was conducted after the lesson, in order to evaluate the teaching session and arrive at the students' comments. The students were asked to share their learning experience of composing songs in a follow-up group interview. They had to revisit the process of summarizing what they have learnt and express their reflections on writing lyrics. Prior to the study, the Human Subjects Sub-committee of the University granted the ethical approval of the focus group interview. All participants signed on consent forms with information sheets before the interview began.

The collected excerpts were transcribed and translated from Cantonese to English. The researcher and her research assistant analysed the narratives and summarised them through content analysis. To uphold the rigor and trustworthiness of this study, frequent research meetings were held.

Results

First illustration

This group of students perceived that Ah Ling was worried about her diagnosis and prescribed medication. They also guessed that she might be avoiding facing the details of her epilepsy to keep herself from feeling unhappy. They intended to write a song containing information about the medication used to control epilepsy as a way of sparking Ah Ling's interest in learning about her disease. The melody they chose is originally from a Hong Kong pop song. The lyrics that the group wrote focus on the use of anti-epileptic drugs. The group believed that through listening to the song, the listener would be interested in learning about epileptic drug use and better understand some of the side-effects and drug routes in an acceptable and pleasant manner (see Table 1).

The group comprehended that it was the responsibility of nursing care to promote quality of life, which means that even if a patient has an incurable disease, they can maintain their lifestyle by taking the prescribed medication and continuing to pay attention to their condition. In the lyrics, the group suggests four medications

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