



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

searching the articles for the contexts, the purposes and the actual uses of drama in nursing education. The relevant data concerning these three areas were then extracted from each article and integrated on a spreadsheet in order to systematically organize the findings from the diverse primary sources. After that the data display was conducted by converting data concerning the different subgroups from the primary sources into a matrix in order to make patterns and relationships visible, and provide the starting point of the interpretation. This procedure initiated the data comparison which resulted in three main themes with their attendant subthemes (see Table 1).

Theme: The Framing

The first theme “The Framing” covers the context and the underlying frame factors related to when and where drama was used. A majority of the articles focused on nursing education on the ground level but there was an extensive variation between the articles regarding where in the curriculum and at what physical location drama was conducted. The following two subthemes emerged through the analysis: Level and course and Location.

Level and Course

All studies but one were conducted on the ground level in nursing education and the participating students were undergraduate students. The exception was the article by Bates (2013) where midwifery students participated together with undergraduate students. In three different articles drama was used in or prior to the clinical experience in the mental health field (Buxton, 2011; McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013; Welch and Welch, 2008). The other 17 articles presented significant differences in the nature and structure of courses where drama education was used. Examples of courses containing drama were: an online core professional issues course (Levitt and Adelman, 2010), a nurse training program involving the study of ethical and legal issues in a nursing module (McAlinden, 2010), an undergraduate course on teen sexuality (SmithBattle, 2012), a second semester medical–surgical course (Tuxbury et al., 2012) and as part of the course work in the synthesis (clinical capstone) course (Welsh and Lowry, 2011).

Location

Drama activities were held at a range of different locations on the university campuses. Some were held in the ordinary classrooms but the majority were performed in custom locations such as a skills lab (Cangelosi, 2008), a nursing resource center (Reams and Bashford, 2011) and an action methods classroom (SmithBattle, 2012) and a nursing laboratory (Welsh and Lowry, 2011). Other locations included a ballroom (Newcomb, 2007), a small theater (Tuxbury et al., 2012) and a designated mass care evacuation shelter (Austin et al., 2013). There were also examples where drama was conducted in an emergency care setting (Ekebergh et al., 2004; Ekebergh, 2005), in an educational ward setting (Ekebergh et al., 2004; Ekebergh, 2005) or on stage at an external theater (Welch and Welch, 2008).

Table 1
Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
The Framing	Level and course Location
The Objectives	Support students learning Learning specific skills Lifelong learning
The Embodiment	Exploring different roles The relationship between performers and spectators Combining drama with other activities

Theme: The Objectives

The second theme “The Objectives” covers the purposes and desired outcomes for using drama in nursing education. The articles presented different reasons why drama was used and the following three subthemes emerged through the analysis: Support students learning, Learning specific skills and Lifelong learning.

Support Students Learning

In a number of the articles drama was used to develop teaching and learning in order to make theoretical knowledge more accessible in practical situations, so that the students could apply their theoretical knowledge in practice (Austin et al., 2013; Ekebergh et al., 2004; Ekebergh, 2005; Levitt and Adelman, 2010). In many of the articles it was found that the actual classroom experience could be enhanced by the use of drama, and students could become more involved in their own learning since they themselves become the experts as they explored different situations together (Buxton, 2011; McClimens and Scott, 2007; McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013). When students became more involved in their own learning they could discover their own knowledge gaps (Newcomb, 2007; SmithBattle, 2012) and enable a deeper learning (Middlewick et al., 2012).

Learning Specific Skills

As a pedagogical strategy drama was used to help the students to develop skills needed in their future profession. Drama was also used to prepare students for specific situations and to cope with patients with specific needs.

In many of the articles drama was used for enhancing the students' communication skills (Lewis et al., 2013; McAllister et al., 2013; Middlewick et al., 2012; Reams and Bashford, 2011). Drama was also used to enhance student's ethical and relational skills of receptivity, openness, dialogue, understanding and personal reflection (SmithBattle, 2012). One article (Austin et al., 2013) introduced students for the specific situation of a disaster with mass casualty where child actors performed as victims of the disaster. Another article (McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013) focused on the students' ability to communicate with persons with specific needs in the form of learning disabilities. In two articles (Tuxbury et al., 2012; Welsh and Lowry, 2011) drama was used in order to prepare students to meet and communicate with patients and their relatives in end-of-life care. Drama was also used to prepare students to communicate with patients and their relatives in mental health care (Buxton, 2011; McAlinden, 2010).

Lifelong Learning

One purpose for the use of drama was the development of life-long learning skills, to enhance nursing student's personal development and professional attitudes. Many of the articles reported projects designed to assist students to become reflective and develop critical thinking (Austin et al., 2013; Ekebergh, 2005; Ekebergh et al., 2004; McAlinden, 2010; Middlewick et al., 2012; Reams and Bashford, 2011). By providing the opportunity for self-reflection the students could enhance their personal and professional development through an increased self-awareness (Ekebergh et al., 2004; Lepp et al., 2003).

Drama was seen as a possibility for the students to learn lifelong learning techniques that could provide them with an understanding of the professional nursing framework (Bates, 2013). By exploring the complexity of human behavior in role, students were given the opportunity to develop as evolved practitioners (McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013). As the students examined their own feelings about death and dying in the reflections held in conjunction with the drama activity, they could learn self-care strategies that could prevent burnout later in life. By practicing care situations through drama the students could replace their anxiety with confidence and self-assurance (Buxton, 2011).

Theme: The Embodiment

The third theme “The Embodiment” consists of three subthemes which present the different ways drama was implemented in nursing education. The subthemes are: Exploring different roles, The Relationship between Performers and Spectators, and Combining drama with other activities.

Exploring Different Roles

A number of variations of role playing exercises were presented in several of the articles. Some were joint projects together with the universities' drama/theater departments or/and professional role players. Reams and Bashford (2011) described a project where nursing students interviewed theater students acting as patients as a preparation for their first real patient interviews in the following week.

In one article Cangelosi (2008) presented a joint project where theater students acted as patients in unfolded cases. They stayed in the role and interacted with the nursing students for each “lab session” throughout the whole semester. Instead of using external role players McAllister et al. (2013) evaluated a project where the educator performed a dramatic role play hidden behind a realistic mask. In another role play project (Levitt and Adelman, 2010) students in an online core professional course adopted the personas of a nursing theorist and interacted with each other in the role as theorists via the internet. The instructor moderated the discussions and guided the students into a deeper understanding and appreciation of the theory and how it can be applied.

The Relationship Between Performers and Spectators

In most of the analyzed articles drama was performed by a smaller group of persons while a larger group of students watched the performance. Buxton (2011) describes how a student volunteered to portray a nurse, and a faculty person portrayed a person with mental illness in front of the class.

Forum Theater is another example where drama is performed by small groups in front of a larger group of spectators. In one project (Middlewick et al., 2012) academic staff from the nursing department performed Forum Theater with short scripted scenes depicting nursing practices. The end of the scene was always unsatisfactory for the service user. The scene was then re-run and the students interacted with the characters to change the outcome to a positive one. In some articles forum theater activities were conducted as joint projects. In the article by McClimens and Scott (2007) a theater group comprising people with disabilities/impairments performed a Forum Play for the nursing students. Tuxbury et al (2012) describes a project where faculty and students from the theater department performed a short play concerning end-of-life care together with one lecturer and two students from the nursing department.

Bates (2013) describes how nursing and midwifery teachers performed a “Fitness to Practice hearing” using fictional cases. The students participated as an audience with the possibility of using electronic voting handsets to show how they thought the outcome should be. In some of the projects drama was implemented as plays where the nursing students were spectators. One project Welsh and Lowry (2011) involved a play about the emotional aspects of death and dying, written and performed for nursing students by faculty and staff from the College of Nursing. In another project (McAlinden, 2010) nursing students watched a short play about suicide, written and performed by volunteers from the Belfast branch of the Samaritans. In the article by Welch and Welch (2008) the students viewed a play written by nursing staff and produced together with the University Drama department. This play was a commercial production. In addition to the public performances, three matinee performances were held especially for nursing students.

Combining Drama with Other Activities

In some of the analyzed articles drama was one of several pedagogical activities. One example (Austin et al., 2013) was a mass casualty full scale exercise for nursing students performed on an academic campus, where children from a youth theater were trained by a senior nursing student so that they could act out scenarios which would include physical injuries. In another project described in two separate articles (Ekebergh, 2005; Ekebergh et al., 2004) the students explored experiences of caring situations by using drama, reflection and verbal expressions. A variety of drama techniques such as improvisation, role play and forum theater were used.

Drama was used together with other arts based learning strategies in two articles (Lepp et al., 2003; McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013). One study (Lepp et al., 2003) was a joint project with Swedish and U.S. nursing students using interactive video conferencing technology (IVC). The nursing students and faculty incorporated reflective journaling, drama and photolanguage to enhance personal and professional development. Another article (McGarry and Aubeeluc, 2013) describes a joint project facilitated by a theater company, where nursing students participated in a workshop together with individuals with learning disabilities to produce art, dance, and drama sketches.

Newcomb (2007) describes a project where improvised theater was combined with Problem Based Learning (PBL). Students participated in a form of improvised theater concerning a case where a family is having a second child through pre-implantation, in vitro fertilization (IVF) in order to enable stem-cell transplantation to their first child who was born with a genetic disorder. Through the whole exercise the students worked in a PBL-inspired way by seeking more knowledge from the internet, textbooks and articles. SmithBattle (2012) described how drama can be used as part of an examination where nursing students conducted interviews with teenagers. The interviews were then processed into a reflective paper and a dramatic script and the students perform the drama in front of their peers.

Discussion

All the 20 included articles did contain clear descriptions of the use and application of drama, which was what this study aimed to review. Since the integrative review method is considered the most inclusive, the inclusion of qualitative articles with small sample sizes based on student evaluations without a clear description of the data analysis process was possible. This could be perceived as a limitation. However, we believe that the inclusion of these articles enabled the fulfillment of this study's aim.

Three themes with their attendant subthemes emerged through the analysis. The first theme *The Framing* shows that drama can be implemented in various stages and courses on the ground level in nursing education. Notably, no studies of the use of drama conducted solely at an advanced level were found. However, students' involvement in drama at the advanced level together with students from the ground level was mentioned in one article (Bates, 2013). In this study midwifery students (advanced level) participated together with nursing students (ground level). This raises the question of whether drama is not used to the same extent at advanced level in nursing education or is used but not highlighted through research studies.

The locations for conducting the drama activities varied depending on how the drama was designed and who were participating, but in most of the articles custom locations at the campuses were used. This indicates that the location for using drama can be flexible and fitted into universities' existing premises.

The theme *The Objectives* examines a range of purposes for using drama in nursing education. The need to support student learning in nursing education was evident in many of the articles. Drama was one way to assist students to use their theoretical knowledge in various practice situations, develop specific skills and prepare them for the professional role as nurses. To be able to develop specific skills the students

need to experience related situations, but some situations can be inaccessible to students and it may be difficult to find quality clinical placements. Tuxbury et al (2012) found it hard to provide the students with real-life experiences of end-of-life situations. Drama was therefore used as an effective alternative for the students to get an opportunity to practice end-of-life care through a fictional scenario. Drama in nursing education was also considered as being a cost effective teaching method (Lewis et al., 2013).

According to several of the articles drama can contribute to lifelong learning and prepare students for the professional role as nurses since drama enables them to practice nursing in a controlled setting, a safe place. In drama the students could work with two worlds simultaneously, known as metaxis, which enabled them to integrate their feelings thoughts and actions. By providing this double perspective drama made it possible for the students to reflect on and learn from their real experiences of fictional scenarios. Through metaxis new knowledge can be applied without the consequences of a real application (Bolton, 1992). This enables the students to reflect both in and on action, which according to Schön (1995) and Burnard and Hennessy (2006) is important for professional learning. This opportunity for reflection promotes professional skills such as critical thinking and self-awareness. The ability to be sensitive to one's self is important for nurses and leads to self-acceptance and psychological growth. Nurses need to understand the patient's feelings and help them to achieve a similar growth. This factor is crucial in all nursing (Watson, 2007).

The third theme *The Embodiment* shows that drama in nursing education can be carried out in many different ways. For example the students participated in role plays, watched or performed in plays, and participated in forum theater. But the result also reveals that in the majority of the articles the nursing students only got to try the role as nurses or other health care personnel during the drama activities. The role of patients or relatives was in most articles performed by actors, drama students, teachers and others. According to Watson (2007) the caring relationship between nurses and patients is transpersonal. Nurses need to learn the art of entering into the patients' experiences in order to form a helping union. Burton (2013) argues that drama can give students an opportunity to try different roles and to explore experiences from different perspectives. But if the students only get the opportunity to perform as health care personnel, the full potential of drama is not being used and the students miss out on the chance of exploring situations from the patient's and the relatives' perspectives.

Conclusion

Drama is effectively used in various stages and courses in nursing education to enhance students learning. Drama can be flexible and adjusted to various purposes, designs and locations. Future research is needed regarding the use of drama to give nursing students the possibility to get in the role as fictive patients and relatives and thereby explore different perspectives. A lack of research regarding the application of drama in nursing education on an advanced level is another deficiency that became clear through this review.

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