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Evaluating an Online Family Assessment Activity: A Focus on Diversity and Health Promotion

Key Words

RN-BSN Education, Family Assessment, Health Promotion, Diversity

Abstract

This article describes the development, implementation and evaluation of a family assessment activity that was designed for a transition course in an RN-BSN program. The family assessment activity emphasized diversity and health promotion as key curricular concepts highlighted through the use of constructivist teaching strategies in the online classroom. The activity was developed and implemented by utilizing the Family Health Systems (FHS) approach to family assessment and Healthy People 2020 as a framework for family health promotion. The activity was evaluated through faculty observation and student feedback which is discussed in the article.

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The Affordable Care Act, historical health legislation signed into law in 2010, called for the National Prevention Strategy to improve the health of all Americans by emphasizing disease prevention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Based on critical health risks for all Americans, there was an urgent need to address healthcare costs, improve the quality of health care, and provide access to care for the uninsured, which are key components of the legislation. As members of the largest health care profession, nurses are well-positioned to intervene with essential support for health promotion and disease prevention.

Health promotion, disease, and injury prevention across the lifespan are defined as key components of baccalaureate nursing practice (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2008). Nurse educators are expected to integrate opportunities for undergraduate students to develop skills in health promotion and disease prevention that assist individuals, families, groups, communities, and populations to minimize health consequences (AACN, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to describe an innovative approach to teaching family assessment in an online RN-BSN program. Further, the authors describe the development, implementation, and evaluation of the family assessment activity that was designed to provide students with practice experiences that emphasize diversity and health promotion.

Background

Caring for families during an illness experience is a vital aspect of nursing practice (Wright & Bell, 2009). The development of collaborative, nurse-family relationships in the healthcare setting and community is critical to improving health outcomes (Wright & Leahy, 2009). Despite this awareness, researchers continue to cite deficiencies in family nursing care, possibly due to a lack of formal education about family nursing in healthcare curricula (Eggenberger & Regan, 2010). As the need for nurses to partner with families to promote the

health of their family, to support families coping with illness, and to assist families to navigate the complex healthcare system continues to grow, a focus on family nursing in undergraduate programs is essential.

A family assessment activity was developed for transition course in an RN-BSN program. The nursing curriculum is concept-based and delivered in the asynchronous, online classroom. The curriculum also emphasizes community-focused experiences across the lifespan. In recent years, several schools of nursing have adopted concept-based curricula as a framework that is well-supported in the literature. The advantages of this approach to nursing education include a more streamlined approach to managing content, a student-centered approach to teaching, and enhanced critical thinking on behalf of students (Giddens, Brady, Brown, Wright, Smith, & Harris, 2008; Giddens & Morten, 2010). A conceptual-based approach was utilized in the development the family assessment activity which emphasized the concepts of diversity and health promotion.

Diversity

The increasing diversity of this nation's population mandates an attention to diversity in order to provide safe, humanistic, high quality care. From 2000 to 2010, the population growth in the United States was driven almost exclusively by racial and ethnic minorities (Pew Research Center, 2011). Racial and ethnic minorities accounted for 91.7% of the nation's population growth over the past 10 years (Pew Research Center, 2011). In addition to racial and ethnic differences, diversity is reflected in the community by cultural, spiritual, gender, sexual orientation, and generational differences. With projections pointing to even greater levels of diversity in the coming years, it is important that nurses demonstrate sensitivity and understanding of diversity in order to provide high quality care across settings.

The increasing globalization of healthcare requires that professional nurses be prepared to practice in a multicultural environment and possess the skills needed to provide culturally sensitive care. The family provides the most critical resource for integrating and coordinating healthcare for its members (Servonsky & Gibbons, 2005). Nurses are often in the position of assessing individual family members or the family unit, as the client, and the culture of the family is an important component of the assessment. The nursing process involves assessment, diagnosis, planning, intervention, and evaluation with the dynamic context of the family (Servonsky & Gibbons, 2005).

Health Promotion

The United States is experiencing a health crisis. After many years of disease-oriented care, health promotion is now recognized as a powerful health care strategy for the enhancement of quality of life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011). The World Health Organization defined health promotion as the process that enables people to improve control over the determinants of health and as a result, improve their own health (CDC, 2011).

According to the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, at least half of U.S. adults will be obese by 2030 (Cohen, 2013). Additionally, more than 133 million adults are living with a chronic disease such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Dossey, & Keegan, 2013). An approach to healthcare that emphasized health promotion and behavior change strategies would reduce health care spending and improve health in this country (Cohen, 2013). The increasing burden of disease and disability comes at a huge price in terms of medical related costs and impact on quality of life of individuals, families, and communities.

Nationally, there has been an effort to move in the direction of promoting health, across the lifespan, for all Americans. Healthy People 2020, developed by the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services (HHS), provided a comprehensive framework for the health promotion of individuals, families, and communities in the United States. Using a science-based approach, Healthy People 2020 identified four overarching goals for health promotion in community and public health:

- Attain high quality, longer lives free of preventable disease, disability, injury, and premature death.
- Achieve health equity, eliminate disparities, and improve the health of all groups.
- Create social and physical environments that promote good health for all.
- Promote quality of life, healthy development, and healthy behaviors across all life stages. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012)

As a framework for health promotion in the online program, Healthy People 2020 provided valuable practice experiences for students to develop health promotion plans for diverse families. Being able to apply concepts of health promotion obtained from Healthy People 2020 to a diverse family enables the student to not only focus on promotion but also how to design and develop health promotion plans that are culturally sensitive.

Development

The goal of the family assignment was to engage students in an in-depth family assessment in order to identify strengths and challenges relevant to family health promotion. The assessment included a focus on family dynamics and social interactions related to health behaviors and risk for illness and disease. Formal education for family nursing may be lacking in nursing curricula due to the challenges of developing pedagogical approaches to teaching family nursing care (Eggenberger & Regan, 2010). The nursing education literature available to support effective teaching strategies used for family nursing care is limited. Constructivist

teaching strategies were used effectively for teaching family assessment to RN-BSN students in the online classroom.

Teaching Strategies

The faculty approached this assignment with the knowledge that that previous knowledge, life experiences, and practice experiences in nursing would inform their learning with the family assessment activity. Examples of effective uses of constructivism, particularly applied to distance learning in nursing that highlight active, self-directed learning (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004; Hunter & Krantz, 2010). The constructivist theory model operates with four basic assumptions: (a) Prior knowledge is the foundation of the learning process, (b) Assimilation and accommodation are important for the development of new constructs, (c) Learning is a natural activity of invention, and (d) Valuable learning is the result of reflecting on the connections between new knowledge and previous experiences (Brandon & All, 2010; Muirhead, 2006). A constructivist approach places the student at the center of the learning experience, engages them actively in the process of learning, and promotes student responsibility for learning.

Active Learning

Active learning can occur in many forms in the online classroom including problem-based, cooperative, and self-directed learning. Online learning activities should require active participation and interaction with the content, classmates, and the instructor (Billings & Halstead, 2009). To engage students actively in an experience with assessing a family, students were assigned to watch a movie that depicted family interactions and functions.

The use of cinema in nursing education is well supported in the literature as an effective strategy for integrating technology into education and for addressing concepts of student-

centered learning and experiential, reflective, and problem-based learning (Oh, Kang, & De Gagne, 2012). Parker and Faulk (2004) described the use of feature films as an effective learning activity that allowed educators to apply a constructivist approach and students the ability to learn reflectively.

To ensure that students would be exposed to diverse families, movies were selected by faculty that demonstrated many aspects of cultural diversity. In addition to racial and ethnic backgrounds, it was important that students consider levels of education, socioeconomic status, belief systems and health practices in order to appreciate and understand the impact of cultural diversity on the family (Harkness & DeMarco, 2012). The movies utilized for the family assessment assignment are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Movie Titles with Concepts*

| Movie Title | Main Concepts |
|--|--|
| Little Miss Sunshine (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006) | Suicide, Death & Dying, Substance Abuse, Role Strain, Sexual Orientation, Childhood Development |
| Ordinary People (Paramount Pictures, 1980) | Suicide, Survivor's Guilt, PTSD, Grief Process, Depression |
| Precious (Lionsgate, 2009) | Socioeconomics/Poverty, Single Parenting, Physical, Sexual, and Verbal Abuse, Obesity, Education, Teen Pregnancy, HIV |
| Skin (The Little Film Company, 2008) | Discrimination/Racism, Self-Identity, Developmental Concerns, Family Conflict, Poverty, Single Parenting, Rural Health, Domestic Abuse |
| Stepmom (Sony Pictures, 1998) | Death & Dying, Family Roles, Parenting, Divorce, Terminal Illness |
| The Kids are All Right (Gilbert Films, 2010) | Sexual Orientation, Alcoholism, Same-Sex Marriage, Family Conflict, Coping, Infidelity |
| The Other Sister (Touchstone Pictures, 1999) | Alcoholism, Spirituality, Sexual Orientation, Developmental and Mental Challenges |

| | |
|---|--|
| What's Eating Gilbert Grape (Paramount Pictures, 1983) | Mental Retardation, Suicide, Single Parenting, Socioeconomic/Poverty, Family Coping Patterns, Obesity |
|---|--|

Nurses often practice family nursing and work with families based on their own conceptualization of the family (Servonsky & Gibbons, 2005). By including movies that demonstrated various definitions of family and diverse family experiences, students benefitted from expansive and diverse perspectives of what constitutes a family. An integration of the arts into the course also aligns with the commitment to the liberal arts and provided students with a well-rounded educational experience.

Implementation

Prior to the family assessment, students participated in a two-week learning module that consisted of assigned reading and web-based learning activities that focused on increasing their knowledge of working with families and conducting an in-depth family assessment. Throughout the module, students were expected to demonstrate understanding of the concepts of family, family systems, structure, and function. Healthy People 2020 was utilized as a framework for the development of a health promotion plan designed to reduce the family's risks for disease.

The learning module included two online group activities. Students shared personal ecomaps and genograms that they had created to help identify the connections and relationships in their own families (Harkness & DeMarco, 2009). By reflecting on their own family structure, students were able to gain understanding for how these diagrams could be useful for family-centered nursing care and health promotion teaching. Secondly, students addressed ethical issues in a collaborative discussion related to the nursing care of families. The discussion questions centered on how families are defined, how the nurse's perception of what constitutes a family might influence the assessment of the family, and if there are ethical issues that should be considered when working with families.

Students began their family assessment by choosing a movie family from a list provided by faculty. Students were assigned to watch the movie and perform an assessment of the family utilizing a Family Health System (FHS) approach (Anderson, 2000). The assessment included a holistic analysis of the interactive, developmental, coping, integrity, and health processes that emerged as relevant during their assessment which was completed while watching the movie. As a result of their analysis, students prioritized a health concern using a Healthy People 2020 objective and developed a health promotion plan to implement during a care interaction with the family. The written assignment included a discussion of their assessment and analysis of the family and the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of the health promotion plan. To address the needs of the family in a meaningful way, there was an emphasis on planning for the relevant community resources that the family would need in order to carry out health promotion activities.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the family assessment activity included faculty observations of learning and student feedback. At the beginning of the term, faculty members met to discuss the goals of the learning activity and to create a plan for evaluation. A survey was developed to collect feedback from students. Based on student interactions during the learning activities, faculty observations, and the narrative comments obtained from students, some key areas were identified as particularly valuable in meeting the goals of the assignment.

Faculty Observations

By using a cinematic approach to family assessment, students were able to visualize family interactions and the longitudinal progression of the family unit over a period of time. They were not limited to assessment that occurred at one specific point in time in regard to their

interactions, function, and well-being as a family. This gave students an opportunity to see an unfolding of family situations and allowed for the students to develop their assessment skills and their ability to gather assessment data while watching the movie.

In addition, a cinematic approach provided students with valuable exposure to diverse families. The assessment pushed some students outside of their identified comfort zones to explore family issues, dynamics, and structure. Students demonstrated an understanding that diversity in families extends beyond their ethnicity or cultural background to include factors such as sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, generational differences, developmental and physical disabilities, and more.

One student reflected on the benefits of being exposed to diverse family dynamics and structures, which may not have been possible if the family was chosen based on convenience in their own community. It was important to select movies that provided diverse families and situations and allowed for student-centered learning opportunities

Student Feedback

During one semester, faculty implemented a simple survey in order to obtain student feedback on their experience with the family assessment assignment. A total of 41 of 45 (91% response rate) students, who completed the assignment, participated in the survey and provided narrative feedback. Specifically, the students were asked to evaluate their learning related to diversity and health promotion. A four-point Likert scale was used for two questions and an open-ended approach to two additional questions allowed students to provide narrative comments. A summary of student responses to the Likert scale questions is included in Table 2.

Table 2. *Evaluation Feedback Obtained from RN-BSN Students*

| Statement | SA | A | D | SD |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| Assessing a movie family increased my awareness of diversity and families. | 26.8% (11) | 56.1% (23) | 9.8% (4) | 7.3% (3) |
| Assessing a movie family increased my awareness about health promotion and families. | 39 (16) | 51.2 (21) | 4.9 (2) | 4.9% (2) |

Abbreviations: SA, strongly agree; A, agree; D, disagree; SD, strongly disagree
 Values are expressed as percentage (number) of students selecting the option.

The faculty members reviewed the narrative comments provided by students in order to evaluate if the goals of the assignment were met. In response to being asked if assessing a movie family had increased their awareness of diversity and families, students indicated they had 1) developed cultural knowledge, 2) expanded their personal perspectives on families, 3) increased their skills using the FHS framework for family assessment, and 4) related to similarities and differences between their movie family and their own families. Students also identified feeling safe in the online learning environment while learning about diversity in families.

In response to being asked if the activity had increased their awareness of health promotion and families, students indicated the assessment: 1) increased their knowledge of Healthy People 2020 as a framework for health promotion, 2) enhanced their perspective of the resources a family needs for health promotion (i.e. hospice, counseling, community resources), 3) provided a broader scope of nursing practice in the community, and 4) assisted them to make connections between family circumstances and their ability to promote their health. Overall, students reported an increased awareness of the health promotion opportunities that exist for nurses when working with families. A summary of student responses to the narrative questions is included in Table 3.

Table 3. *Narrative Feedback Provided by RN-BSN Students on Open-Ended Questions*

| |
|---|
| <p>Please describe ways that this activity increased your awareness of diversity and families.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I only see my family and the families around me. This assignment gave me a different perspective to look at families and how each one is completely different. • Not everyone has direct access to families in which there are drastically different ways of living. Assessing a movie family allows you to look at families that many people wouldn't normally have access to and to really analyze the dynamics of the family in the movie. • Anytime we have the opportunity to assess families offering a different perspective on how one family lives give us as nurses the opportunity to learn. • I realized that families are often different than what they appear on the surface. • It prompted me to take a deep, reflective personal and professional look at the dynamics of: patriarch family structure, family hierarchy, racism, sexism, and traditional vs modern family roles and structure. |
| <p>Please describe ways that this activity increased your knowledge of opportunities for health promotion.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have learned that you do not have to look very far to find opportunities for health promotion in families, as well as communities. • Assessing the family gave me practice in seeing a much bigger picture with many subtle nuances. We all know that things are not always what they seem - this exercise gave me a full color picture of the many connections between the family members' interactions and their health status. • Assessing a movie family allowed me to realize that not all health concerns are obvious unless you can get behind closed doors and get to know the family. • My movie was a good illustration of what middle class, working families might be going through: a car that barely works, lack of medical insurance, blended family issues, poor nutrition. There are many opportunities for health promotion, including addiction medicine, tobacco cessation, social work, mental health and family counseling. • Assessing a movie family's health is a good way to look at what areas need attention and how to best help a person. This opportunity forces the creative thoughts to look outside the box for available services and programs. • Viewing the individual members in a family is important, but creating a plan that the whole family can work with is a huge challenge! • Thinking through the different ways this family could be helped to have had a different outcome made me keenly aware of the need for community and public health nurses, as well as education and intervention among families in crisis. • Choosing a health promotion based on the family in the movie allowed for the student to see beyond just the dysfunction of the family and try to see a solution could be cultivated. |

Recommendations and Conclusions

The evaluation demonstrates that using constructivist strategies, that emphasize active learning and the use of cinema, to teach family assessment results in increased awareness of

diversity and increased knowledge of opportunities for health promotion in families. Based on the impact of this family assessment activity, the authors recommend the following:

1. Integrate experiences that focus on diversity and health promotion in undergraduate nursing programs to increase awareness of diversity and opportunities for health promotion.
2. Consider cinema education as an opportunity for active, self-directed learning in the online classroom. In this activity, the use of cinema provided the opportunity to explore diversity in a way that students may not have been able to in their own community.
3. Integrate additional opportunities for student interaction related to the family assessment. For example, a future course activity could include assigning two movies to watch. Students assigned to small groups may benefit from watching the same movie and discussing concepts of the family assessment and health promotion with each other prior to completing the family assessment activity individually on a movie family that they choose.

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