



## Review

# The use and application of drama in nursing education – An integrative review of the literature



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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Caring is grounded on universal humanistic values such as kindness, empathy, concern and love for self and others. Nurses need to learn how to implement these values in the care for patients. Nursing students find it hard to assimilate theoretical knowledge in practice. Experiential learning in the form of drama has been used in several studies to enhance nursing students' learning.

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to review empirical and theoretical articles on the use and application of drama in nursing education.

**Design:** An integrative review of the literature.

**Method:** The databases CINAHL, PubMed, ProQuest and Academic search elite were searched for articles.

**Result:** The search generated 64 articles, with 20 articles meeting the inclusive criteria. Three themes with their attendant subthemes emerged through the analysis. The themes are: The Framing, The Objectives and The Embodiment.

**Conclusion:** Drama is effective in entry level courses in nursing education to enhance student learning and can be flexible and adjusted to various contexts. Further research using drama to enroll nursing students as fictive patients and relatives and thereby explore different perspectives is suggested, and more research on the application of drama in nursing education at an advanced level is required.

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## Introduction

Caring is grounded on universal humanistic values such as kindness, empathy, concern and love for self and others (Watson, 2007). Nurses need to understand these values in order to promote professional care for patients, or else there is a risk that nursing is performed as tasks or actions with no deeper meaning. Practicing these values cannot only be reached by reading; personal experiences are needed to fully understand it (Watson, 1999, 2012). Nursing students need to be able to assimilate theoretical knowledge into meaningful tools when encountering patients in various nursing situations (Ekebergh, 2009a). Even though the content of nursing education is changing, nursing students often find it difficult to link theory with practice which creates a tension between theory and practice that is constant. Nurse educators struggle to find a balance that enables the students to understand the connection between the theoretical course content and its practical application. The need for teaching methods clearly connected to practical applications is a current issue for discussions among nursing educators (Crookes et al., 2013).

## Experiential Learning and Drama

One way to combine theory and practice is by using experiential learning where knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences (Kolb, 1984). Since nursing is a practice based profession and all students participate in clinical activities as well as theoretical lectures, experience based learning can bridge the gap between theory and practice (Fowler, 2008). Deep learning occurs when students engage their emotions as well as their intellects and interact with their fellow students and teachers. Experiential learning in nursing education can promote personal awareness, creative expression and critical thinking among the students (McLaughlin et al., 2006).

An experiential approach to learning can be implemented in education through all the arts. Burnard and Hennessy (2006) argue that the essential ability of reflection, both professional and personal, is integral to learning through the arts because artistic practices promote learning both in action and on action. These two, interlinked elements of reflection were identified by Schön (1995) as the key to professional learning. To improve higher education, artistic teaching methods such as drama can be used as a method in experiential learning (Boggs et al., 2007). Previous research shows that drama can help students in higher education to integrate theory and practice (Ekebergh, 2009b;

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Lepp et al., 2011; Halabi et al., 2012; Morrison et al., 2013). Cahill (2013) argues that in Health programs drama techniques enable students to describe, rehearse, explore, deconstruct and envisage issues and experiences.

Burton (2013) notes that major drama educators have identified the value of drama as a learning medium in the way it allows learners to investigate experiences from different perspectives and points of view. Drama enables the students to experiment with different roles and offers an opportunity to explore their own individual vulnerability in a safe environment. Fictional scenarios provide a safe place that allows participants to act out experiences, issues and human situations and effectively change them (Hunter, 2008). The safe environment of drama therefore provides participants with the opportunity to discover a better understanding of themselves which is vital to personal growth (Wasylo and Stickley, 2003). Drama can enhance personal growth through activities that help students to develop their imagination and increase their confidence, self-esteem, management skills and group work skills (Kerr and MacDonald, 1997). Lightblau (2014) found that “dramatic performance” may contribute to the ability of individuals to empathize, work collaboratively and think critically.

It is not unusual that non-dramatic role plays and simulations are used in education, without the roots from drama or theater mentioned or acknowledged (O’Toole and Lepp, 2000; O’Toole, 1992). Therefore it is important to clarify the difference between drama and other kinds of role plays and simulations used in education. According to Bolton (1992) role play and simulations without the artistic underpinnings, often performed mainly for skill training, are to drama as diagrams are to visual art. These kinds of activities can surely have their place in education and training, but should not be equated with the art of drama. Bolton (1992) points out some essential elements of drama and underlines the importance of the artistic underpinnings since drama is in fact an art form. The dramatic context is crucial and drama always includes content, theme, substance, subject matter and curriculum. The art of drama is used in order to illuminate some truth about the world, not just for retrieving facts or practicing skills. The existence of drama as an art form depends on the participants’ engagement in both the real and fictional contexts at the same time. This double perspective, seeing the situation from two worlds at the same time, is called “metaxis” and adds an essential reflective dimension. The definition of drama made by the international DICE-project (“Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education”) emphasizes the importance of metaxis. To hold both the real world and the world of dramatic fiction in mind simultaneously is the source of dramatic tension, and the meaning and value of drama lie in the dialogue between these two worlds (DICE Consortium, 2010).

## Aim

The aim of this study was to review empirical and theoretical articles on the use and application of drama in nursing education.

## Method

An integrative review of the literature guided by the framework by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) was conducted. The integrative review method is considered as being the broadest type of research review since it allows inclusion of different methodologies both experimental and non-experimental studies, as well as utilizing data from both theoretical and empirical literature (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005). Several studies investigating learning in nursing education have been conducted using integrative review of the literature guided by the framework of Whittemore and Knafl (Earle et al., 2011; Oh et al., 2012; Farra and Miller, 2013; Pitt et al., 2012).

## Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted over the period from 1 September 2013 to 31 March 2014 in CINAHL, PubMed, ProQuest and Academic search elite. The following search terms were used: drama, applied drama, drama education\*, nurse\*, education\*, student\*, “forum theater”, “forum play”, theater\*, applied theater, theater education\* in various combinations.

## Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In integrative reviews of literature, it is important that the sampling decisions are clear and made explicit. The inclusive and exclusive criteria must therefore be justified and clear (Whittemore and Knafl, 2005). In this study peer reviewed articles from 2003 to 2013 that were written in English, and had a focus on drama in nursing education were included. Inclusive criteria also required that the articles must include the terms drama/theater in the description of the teaching methods in the studies, and contain detailed descriptions of both the intended purpose and the actual use of drama. Articles that had a focus on simulation instead of drama were not included even if they contained methods related to drama. The terms narrative pedagogy, simulated patients, standardized patients and role play are examples of concepts that are clearly related to drama, but also appear in articles focused on simulation where drama and/or theater is not mentioned. Articles with focus on drama for others than nursing students were excluded, as well as articles that just offered opinions or commentary on the subject. Articles concerning reader’s theater were excluded since this technique involves the reading of an existing text, rather than the creation and dramatization of an aspect of human experience.

## Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

- Where and when is drama used in nursing education?
- For what purposes is drama used in nursing education?
- How is drama used in nursing education?

## Results

The literature search resulted in 352 hits. By screening through titles and abstracts, sorting out duplicates and including some hand searched articles, 64 articles were read in whole in order to find out if they matched the inclusive criteria. As a result 20 articles were selected for the review. Of the 20 articles nine were from USA, five from UK, two from Sweden and one each from Australia, Ireland and Canada. Additionally one study was conducted as a joint project between universities in USA and Sweden. The next step was to evaluate the quality of the primary sources. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) points out that this is a complex procedure, due to the diverse representation of primary sources. How quality is evaluated will vary depending on the sampling frame. The primary sources in this review were evaluated by a method suggested by Whittemore and Knafl (2005): the primary sources were coded according to two criteria relevant for the study, methodological or theoretical rigor and data relevance, on a 2-point scale (high or low). The results should then be used as criteria for inclusion/exclusion or as a variable in the data analysis stage. Many of the articles had method sections that were not described in detail, but all of the included articles showed a high informational value. Due to this result, none of the articles meeting inclusion criteria had to be excluded.

According to Whittemore and Knafl (2005) the analysis process should start with a data reduction were a logical system that can manage all the data from the primary sources into more manageable subgroups is developed. In this study the data reduction started by

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