

Memento mori

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Objective: To report how an art-based workshop assisted undergraduate nursing students to explore their experiences and beliefs about death and dying.

Design: A descriptive qualitative study.

Participants: Year three adult nursing students studying on a full-time undergraduate pre-registration programme.

Methods: Long answer questionnaires were completed by 48 undergraduate student nurses, all of whom had participated in the art-based workshop. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report themes identified.

Results: Four themes were identified: (1) exploring experiences and beliefs, (2) the role of the art in supporting discussions, (3) the gallery environment, and (4) impact on practice. Participants valued the opportunity to 'slow down', fully examine, and be challenged by, the art prompting reflective and critical discussion. The calm and peaceful gallery environment, and the skilled facilitation increased participant confidence to share experiences and beliefs. Reflecting on the workshop participants reported the workshop increased their understanding of the complexities of care and of addressing these on an individual basis.

Conclusions: This shared experience encouraged open and honest discussion and reflection, enhanced critical thinking and the need for compassionate person, and family-centred palliative and end-of-life care. While this study focused on an educational strategy delivered to student nurses, it is an approach that could be used with other health and social care professionals. Close and critical observation of the selected art increased participant understanding and insight of the many experiences and interpretations of death and dying.

Key words: art, beliefs, death and dying, nurse education, object-based learning, student nurse

Introduction

Caring for people at **the end-of-life** is complex (Lindqvist et al, 2012), **as such nursing** students have to be alert and respond to a person's physical, social and psychological needs (WHO, 2014). This can be enabled by the development of a meaningful therapeutic relationship, an aspect particularly valued by families (Aparicio et al, 2017). However, developing relationships in a meaningful way requires some investment of self and being prepared to be fully present with the patient and their families (Eket al, 2014). This level of engagement requires nursing students to manage complex emotions while maintaining a degree of professionalism, requiring them to be self-aware, able to self-regulate and **to** be empathetic.

Exploring one's emotions in this way is not easy. While much has been written about how nursing students respond to caring for a person who is dying (Edo-Gual et al, 2014; Poultney et al, 2014; Öserlind, et al 2016; Henoch, et al, 2017), less has been written about their personal beliefs about death and dying and how these **beliefs** influence their self-awareness, self-regulation and empathy when caring for people at **the end-of-life**. **Holcomb and colleagues (1993), on exploring personal beliefs around death and dying of university students in the United States of America, found** that participants who had a personal philosophy of death, for instance a belief in life after death, viewed death more positively and purposefully, such as having a continued existence. **Focusing specifically on nursing students, Johnson (1994) identified three main themes, knowing, relationships and culture, which informed how nursing students understood death and what it meant to them.** Knowing encompassed both theoretical knowledge, for example, an awareness of the grieving process and expert knowledge. Relationships emphasised how self-awareness is key to promoting supportive interactions with patients, relatives and staff. Culture explored both personal philosophies, similarly to Holcomb, et al (1993), and how the culture of the clinical environment influenced participants' beliefs **about** death. The key areas identified in these studies **can** inform learning and teaching strategies for nursing students.

Background

Art as a pedagogical tool has a long history, initially developed by Lichtwark in the early 1900s. His approach was to take students out of the classroom and expose them to **art 'insitu'** (Fishman, 1966, **pg. 12**), emphasising the feeling, through 'seeing', that art as an experience **evokes**. Similarly, Dewey (2005) proposed *art as experience* could be used to enable people to explore both objective reality and their own subjective needs. Building on this there is a strong tradition, in nurse education, of using the humanities **as** part of a 'hearts and minds' approach (Robb and Murray 1992; Darbyshire, 1993; McKie, 2012). Additionally, art has been used as a form of object-based learning encouraging students to actively engage and critically examine objects to stimulate learning (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2015).

In nurse education, art, as a form of object-based learning, has been used to explore aging (Wikström, 2000a), observational and assessment skills and nursing care (Wikström, 2001; Pardue, 2005; Pellico, et al, 2009 and Frei et al, 2010), empathy and spirituality (Wikström, 2003, Mooney and Timmins, 2007 and Jack, 2012), interpersonal skills (Wikström, 2000b), reflection (Wikström, 2012) **and the death and dying process** (Rose, Leonard and Courey, 2008). While these studies used art to examine the humanistic aspects of nursing practice only Rose et al (2008) explicitly addressed death and dying. Using six images, all depicting people in the dying phase of their life, participants were encouraged to use one of the pieces to guide their reflection on the human experience of death and dying. The unique contribution the study reported in this paper makes relates to the range of art included, **the fact that the art was not confined to depictions of people and that**

participants worked in groups and were provided with guided questions which they used to structure their discussion.

Memento Mori: exploring death and dying through art

The Memento Mori workshop was developed as part of the learning strategy for a mandatory year three supportive care module in an undergraduate nursing programme. The workshop was developed collaboratively by the module lead and the Head of Public Engagement at a local art gallery. All artworks were appraised individually, in relation to how they could be interpreted as expressing death and dying. Following this a list of 16 pieces was compiled, and included; paintings, sketches and sculpture. To ensure provision of appropriate support and facilitation, and to allow the participants space to discuss in groups, numbers were limited to 20 per workshop. Before attending the workshop, participants were required to undertake pre-reading focused on beliefs about death and theories of loss, grief and bereavement. This provided participants with the theoretical background to the subjects, enabling them to integrate theory and practice.

Working in groups of three or four, participants were provided with a list of the selected art and were encouraged to view all works before identifying three or four they would like to explore in more detail. Participants were provided with prompt questions to generate discussion. The first set of questions, devised by the module lead, encouraged participants to explore death and dying as represented by the art. The second set of questions, based on the *Ways of Looking* framework (Tate, n.d.), focused on critical appraisal of the art, encouraging exploration of the aesthetics of the art and how these contributed to their interpretation.

Participants added their group discussions to a virtual bulletin board allowing all comments to be collated in the same place, meaning group discussions were available to be shared when the larger group reconvened. To conclude Memento Mori, each group was invited to share their discussion on one of their selected works with the wider group. This encouraged further discussion relating to death and dying, which allowed greater exploration of individual perceptions and understanding.

Method

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the effectiveness of art, in supporting year three undergraduate nurses to explore death and dying. The objectives were:

- to examine the role the art had in promoting discussion and reflection
- to identify the impact the environment had on participants and their discussions
- to determine the impact the workshop could have on participants' clinical practice

Sample

All students who participated in Memento Mori (n=48) completed a questionnaire, a response rate of 100%. This response rate may be explained by the mutually respectful relationship that had developed between the module lead and participants, and that the questionnaire was administered at the end of Memento Mori. The questionnaire was completed anonymously.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought from the University Ethical Review Committee. The University Ethical Review Committee was satisfied by the measures taken to ensure informed consent, confidentiality of participants and protection of data and ethical approval was granted for the evaluation to be

carried out (ERN_18-0243). A participant information sheet was distributed and time provided for any questions before consenting to participate.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, using Braun & Clarke's model (2006), was used because it enables clear identification and reporting of patterns within the data. Firstly, the qualitative data from open-ended questions were read and re-read to become as familiar as possible. Initial manual codes were generated by highlighting words, sentences and phrases. The analysis was then refocused to search for themes. Author (JN) carried out the data synthesis independently.

Results

Whilst this was a qualitative descriptive study, the four questions that preceded the qualitative data employed a 5-point Likert scale technique allowing for a quantitative evaluation. The Likert scale was based on the degree of agreeability, and participants were then asked to explore this response qualitatively in order to provide justification for their Likert score. The results from the open-ended questions and likert scores are presented together, this allows for a comprehensive view of the data to be provided. The main themes identified were: exploring experiences and beliefs; the role of the art in supporting discussions; the environment of the gallery and impact on practice.

Exploring experiences and beliefs

Results demonstrated that 71% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that Memento Mori afforded them the opportunity to explore both their own perspectives and those of others, as illustrated by the quotes below:

This workshop has enabled me to explore others' perspectives of death and through this draw parallels and compare with my own. Has involved some thoughts about death I may not have considered before, useful reflection exercise. (ID: 27)

A space to explore death and dying in a more abstract sense. The good, the bad, the peaceful and tumultuous. It encouraged me to think deeply about the subject using visual stimulus. (ID: 18)

The role of the art in supporting discussion and reflection

The majority of participants (83%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the art encouraged deeper exploration of their personal beliefs:

Very engaging pieces and thoughtful curation of images which provided a variety of perspectives (ID: 18)

The variety of subject matter, art movements and forms was a positive challenge. Exploring the work of painters alongside a structural piece by 'Gabo' encouraged a creative outlook and challenged us to express our own feelings in order to understand the works. (ID: 12)

As evidenced in the quote above, some participants chose to discuss the more abstract pieces, for example, Linear Construction in Space no 1 by Naum Gabo (n.d.). On first viewing, the connection between the piece and death and dying may not be obvious. However, as can be seen from the comment below, it was often the pieces that challenged that generated the most discussion:

I enjoyed the varied art chosen. I like that not all the paintings were to my own taste, but that in not liking a painting or finding it confusing prompted more questions and discussion. (ID: 8)

The gallery environment

The art itself and the environment of the gallery are related and; 87% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the environment had a positive impact **on their experience**. Participants commented the calm environment allowed them to focus on the art with few distractions enabling more in-depth discussions:

Quiet, private. Felt fairly confidential, non-judgemental (ID: 49)

Atmosphere encouraged discussion within the group, somewhere outside a lecture room so took away the 'listen and make notes' sort of environment (ID: 13)

Very peaceful and relaxing. Lots of areas to stop, think and reflect (ID: 7)

As well as the physical environment participants stated the role of the facilitators had a positive impact on discussions:

...staff happy to explore and discuss their ideas too (ID: 17)

Staff were very friendly + encouraged me to discuss my thoughts/ideas in a very accepting way (ID: 27)

Staff helped giving us different experiences and thoughts...which also opened up our ideas (ID: 25)

These responses suggest it was a combination of the art, the environment and the facilitators that encouraged open and honest discussions about death and dying.

Impact on practice

Participants were asked to consider whether their engagement in **Memento Mori** would support their practice as a nurse. **Sixty-five percent** of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop would support their practice. Despite this question receiving the lowest response, comments indicated participants had reflected, both personally, and in relation to their practice, on **Memento Mori**:

Increased understanding of the complexities regarding death. Seeing the depth of explanation and differing opinions have made me realise patients will have multiple, complex dimensions which need acknowledging/addressing. (ID: 36)

Really interesting to listen to my peers and see their perspectives, which is important when working in a team work run environment. You can see how exploring these ideas together can help us improve our care and provide a good death to patients through considering their needs + desires. (ID: 8)

Discussion

The outcomes of the Memento Mori workshop provide important lessons for both educators and students. Our findings demonstrate that using art to learn about issues related to death and dying can be beneficial to student nurses by enabling open conversation of the topic. It also highlighted the importance of slowing down and taking the time to listen to others' views and perspectives related to the complexities of death and dying, and reflecting on these. Both the method of teaching and the impact Memento Mori had on participants and facilitators are further discussed.

Method of teaching

Memento Mori succeeded in enabling students to discuss issues related to death and dying. The art, environment, and facilitation acted as catalysts to support students to explore their beliefs and reflect on their own experiences. Although some students were not sure how their participation in Memento Mori would influence them in practice, this study found that students perceived this to be a creative and non-didactic method of teaching in nursing education. In slowing down, students were able to take notice of the bigger picture, explore the nature of having difficult conversations, challenge ideas and, when faced with different interpretations, examine their prejudices. When considering visual learning strategies, slowing down is about taking the time to take in what we see, noticing the details and allowing those to register. It is about preparing ourselves to absorb and be open to possibilities both around and within us (Herman, 2016). As society and the healthcare sector become more dependent on technology it remains important to 'see' and connect with people on a human level, particularly when a loved one is dying. While technology may be able to keep patients alive to within millimetres of their physiological parameters, it should not distract from the humanity required to compassionately discuss their care, treatment and, perhaps, poor prognosis with the patient's significant other(s). This emphasises the inherent sense of observation and intuition needed for communication, engagement, human interaction and reflection.

This learning and teaching strategy provided students with the rare opportunity to 'think outside the box' and explore their own experiences and beliefs of an area that is unique to everyone; something that, as also found by Jack (2012), the students welcomed. Providing critical prompts, i.e. 'How does this representation compare to your experiences, either personal or professional?' and the space to slow down that encouraged consideration of different possibilities, allowed students to focus on the art and the task, thereby enhancing their powers of observation; a skill critical to the role of a nurse. Memento Mori encouraged different interpretations and perspectives to be shared that facilitators felt were thoroughly considered and committed; different to the sharing of ideas in a lecture environment. The data supports this, with students stating that the art allowed them to discuss and reflect on their beliefs and share these with other students in the group. It has been suggested that this interactive process stimulates critical thinking and activates a domain of learning that lectures do not (LaPorte Matzo et al., 2003), and that lectures alone are an ineffective method for identifying students' perceptions and fears associated with death and dying. This interactive approach, Eisner (2002) argues, equips us to better manage ambiguity. Relating this to nursing, which by its very nature is ambiguous and unpredictable, it could be argued that exposing students to a situation where they are encouraged to think creatively can support their problem-solving and management skills in the clinical setting. Musso & Enz (2017) support this by explaining that art can help practicing clinicians to more easily understand and communicate the concept of death and dying as it allows

them to transcend the conceptual dichotomy of life and death, thereby acquiring an inner strength to care for dying patients as well as themselves.

Impact on students and facilitators

The students in this study gained insight into the many interpretations of death and the importance of respecting other's views, encouraging them to consider the importance of personalised compassionate care for their dying patients and significant others. In addition, whilst the students in this study recognised the challenges of the busy clinical environment, they noted Memento Mori helped them to acknowledge the importance of spending time with the bereaved. This was aided by the calm and relaxed atmosphere which facilitated open discussion, where it was reiterated to students that there was no rush. The influence that the atmosphere had on the students and their experience in this study was also identified by Barry et al (2017) in their work. They found, through encouraging engagement with, and reflection on an art installation portraying perinatal death, the participants, all midwifery students, commented on the calm and serene nature of the art installation, the atmosphere it portrayed and how this contributed positively to the experience. This slowing down is something that could be beneficial in clinical practice when registered nurses are supporting patients and families through the process of death and dying.

This study helped to demonstrate that this type of reflective and interactive learning approach can assist student nurses build confidence and knowledge in order to provide compassionate relationship centred care (Adamson & Dewar, 2015). The students' different interpretations of the art allowed for reflection on the art of nursing. In particular, rather than using only their observation and interpretation of what they see in front of them, the ability to empathise with the differing perspectives of other healthcare professionals, the dying person, and their close persons (Archibald et al, 2016). This enabled students to make connections on a human level. Its other merits included encouraging collaboration, communication and listening in groups; all skills required in the healthcare team to ensure person-centred care is delivered. This is of particular relevance in end-of-life care where developing therapeutic relationships with patients, families and carers is fundamental (Aparicio et al, 2017).

The role of the facilitators in this study was particularly important. Both facilitators brought their specific expertise to the workshop, the module lead in relation to supportive care, and the Head of Public Engagement in relation to art. Ensuring effective co-facilitation required both facilitators to engage in a dynamic and collaborative relationship that recognised their specific areas of expertise. The relationship between the facilitators and the knowledge they brought was key in supporting the students to engage, perhaps emotionally, with unfamiliar art, as well as striking the appropriate balance between facilitating student focused learning and directing the conversation. This required skilled observation of the groups, an awareness of how they were functioning, and an ability to know when and how to intervene and guide discussions (Haith-Cooper, 2003). Using this approach, and by allowing time for the students to discuss and debate, the facilitators were privy to how beliefs were shared, discussed and developed. This provided valuable insight into the cognitive learning of students in the context of their understanding of death and dying and how this had developed (Williams & Paltridge, 2017). In addition, the different interpretations, discussions and reflections taking place, particularly when several groups were discussing the same work confirmed to the facilitators the benefits of this approach. The facilitators believed that, as the students were nearing the end of their pre-registration education, this level of engagement and reflection was evidence of the skills of reflection developed throughout the students' education. In addition to this, as

reflected in the students' comments, the opportunity to learn in a setting that was not a lecture theatre, or clinical setting, and the pace of the workshop, gave students 'permission' to really explore and examine the art and its relationship to death and dying and associated loss, grief and bereavement.

Limitations

Whilst the results of this study would suggest that students can learn through art, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the data were gathered at one point immediately after the workshop was finished. By gathering data at a later date, the long-term impact could have been identified particularly in relation to any impact on clinical practice, and is something that should be considered for future studies. Data were also extracted and analysed by author JN, it is recognised that there is a risk when undertaking analysis independently that bias can occur. Furthermore, the relationship between the facilitator(s) and the students should be taken into account. It is acknowledged that the students had previously been taught by one of the facilitators and therefore some students may have responded in a socially desirable manner. However, this was minimised by anonymous evaluations following the workshop.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the use of an art-based workshop enabled students to openly, and honestly discuss death and dying and the associated loss, grief and bereavement that is experienced. The combination of a varied selection of art, guided questions and the conducive environment enabled students to discuss death and dying candidly. It also provided the students with valuable experience in working in groups, respecting other's opinions, and working collaboratively. From a pedagogical perspective this study adds to the available body of evidence regarding object-based learning as a student centred, interactive, and visual learning and teaching strategy. Using museum collections with a focus on design, object-based learning has been used to enhance student's subject knowledge in creative design students (Reading, 2008). Additionally, using a range of objects including natural history artefacts and fine art has been used to develop students' transferable skills such as communication, organisation and time management (Chatterjee & Noble, 2009). In taking a different perspective, by using non subject specific art, Memento Mori further challenges students to consider their subject knowledge in a wider context, while learning in groups develops key transferable skills. When considering the impact on practice, students were not always able to say how their participation in the workshop would influence their practice. Recognising this, a longitudinal study, carried out with students earlier in their education will allow for potential impact to be observed over time.

The workshop demonstrates an original collaboration between the module lead and the Head of Public Engagement, both of whom believe art has a positive role to play in the personal and professional development of nurses and other healthcare professionals. This has led to further collaboration and development of art-based workshops which will be delivered to medical students and members of the public.

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