



Using standardized patients in enhancing undergraduate students' learning experience in mental health nursing

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ABSTRACT

Background: Conducting mental status examination and suicide risk assessment is an important skill required of nurses when they are in the clinical setting. With nursing students often expressing the anxiety and lack of confidence in doing so, the use of standardized patients provide an excellent opportunity to practice and become proficient with this skill in a simulated environment.

Objectives: To explore the learning experience of undergraduate nursing students using standardized patients while practising their mental status examination and suicide risk assessment skills in mental health nursing module.

Design: A pre- and post-test, single group quasi experimental design was used in this study. A standard didactic tutorial session and a standardized patient session was conducted to evaluate the learning experience of undergraduate nursing students learning mental status examination and suicide risk assessment. Outcome measures for this study include Student Satisfaction and Self-Confidence in learning scale.

Qualitative comments in the form of open-ended questions were also collected in this study.

Settings: A University offering nursing program from undergraduate to postgraduate level.

Participants: A convenience sample of Year 2 undergraduate nursing students undertaking the mental health nursing module was included in this study.

Results: The use of standardized patient session had significantly increased students' satisfaction and confidence level before they are posted to a mental health setting for their clinical attachment. There was a significant difference on students' self-confidence level for those who have taken care of a patient with mental illness after adjusting for pre-test on score in learning. Qualitative feedback obtained from students showed a positive outlook towards the use of standardized patient as an effective tool in augmenting didactic learning into practical skills.

Conclusions: Using standardized patient in mental health nursing education enhanced the integration of didactic content into clinical setting allowing students to practice their assessment skills learned in classroom and transfer it to the clinical area. The benefits of using standardized patient include allowing students to practice their communication skills and improving their confidence level in conducting mental status examination and suicide risk assessment by reducing anxiety as compared with traditional classroom and textbook-based pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The use of high fidelity simulators (HFS) in either the form of adult or pediatric mannequins is becoming a common pedagogy among nursing faculties when teaching clinical skills to nursing students. With the ability to respond physiologically to medical or nursing interventions,

such as administration of intravenous fluid, application of oxygen therapy and emergency resuscitation, this has brought about realism in teaching clinical skills in a classroom environment. HFS has been around for many years (National League for Nursing, 2006) as it allows students to perform nursing interventions in a safe environment while improving their confidence as well as decreasing anxiety level (Kaddoura, 2010). With simulation, the learning environment replicates all potential circumstances students may encounter in the clinical area, which helps them to develop critical thinking skills (Kaddoura, 2010; Lehr and Kaplan, 2013; National League for Nursing, 2006). Although HFS has been incorporated into most healthcare courses, this trend has yet

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to be widely adopted into mental health nursing modules. With preconceived ideas on associated violence and the unpredictability of mental health patients remaining high among nursing students, (Brown, 2008; Kameg et al., 2009, 2010) this will impede the learning process as teaching cannot take place until students feel safe and relatively comfortable in the situation (Iezzoni et al., 2006). With this in mind, mental health faculty needs to explore the possibility of incorporating HFS into their teaching pedagogy. However, many mental health faculties still find it challenging to adopt HFS fully as the mannequins used need to be able to reflect reality required in the mental health environment such as providing non-verbal cues, body language, facial expressions and physical movement (Doolen et al., 2014). Therefore a different form of HFS, such as the use of standardized patients (SP) encounters may be required when teaching mental health nursing.

SP are individuals trained to simulate patients with health conditions in an accurate and consistent manner with the help of a case scenario (Gliva-McConvey, 2009; Wallace, 2007). This methodology was first described in the work of Barrows and Abrahamson (1964) where a standardized patient was used to simulate a neurological condition in order to appraise the clinical competences of medical students. Such SP encounters are considered high-fidelity simulation experiences as SP are able to provide credible interactions for students (Bosek et al., 2007; Bradley, 2003; Hetzel-Campbell and Daley, 2013; Lehr and Kaplan, 2013; Robinsons, 2009) allowing them to fulfill their learning objectives (Brown, 2008; Robinson-Smith et al., 2009). Since the 1960s, SP methodology has been used in many countries worldwide, particularly in the United States since its value is apparent (Barrows, 1993). In Asia, this methodology remains fairly new. In a study conducted in Taiwan, SPs were used to train students in the Advanced Practice Nurse program in interpersonal and communication skills where it showed positive outcomes (Lin et al., 2013). Similarly, a study in Singapore, showed that the use of SP helped final-year undergraduate nursing students improve their inter-professional skills, collaboration, management, and confidence (Liaw et al., 2014).

Learning to listen to the patient is a critical communication technique within mental health nursing. However, most didactic lessons do not provide the avenue for students to practice this skill (Fay-Hillier et al., 2012) therefore the use of SP will provide a safe setting for students to practice professional communication, collaboration, and peer evaluation as well as a practice setting for patient feedback (Fay-Hillier et al., 2012). Since communication is the foundational skill required in mental health nursing, it would be essential that simulations within the mental health course focus on more effective and structured communication skills (Kameg et al., 2009). With the use of SP encounters, this further complements the didactic mental health nursing content as it allows nursing students to interact with SP with realism in a less threatening environment (Flanagan et al., 2004). Nursing students can then use therapeutic communication, assessment and planning skills to provide nursing care for their patients (Lehr and Kaplan, 2013; Robinson-Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, nursing students can also gain experience of working with SP who might mimic mental health symptoms that they might not have encountered during their clinical practicum (Brown, 2008; Kameg et al., 2009).

This study uses John Dewey's experiential learning philosophy as the theoretical framework where Dewey states that learning cannot come through memorization and knowledge is gained from experience (Dewey, 1902). The SP encounters provide nursing students with active participation in communication skills within a safe learning environment. This study is based on the theory of experiential learning suggested by Kolb (1984) as it concludes learning being a process, not an outcome and the development of new knowledge is a result of transforming real-life experience. There are two processes in the transformation of experience: (1) grasping the experience (apprehension) and (2) transforming the experience (comprehension). According to many studies (Jeffries & Rogers, 2007; Lisko & O'Dell, 2010; Rowles & Russo, 2009), learners should be given a debrief immediately following

the SP encounter as it provides them the opportunity to self-reflect on their performance and transform the learning experience into new nursing knowledge.

2. Teaching and Learning Activities

The main objective of the Mental Health Nursing module is to prepare undergraduate nursing students with theoretical knowledge and skills in taking care of patients with mental illnesses in institutional and community settings. The main emphases of the module are: assessment, early intervention, health promotion and prevention and the identification of at risk behaviours among patients. Based on the objectives, the module consists of two pedagogical approaches; one being didactical lecture and the other being tutorial discussion. In this study, mental status examination and suicide risk assessment (MSE/SRA) were selected by the research team as both skills require the nurse to develop communication and clinical judgment which is difficult to acquire through didactical teaching. A case scenario was developed, and SP were used in providing the simulated practice during the session. The SP were trained by the module coordinator and educator from the University simulation centre. The simulations were conducted in the tutorial room which simulated the interview room of the hospital. The undergraduate students were informed and asked to volunteer a week before the session. All students were blinded to the case scenario. The case scenario and important points to note during MSE/SRA were discussed with the students during the debriefing session. All students participated in the session were consecutively conducted in August 2015.

2.1. Aim of Study

This study aimed to explore undergraduate nursing students' learning experiences with the use of SP for mental health nursing. Research questions for the study were:

1. Is there a significant change in nursing students' satisfaction level following participation in the SP session?
2. Is there a significant change in nursing students' confidence level following participation in the SP session?

3. Methods

3.1. Design and Setting

In this study, the team seeks to explore the learning experience of students using standardized patients for their MSE/SRA skills in mental health nursing module among the undergraduate nursing students. A pre and post-test, single group quasi experimental design was used with a standard didactic tutorial session on the topic on MSE/SRA conducted for all students enrolled in the module. The SP experimental session was conducted as an extra session in order to evaluate its effectiveness in teaching MSE/SRA. SP in this study were provided by the Standardized Patient Program from the Centre for Health Simulation in a University in Singapore. A case vignette was provided to all SP in order to ensure a standardized response during the interaction with the students in the intervention phase of this study.

3.2. Participant Recruitment and Procedure

A convenience sample on all students enrolled in the module was invited to participate in the study. Upon ethical approval, the Head of Department was informed regarding the commencement of the study. Students were informed of the purpose of this study during their first lecture when the semester starts. After the standard tutorial being conducted for all the students, a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form were given to all interested participants who fulfill the inclusion

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