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EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

“A Day in the Life:” A simulated experience

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Abstract

An experiential learning activity titled, “A Day in the Life” was implemented with nineteen baccalaureate nursing students in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by persons living with Schizophrenia and a physical disability, such as a fracture in an upper extremity or a visual impairment. The role play simulation required that students interact with public transportation and community resources, while assuming the role of a person with Schizophrenia and a physical disability. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, reflective journals, aesthetic expressions, and post conference discussions about “A Day in the Life” were reviewed and analyzed by the authors. Two major themes were identified from the journal data: Changed Person, and Eye-Opening. Exemplars illustrating each theme are provided in the manuscript. Based on the results of this study, the authors believe that the role play simulation, “A Day in the Life” was effective in helping students to achieve a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by persons living with Schizophrenia and a physical disability. Further use of this experiential learning activity, with multi-method evaluation, along with short and long term follow-up is recommended.

Key words

Psychiatric/mental health, Simulation, Nursing students, Experiential learning, Qualitative

1 Introduction

Role play has a long history within the discipline of medicine and mental health nursing, and is included within the over-arching concept of simulation ^[1, 2]. This simulated psychiatric mental health clinical experience offered second semester baccalaureate students at a southern university an opportunity to “walk a mile” in the shoes of a person living with Schizophrenia and a physical disability. Faculty challenged students to look beyond the textbook, classroom, and similarly controlled environments, in order to enrich their learning experience ^[3, 4].

Many pressures impinge upon the delivery of baccalaureate psychiatric mental health nursing education. For example, faculty may strive to identify and secure a variety of clinical experiences in order to convey nursing roles and responsibilities across the psychiatric mental health continuum of care. Additionally, there is never a guarantee about what students will experience on a given clinical day, and within a specific clinical setting ^[5]. Also, psychiatric mental health clinical faculty wishes that students appreciated the biopsychosocial and spiritual facets of individuals living with psychiatric disorders ^[6]. It is highly desirable that students understand the interaction between the demands of self-care while living with a psychiatric illness, the challenges of co-morbidities in day to day life, the practical impacts of traveling

via public transportation, while perhaps providing care to dependent children, and/or the creativity and choices involved in managing one's needs on a seriously limited income. The authors determined that a simulated role play activity, designed to cause students to "come up against" some of these issues ^[3], would provide an excellent experiential learning opportunity ^[7], and convey a faculty commitment to holistic nursing practice.

Holistic education approaches education from a deeper and all-encompassing view of individuals because the mind, body and the spirit are woven into the teaching framework ^[8]. Holistic education beckons interconnections, contemplation, intuition, and calls to a way of knowing ^[9]. This paradigm shift in education, from valuing rote memory to valuing caring, human relatedness, unity, and relationships is paramount in holistic nursing education. In addition, education from the holistic perspective includes the following characteristics: nurturance of the person, open and democratic relationships, contextualized teaching of skills, cross-cultural awareness, appreciation, and sensitivity, and profound and deep reverence for life ^[8, 10].

Holistic education, in the realm of nursing curricula, is truly in its infancy. Nursing leadership and nurse academicians are just beginning to ask the following questions: "Doesn't how something is taught matter as much as what is being taught?" "Ought integrative, holistic health be learned holistically?" ^[11] (p. 43). According to Baldacchino ^[12] nurses are expected to provide care that is in accord with their patient's biological, psychological, social and spiritual needs. Further, van Leeuwen et al. ^[13] espouses that nurses are to care for the whole person which entails caring for a patient's spiritual needs. The authors believe that this simulation, "A Day in the Life," allowed faculty to create a holistic learning environment and may contribute to students' better understanding and care of the whole person.

Role play is an important educational strategy within the helping professions, particularly in advancing student experience of patient-related empathy, and in allowing students to experience and explore feelings and attitudes surrounding healthcare situations. In particular role play promotes student capacity to take on patient roles and to develop "empathy, compassion, respect, and positive regard" ^[2] (p. 87). Role play is used across many professions, for instance, Rao ^[14] reported on the use of role play for first year pharmacy students. Similar to findings in medical and nursing students, Rao found that student practice in the role of the patient offered learning beyond that acquired when students practiced in the role of pharmacist or observer. Specifically, pharmacy students stated that enacting the role of the patient helped them to acquire skills in exhibiting empathy when they returned to the pharmacist role.

Curtis ^[15] reported on baccalaureate nursing student perceptions of a combined role play and problem based learning (PBL) workshop designed to address student anxiety about practice in mental health clinical settings. Students participated in role play of patient interviews, and in working through clinical scenarios. Student evaluations of the usefulness of role plays and PBL activities in meeting the workshop goals were positive at immediate, and post- graduation and employment follow-up.

In a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test study comparing a virtual baby role play to traditional lecture ^[16], students in an undergraduate developmental psychology course learned about Erik Erikson's Stages of Development theory, and other content. Results of the comparison between pre- and post-test scores showed significantly greater improvement in course concepts for the virtual baby role group, as compared to the traditional lecture group. Students' perception of their learning was high in the virtual baby role play, and students recommended the activity for use in subsequent semesters.

Loui ^[17] reported on the use of role play during an undergraduate honors course on the topic of technology and society. Data on student perceptions of the role play was collected via electronic journaling, and final reflections. Students were given three healthcare scenarios concerning stem cell research, nanotechnology, and privacy, along with various roles to choose and enact during the scenarios. The roles included biotechnology researcher, pastor, university vice president of research, social worker, and employee of a biotech company. Loui's findings included student comments about increased sensitivity to the perspective, feelings, and values of others. Students also noted increased ability to listen to others,

especially people with whom they disagreed. Students also reported linking of the course content to stakeholders represented by the characters in the scenarios.

In another videotaped, randomized controlled study involving third year medical students, on the topic of motivational interviewing for smoking cessation, Mounsey, Bovbjerg, White, and Gazewood^[18] found that role play with a student peer was as effective as role play with a standardized patient in teaching beginning motivational interviewing skills. Student outcomes were assessed using the Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity (MITI), an observational tool that includes six rating criteria: empathy, MI spirit, MI adherence, MI non-adherence, types of questions, and number of reflections.

Finally, DeNeve and Heppner^[19] examined the effects of role play simulations, added to a traditional lecture format, as a strategy to enhance active learning in an undergraduate industrial psychology course. In this investigation, students were assigned to roles at the beginning of the semester, and during simulation class periods students worked on faculty identified issues “in role.” The role play teaching technique was evaluated immediately, and eight months after the completion of the course using structured follow-up telephone interviews. Findings included positive student responses to the role play, both immediately and at the long term follow-up. Further, students tended to recall significantly more information from the role-play condition as compared to the lecture condition, although students did report valuing the lecture format.

Taken together these findings suggest that role play contributes to the total development of the student, with learning outcomes in intrapersonal cognitive and emotional, and interpersonal domains. These outcomes are particularly desirable in the helping professions, and in realizing a patient-centered, holistic approach to healthcare.

There is a trend in nursing education to provide more opportunities for experiential learning as opposed to the conventional instruction. The focus of this trend is to emphasize outcome-based education, and to incorporate more evidence-based strategies into today’s educational curriculum^[20]. The role play simulation titled, “A Day in the Life,” is an example of a student-centered active learning, in which critical thinking and decision making is required in the navigation of the community experiences.

The purpose of this study was to create a holistic learning environment for students to better grasp caring for the whole person. An additional purpose was to illicit the students’ perception and experience of a new Psychiatric Mental Health clinical experience, “A Day in the Life.” The research question for the study was, “How does taking on the role of a person with Schizophrenia and a physical disability such as an upper extremity fracture or a visual impairment, while negotiating public transportation and services, promote student understanding of self and other?”

2 Methods

2.1 Student Characteristics and Setting

Nineteen students (n=19; 10 in the first 8 week clinical group and 9 in the second clinical group) participated in “A Day in the Life.” Table 1 present the demographic characteristics of the student participants. The setting was in a small southeastern university.

Table 1. Demographic Data

Sample (n=19)	15 females; 4 males
Ethnicity	1 African American, 1 Asian, 1 Indian, and 16 Caucasian Americans

Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the university prior to conducting the study. Written permission was obtained from each student participant. Contacts from the list of community agencies that were potential sites for student visits were informed about the date and time frame for the role play activities. Agencies were informed that students would drop-in, and might request application materials and/or literature about the agency services. Students were instructed not to actually role play the application process.

2.2 Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, using student journals and personal art forms to assist faculty researchers in understanding the students' perceptions of "A Day in the Life." Qualitative research seeks to understand a social or cultural phenomenon which takes place in the natural setting^[21]. Additionally, qualitative research strives to deepen the body of knowledge about a particular topic by illuminating the individual's experience^[22].

2.3 Procedure

In this one day clinical assignment, students assumed the role of an individual who was diagnosed with a mental and physical disability. All students "walked in the shoes" of a person diagnosed with Schizophrenia. Students also selected one or more of the following medical conditions: Multiple Sclerosis (MS), diabetes, hypertension and or vertigo. In addition, all students were assigned to select a functional limitation that might accompany their medical condition, such as a broken arm, significant visual impairment, and mobility impairment requiring of a wheelchair, crutches, or a cane. In lieu of a functional limitation students had the option to select the additional role of being the parent of an infant. Students were asked to take the local public transportation to various community services. However, their first stop was to the bank to cash the Social Security checks. The first community resource to be accessed was the local Mental Health/Mental Retardation (MHMR) clinic for a follow-up appointment and medication management. The next stop was a local agency called People Attempting to Help (PATH) where "in role students" were to ask for hygiene and food items.

While students were advised to bring their cell phone, in the event of an emergency, students were instructed not to use electronic devices for any other purposes. Also, regarding the issue of safety, students were asked to do this simulation in a group with a minimum of two students. At the end of the clinical day, students were instructed to write a reflection and create an aesthetic expression about the simulated role play. Guidelines concerning the length, structure, and content of the journal and aesthetic expression were limited; students were encouraged to respond to their subjective affective experience concerning "A Day in the Life," as well as their creativity.

2.4 Analysis

The primary goal of data analysis is to depict and ultimately portray individuals who have described their unique experience to the researcher. Thematic analysis was used to interpret meaning from the content of the student journals while adhering to the naturalistic paradigm of qualitative research^[23, 24]. There are three stages in thematic synthesis: the line-by-line coding of the text; the development of descriptive themes; and the generation of analytical themes. Codes serve as organizing devices that allow rapid retrieval and clustering of all the segments related to a particular question, concept, or theme^[25]. The process of coding involves segmenting the data into units and rearranging that data into categories which facilitate insight and comparison^[26]. Student journals were read multiple times and codes and thematic categories were identified in an attempt to understand the student participants' individual contexts and experiences. The researchers began the synthesis by identifying codes, relationships, patterns, themes, and categories related to the phenomena of study^[26], in this instance, students' perception of "A Day in the Life."

All research operates from an understanding that methods will possess certain standards that include validity, reliability, rigor, or trustworthiness^[27]. The aspect of validity in qualitative methodology is derived from a thorough, intensive, disciplined, and systematic approach of the data. Credibility, the truth-value is obtained from the discovery of human experiences as perceived by the student participants and is thus subjective in nature and is not defined a priori^[21].

Credibility was enhanced by the recognition of multiple realities and reporting of the student perspectives of the clinical activity using terms which were included in their journal entries. As qualitative findings are always local in nature and therefore not generalizable in a statistical sense, the criteria of applicability were used. Applicability is met when the findings are viewed by others as meaningful and applicable to their own experiences. Applicability was addressed by looking for patterns of repeated expressions. Confirmability refers to accuracy of research procedure and results^[28, 29]. This was done through the identification of categories and a systematic method in which the researchers revisited the data to ensure the data fit the coding. Additionally, records were kept for an audit trail. Dependability and confirmability was achieved by keeping ordered and dated raw data. Trustworthiness of data was achieved in several ways. Faculty reflections were described and interpreted within the research context using analytic notes to increase the awareness of any biases or preconceived assumptions. For example, faculty were aware that students had never taken the local public transportation; therefore, faculty made note and assumed that this experience may be difficult as they were accustomed to using their personal mode of transportation. Additionally, students were allowed to use cell phones only on an emergency; not using technological devices, i.e., cell phones, iPads, etc. was thought to be a challenge for this technological savvy generation. Identification of assumptions and biases helps the researcher to elucidate preconceptions in an attempt to better understand the students' story^[30].

3 Results

Students reflected on, wrote about, and aesthetically expressed thoughts and feelings within a journal and an art form (see Appendix B for examples of students' artwork and personal reflections). During a post conference, students presented their personal art forms, which were creative expressions, related to their day as a person with both a mental and physical disability. For example, one student bought a much worn suitcase from the local Goodwill store. The suitcase was filled and decorated to illustrate a point about "A Day in the Life;" that being "we all carry baggage." This student's thoughts and art form suggested that her perspective was now different than before this experience. Another spoke through the perspective of what it was like as a blind man's walking stick, and another student held a mirror up with the words "look closer" written on it.

Each faculty read the students' reflective journals several times to identify commonalities and themes. Two overriding themes were revealed during the analysis: Changed Person and Eye-Opening. Student journal entries suggested that the changed person theme encompassed both the personal and professional aspects of their being. They also reported that the role play simulation prepared them to see the whole, contextually-situated person, not just a diagnosis.

3.1 Changed Person

This experience evoked an array of emotions in the students, from feelings of indifference and preconceptions at the beginning of this experience, to an overwhelming sense or emotion of caring. Student indifference was related to a belief that "A Day in the Life" was just another assignment. Preconceptions existed concerning "smelly bus, creepy people." In reflecting on their experience using public transportation, students made frequent references to time, stating that the bus was late. They also found themselves losing their patience and thinking that they could just get into their car and everything would be much better. One of the most emotional aspects for students' was their feeling of loss of autonomy. Students voiced a realization of their blessings, and reflected on the bounties of access to personal transportation and communication technology. Students also experienced a correction of their preconceptions and misconceptions concerning "bus people." As one student passionately stated, "I had grown a bigger heart for ones who have disabilities and no transportation."

Additional exemplars for the changed person theme include:

"I will think twice before complaining."

“I am so used to getting into my car and putting the key in the ignition and driving off to where I need to. Being able to step into someone’s life to experience this, I felt as if the whole world changed just because they saw a different purpose with Schizophrenia, diabetes, and walking with a cane. No one cared to help because they felt uncomfortable around me. I know now, as a nurse, how to deal with patients that will most likely come in with various disabilities and mental health problems, to be open and nonjudgmental and understand their viewpoint and how they feel. I know just because someone looks alright on the outside, that doesn’t mean that they are alright on the inside. You can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Sitting on the bus not too far from me was a young Hispanic woman who had love in her eyes, tightly holding her toddler’s hand without a wedding band. The little boy was precious with his little boy ‘Elmo’ sweater. By then, I caught myself frustrated and broken hearted, not with this woman’s situation, but with my own. Several thoughts went through my head: Why am I so superficial, judgmental of others, why am I not more compassionate, why am I so uncomfortable around people who are different of me? After a few moments of inner turmoil, I glanced over at the woman and her son, I looked closer, we were probably around the same age, I thought about how we were from different races, socioeconomics, education backgrounds, and circumstances. Then I compared us. We both had basic needs, someone to love, someone who loved us, and a purpose. I concluded that we had more similarities than differences.”

These exemplars suggest that the role play simulation prompted intrapersonal operations such as reflection, perspective-taking, seeking commonality, and empathy. Student comments also reflected intrapersonal processing of emotions related to student reactions to other individuals, as well as other individuals’ reactions to the student in role.

3.2 Eye-Opening

All students stated that this was an ‘eye-opening’ experience. Accustomed to driving their car, using cell phones and other technological devices, this experience challenged their traditional ways of being in the world. Students recognized the value and necessity of community interdependence and assistance. A female student was initially apprehensive about riding the bus, only to learn that some people who used public transportation were open and caring. Other examples of eyes being opened are revealed by the following statements, “Here I am stressing, worrying, and feeling bad about an exam or losing my phone, when there are people worrying about enough money for medicine...” Another student wrote, “My eyes were opened so much more than I imaged. How easy it is for me every day? It is so easy for me to walk outside...but does someone with so many challenges see those things the same way I do?” Yet another student stated, “A Day in the Life” opened my eyes to a whole new world around me. We go through life focused on our plans and tasks for the day, not observing those around us in need. In our fast paced life we need to take the time to stop look and listen to the people who are surrounding us. We are all uniquely different but seen as a treasure of equal importance.”

These exemplars document the eye-opening effect of the role play simulation. Student comments suggest a cognitive compare and contrast, elicited from the experience of entering the community in the role of a person with Schizophrenia and a physical disability. The process of comparing and contrasting of the students’ usual world to the world experienced via the role play, created the experience of “opening” described by the students as “eye-opening.”

4 Discussion

These findings are limited by the small sample size, by student self-reports of the effects of the experience, combined with lack of long term follow-up, and sampling from a specific geographic and cultural location. The study methods and design would benefit from the addition of a standardized tool for data collection to supplement the narrative from student journals. The long term effects of the role play experience should be examined, by a prospective follow-up of baccalaureate student cohorts, during subsequent semesters and across academic years. Ideally, follow-up of student learning, and particularly indicators of holistic practice, would take place post-graduation, during post-licensure practice.

Reflecting on the holistic perspective, it is noteworthy that before this simulated experience, many of these students had never experienced mental illness or physical disability, and had never taken public transportation. Further, students had not “come up against”^[3] individuals with little to no option for travel, beyond use of public transportation. As noted, some students initially approached the activity as “just another assignment.” Such a response speaks to the issue that students may not take simulated clinical experiences seriously. However, during student immersion in the activity, students became very serious in assuming their role. Faculty had preconceived assumptions that this would be a difficult experience for the students based on the premise that they had never taken the public transit to navigate resources, and, the fact that they were not able to use their cell phones or other technological devices. While they had preconceived ideas of the public transit as well as the people they would encounter, their assumptions were quickly invalidated when they were immersed in the setting. In the process, students experienced empathy, sincerity, and caring, both from within and without. Based on student reflections and aesthetic creations, as well as discussion from the post conference, the authors found the role play simulation, “A Day in the Life” an effective, holistic approach to learning, and that the activity closely mimicked the real life experience of navigating transportation and social service systems while living with a mental and physical disability. This activity approaches the ideal learning experience, as presented by Kolb and Kolb^[7], specifically it “draws out the students’ beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated . . . [the student moves] back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and thinking and feeling” (p. 194).

As compared with the McNaughton et al.^[2] review, as well as individual studies cited in the introduction^[14, 17], “A Day in the Life” contributed to students’ exploration of feelings, perspective-taking, development of empathy, examination of values, and perceived increase in practical, community-based knowledge. Students also viewed the role play simulation as a positive learning activity. The reflections and expressions of meaning and insight about their experience honored the multiple ways of knowing^[9], such as empirics, aesthetics, and the personal. This role-play was transformational for participating students and is evidenced by the study’s results: “changed person and “eye-opening.” Student comments about their transformation as a result of participation in “A Day in the Life” support a conclusion that the faculty goal of developing a learning activity congruent with a holistic educational approach was achieved.

In conclusion, data from the journals suggests that these nineteen students were transformed by this learning experience, gained increased self-awareness, greater insight to another, and a deeper and more meaningful perspective as a result of the day that they spent walking in another’s moccasin^[31]. These students had the rare opportunity to step outside of self to see another’s perspective. As one student eloquently stated, “when I become a nurse I will always remember what I have learned (from ‘A Day in the Life’) when caring for my patients.” The authors hope that further evaluation will occur, and that other faculty will report on short and longer-term outcomes of “A Day in the Life.”

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