



Issues for Debate

Integrating psychology with interpersonal communication skills in undergraduate nursing education: Addressing the challenges

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of the social, behavioural and bio-sciences is acknowledged as essential to the development of the art and science of nursing. Nonetheless, the literature highlights on-going debate about the content and delivery of these subject areas in undergraduate nursing education. The bio-sciences and social sciences in particular have received much attention but more recently the inclusion of psychology in nursing curricula is gaining momentum. Studies conducted on nursing students' views of these supporting sciences have also highlighted problems with their understanding, relevance and application to nursing practice.

Although broad guidelines are given as to what should be included, no detail is given as to how much detail or at what level these subjects should be taught. Subsequently, approved institutions are responsible for their own course content. This has resulted in inconsistent and varied approaches to integrating the sciences in undergraduate nursing curricula.

Following a recent review of the undergraduate nursing curriculum in one university in the Republic of Ireland a decision was made to combine the teaching, learning and assessment of Applied Psychology with Interpersonal Communication skills. This paper will describe the developmental process and evaluation of the integrated module.

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Introduction

Nurse educators are attempting to address the development of the art and science of nursing by including theory from the social, behavioural and bio-sciences. Nonetheless, there are difficulties regarding the content and delivery of these subject areas in undergraduate nursing education. The bio-sciences and social sciences in particular have received much attention but more recently the inclusion of psychology in nursing curricula is gaining momentum (de Vries and Timmins, 2012). Studies conducted on nursing students' views of these supporting sciences have also highlighted problems with their understanding, relevance and application to nursing practice (McKee, 2002; Mowforth et al., 2005; Edgley et al., 2009).

Following a recent review of the undergraduate nursing curriculum in one university in the Republic of Ireland a decision was

made to combine the teaching, learning and assessment of Applied Psychology with Interpersonal Communication skills. This paper will describe the developmental process and evaluation of the integrated module. The background, philosophical underpinnings, review of the literature, module content, teaching/learning, assessment and evaluation of the module are presented.

Development process

Background

In 2002, a new nursing curriculum was designed to facilitate the transition of undergraduate nursing students (General, Psychiatric and Intellectual Disability nursing), from a Diploma to Degree status in the Republic of Ireland. Core principles of this curriculum were stipulated by the Nursing Education Forum (Department of Health & Children, (DoH&C), 2000), highlighting the need for flexibility, eclecticism, transferability and progression, utility, evidence base and shared learning. The Irish Nursing and Midwifery Board (An Bord Altranais, (ABA), 2002, 2005) also played a significant role in the development of the undergraduate nursing curriculum. They stipulated the 'Requirements and Standards' for

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nurse registration education programmes, including the indicative content for each of the branches (General, Psychiatric, and Intellectual Disability nursing). These standards acted as a guide for nurse educators developing the curricula. ABA stated that student nurses were to achieve competencies in five key domains: Professional/Ethical Practice, Holistic Approaches to Care and the Integration of Knowledge, Interpersonal Relationships, Organisational and Management of Care and Personal/Professional Development (ABA, 2005, p. 12). In addition, they delineated that graduate nurses should be competent in the skills of “critical analysis, problem-solving, decision-making, reflective skills and abilities essential to the art and science of nursing” (ABA, 2005, p. 12).

In relation to psychology, although broad guidelines were given by ABA (2002, 2005) as to what material should be included, no guidelines were given on how much detail or to what level these elements should be taught. This is not unique to Ireland as in the United Kingdom it is also noted that nurse educators are responsible for individual course content. In the Republic of Ireland, this has resulted in inconsistent and varied approaches to integrating the sciences into undergraduate nursing curricula (Hegarty et al., 2008).

From 2002 to 2011 Applied Psychology was taught locally to first year nursing students as a ‘stand-alone’ 5-credit module (20 h) delivered and assessed by a Psychologist, prior to students’ first clinical placement. Consistent with another international study (Mowforth et al., 2005), students’ evaluations of this module highlighted problems with its relevance and application to nursing practice.

During this period Interpersonal Communication was also taught to first year undergraduate nursing students as a 5-credit ‘stand-alone’ module prior to their first clinical placement. Content related to basic communication skills such as verbal, non-verbal, listening, questioning, empathy and self-awareness. This module was always evaluated positively by students, but as it was taught prior to clinical placement, it was difficult to ascertain students ability to apply/transfer the skills taught in the classroom to situations in clinical practice.

Following a review of the undergraduate nursing curriculum in 2007, a number of recommendations were made. These included more interdisciplinary integration of modules, self-directed learning and reflection-on-practice (Hyland, 2007). These are consistent with international reports where more emphasis on multi-professional, inter-professional, collaborative and team approaches to teaching and learning has been suggested (Turner et al., 2006; Humphris, 2007; Wakefield et al., 2009). A curriculum committee was established subsequently to review/revise the curriculum with one of the changes being to combine Interpersonal Communication Skills and Applied Psychology for Healthcare into one 10-credit module (50 h) for first year nursing students.

Philosophical underpinnings

In designing an integrated module the first challenge for the lecturers involved (General Nurse Lecturer $n = 1$; Mental Health Nurse Lecturer $n = 1$; Psychologist $n = 1$), was to develop a shared philosophy. This advocates that for true integration to take place an agreed philosophy of the content, teaching, learning and assessment has to be adopted by all lecturers (Greaves, 1987; Eraut et al., 1995). Nursing is an interpersonal caring process that acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual (ABA, 2005). A phenomenological life-world perspective therefore was considered essential to underpin the module (Ekebergh, 2011). This approach focuses on the individual’s experiences and the person is seen as being the expert in relation to his/her own health/illness status. It encompasses existential issues concerning the individual’s world e.g. what it is like to experience health, illness, suffering, and learn

to see the world as the patient/client does (Horberg et al., 2011). In the context of interpersonal skills, understanding existential issues such as human needs, frustrations, dreams and possibilities is critical to providing quality healthcare (Nystrom, 2007). In addition, a humanistic approach was also deemed necessary. This advocates a holistic, empowering view of individuals respecting their goals and values (Billings and Halstead, 2008). Key elements of a humanistic approach include empathy, development of self-awareness, reflective listening and acceptance of the individual’s subjective experience.

Review of the literature: psychology for nurses

Concurrent with developing the philosophy was to identify the most salient aspects of Psychology and Interpersonal Communication skills for nursing practice. A review of the literature highlighted a paucity of research on teaching psychology to nursing students. Published papers were either literature reviews or opinion articles in which there was little focus on what psychology is required for nursing practice. The lack of literature in general in this area is also noted by other writers (Jansen and Nicholl, 2007; de Vries and Timmins, 2012).

Piper and Brown (1998) explored the relationship between psychology and health education and proposed that psychology offers nurses valuable insight into the motivation behind human action and behaviour. They emphasised that psychology has a positive role to play when assisting patients/clients to develop knowledge, understanding, power and choice regarding health and illness.

A review of the literature by Priest (1999) to identify what psychological concepts would assist nurse educationalists in developing teaching programmes highlighted that while there’s agreement on the need to include psychological care, there was little consensus on what specific aspects needed to be addressed. Within the texts reviewed, Priest (1999) did find that there were five recurring themes: information giving, emotional care, assessment, counselling and other therapeutic interventions, support, security and comfort.

A more recent review conducted by de Vries and Timmins (2012), on which aspects of psychology should be covered in nurse education and in how much depth, concurs with those of Priest (1999). They concluded that while lists of topics to be covered are offered, the content of theories or how they might affect nurses is limited. The relevance of psychology to nursing features regularly in textbook reviews of textbooks (de Vries and Timmins, 2012), some of which are praised for their efforts e.g. “Psychology for Nurses” by Rana and Upton (2009) while others are criticised for not meeting nurses’ needs (Goddard, 2010; De Vries, 2010). One of the main criticisms of these texts is the limited relevance of psychology to nursing practice or that relevance is addressed in the opening pages only rather than having a more continuous focus throughout (de Vries and Timmins, 2012).

In summary then little support was found in the literature to assist lecturers in identifying the content or level of teaching/learning and assessment of psychology for undergraduate nursing students.

Review of the literature: communication for nurses

Effective communication skills are acknowledged as essential for quality and safety in healthcare practice (Lingard et al., 2004; Jones, 2007; Krautschied, 2008). Indeed communication proficiency is also a required entry level competency for professional registration and practice (ABA, 2005; Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2010). The teaching and assessing of Interpersonal Communication

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