Let’s all play ‘Stigma’! Learning together using forum theatre in collaboration with mental health service users and nurse lecturers

James Wilson

Abstract

This paper shares the experiences of a group of University lecturers and mental health service users who collaborated in the use of an experiential theatrical technique, forum theatre. The aim of the project was to jointly develop a forum theatre that would be performed to all fields of student nurses in their second year within a classroom setting. The was achieved through a session that employed a theatrical technique to bring staff and service users in order to 1) stimulate student analysis around the complexities of communication and 2) raise awareness about the damaging effects of stigma in mental health. Findings showed that service user/carer involvement issues can be presented using interactive theatre techniques. The method facilitated innovative and educationally stimulating engagement between the students and the service users’ personal narratives without losing the impact of the experiences being articulated; this process also brought about a collaborative service user-lecturer initiative.

Introduction

Service user involvement in curriculum teaching of healthcare professionals has gained growing momentum within the UK over recent years (Tew et al., 2004). This paper describes the findings and some of the issues that have arisen from a joint collaboration between mental health service users and lecturing staff that explored the use of an interactive theatrical teaching method. The specific theatrical teaching method used was called forum theatre. The completed project was presented to student nurses at a conference style event within the second year of their preregistration nursing programme. This collaborative venture explored ways of incorporating mental health service user’s personal narratives about their experiences of stigma in health care. Service users’ views of care were able to be explored and given theatrical form demonstrating to the students the multi complex conflicts faced by users and professionals. In this paper, the student learning experience of the interactive theatre is explored. Finally, issues of future involvement and replication of this method in higher education is discussed and recommendations are made about the way forward for user involvement in education.

Service User Involvement in Health and Social Care Education:

The history, growth and development of the service user movement now include a wide network of organisations, consultants and researchers. The profile of service user involvement has become embedded as an important aspect of health and social care education in the UK context (Branfield, 2009; Taylor et al., 2009). It is acknowledged that service users should have a wide remit of involvement in activities such as the selection of nursing students, the design of educational programmes, their teaching and learning, their educational assessment, the quality assurance processes and preparation for practice learning (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2008, 2010). The rationale for such involvement is that the everyday experiences of service users are recognised to be fundamental in equipping the emergent healthcare practioners with key aspects of knowledge and expertise needed to maintain and improve high quality services (Anghel & Ramon, 2009; Beresford, 2000). Rudman (1996) reported the advantages of service user involvement in nurse education being enhanced student understanding of individual experiences and increased respect for individual differences. It has been argued that students development of self-awareness and communication skills is enhanced by the inclusion of service users (Skilton, 2011), and particularly regarded as being important for students in the early stages of their training (Cooper & Spencer-Dawe, 2006).

Promoting service user collaboration in nurse education can perhaps aim towards facilitating change in a number of important attitudinal and learning outcomes for future nursing students. The growing pool of talent that champion the service user agenda has been harnessed to enhance the learning experience of the undergraduate student. Within healthcare education, Morgan & Jones (2009) have demonstrated that the most common method employed to showcase service user engagement in delivering the curriculum was the formal lecture. The format of the formal lecture often included one or more service users telling their stories in a facilitated environment by a lecturer.
The creation of the interactive theatre: Let’s All Play ‘Stigma’

The Faculty of Health Sciences has established links with local mental health support groups and invited volunteers from the local service user networks to prepare and perform in a forum theatre play to be presented to a large student nurse audience at a conference event in November 2012. In August 2012, seven service user volunteers joined together with two members of lecturing staff to begin the production process of the forum theatre. Feeding off the idea of having a more interactive approach in nurse education were limited. Frisby et al. (2006) have noted that the formal lecture style encouraged a more passive role in the students, and further more Turner et al. (2000) showed that the learning experience became secondary when service users became tearful, upset or expressed imbalanced opinions. Initiatives that explored a joint interactive theatrical approach between lecturers and service users in nurse education were limited. Frisby (2001) reported that the sessions which employed a more interactive approach indicated that service users had enhanced feelings of achievement, less censorship from tutors and that involvement enhanced student learning about users’ perspectives. Turnbull and Weley (2013) have reported the great value in the service user presenting their personal narratives and detailed that it had a positive impact in enhancing student understanding of the need to treat individuals with dignity and respect in practice. Speed et al. (2012) has highlighted a number of barriers that students face when they tell their story. While being afforded the ability to offer a valued contribution to student learning, there remains a careful negotiation between the sharing of incidents which may be personally distressing and the inclusion of material which may be perceived as inflammatory. Providing the service user platform to be free to present their own perspective of reality without barrier has to be balanced; whether ‘learning’ and ‘enhancing the quality of care in practice’ is the primary goal. In a formal setting, the articulation and the sharing of the service user’s stories, which is a common feature in the service user’s recollected story is on show at any given moment. The forum theatre play was presented to a large student audience and the service user volunteers were invited to replace the main character (protagonist) as a way of informing the audience about the (unfortunate) life choices that she makes. They had developed her into a character (protagonist) who deploy an arsenal of stigmatising and oppressive tactics against her. The audience witness the detrimental effects the acts of the protagonist’s stigmas have on the protagonist along with the (unfortunate) life choices that she makes. The story concludes in an unsatisfactory way for the protagonist. Feldhendler (1994) stated that the forum theatre production is creative place to debate and rehearse change with the aim being to use theatre as a way of informing the audience about the difficulties people face and moving them to take part in the larger agen of society into active transformers of the dramatic situation.

“A Forum is a question posed to the audience, seeking answers. The question has to be clear. If the spect-actors are to be present to offer alternatives, and if the Forum is to enrich the understanding, the central idea must be perceptible to all” (Boal, 1998)

The ethical principles created by Rifkin (2010) underpinned and informed this theatrical work.

Rifkin (2010) Ethical principles for participatory theatre work

• Choice: participants’ agenda not pre-empted.
• Respect: developed via creative process.
• Equality: with groups having little experience, through creative process.
• Safety: focus on present/future, no fear of physical risk.
• Tutor recognition: support and training, shared perspectives.

The decision to use a forum theatre approach facilitated the theatrical blending of singular or multiple sets of theatrical characters, which ensured anonymity due to the audience being unaware which of the service user’s recollected story is on show at any given moment. The forum theatre production was grown and blended using the experiences from everyone involved rather than a single personal narrative. The story of the play was driven by the desire of the group to share their experiences in a way that facilitated the telling of a collective story rather than individually exposed to a large student group.

Forum theatre was originally conceived by Dr Augusto Boal (1979) where a theatrical performance is presented to an audience as an intellectual game between the actors and the spect-actors (a neologism describing the audience transition from being a passive spectator to becoming actively involved in changing the course of the play as an invited actor onto the stage). Rifkin (2010) identifies that if this were a conventional play then all participants on the stage. Stigma is a term that implies a change scenario at a ‘stop’ point. It is the student’s personal identification and perception of the unfolding drama that ignites group discussion due to each individual observing different elements of the play. The play immerses the students and stimulates problem solving and collaborative thinking. It is a way in which the student becomes at the stage of embracing change with the aim being to use theatre as a way of informing the audience about the (unfortunate) life choices that she makes. The story concludes in an unsatisfactory way for the protagonist. Feldhendler (1994) stated that the forum theatre production is creative place to debate and rehearse change with the aim being to use theatre as a way of informing the audience about the difficulties people face and moving them to take part in the larger agen of society into active transformers of the dramatic situation.

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Following the first run of the play, the audience will discuss between themselves how the play is then re-enacted by the actors. It is during this second-run of the play that students are invited to shout ‘stop’ at a point where they feel a different course of action could be taken. The individual is then invited to replace the main character in the play. In essence the audience is encouraged to leave the passivity of their seats, enter the stage area and steer the story in a slightly different way. They are then asked to demonstrate an alternative solution. Middlwick et al. (2011) reported that this can provide some lively debate as the spect-actors are continually having to adapt the script to ensure movement to the next ‘stop’ point in the play. It is the student’s personal identification and perception of the unfolding drama that ignites group discussion due to each individual observing different elements of the play. The play immerses the students and stimulates problem solving and collaborative thinking. It is a way of informing the audience about the (unfortunate) life choices that she makes. The story concludes in an unsatisfactory way for the protagonist. Feldhendler (1994) stated that the forum theatre production is creative place to debate and rehearse change with the aim being to use theatre as a way of informing the audience about the difficulties people face and moving them to take part in the larger agen of society into active transformers of the dramatic situation.

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The Student Learning Experience:

Department of Health (2012) reported that teaching students to develop the chief nursing officers 6 C’s in healthcare education is vitally important if best practice is to be achieved. These have often been seen as challenging to successfully develop via didactic methods. Middlwick et al. (2011) states that forum theatre offers a fuller and more involved opportunity to rehearse and hear the ‘student voice’. Sternberg and Zhang (2001) has stated that adult learners consistently report that an experiential approach helps them to learn more effectively and therapeutic communication is a practical way of learning about benefits from rehearsal before engaging with the service user. The action of a ‘spect-actor’ supports Benner (2001) by providing the opportunity to ‘pose and test’ situations which links into the active experimentation stage of Kolb (1984) four stage learning cycle. Forum theatre provides a concrete experience that lets an audience decide their own method of engagement. This could be in the form of physically becoming involved as a ‘spect-actor’ and experience the instant feedback provided by trying out a solution. Alternatively, not everyone may have the opportunity or desire to be a ‘spect-actor’ and be engaged in a number of national and international projects (e.g. ‘time to change’) have been launched in efforts against the stigma of mental illness. Sartorius (2004) stated that education has been focused on the changing of the values and beliefs of patients and healthcare professionals. However, others have questioned whether this education has a substantial public health implications such as it may exacerbate stress and its health consequences, reinforce and reinforce stigmatising mental health stigma, and oppression, or contribute to the positive or negative health consequences for mental health problems. Schulze (2007) states that while largely successful in beating stigma and discrimination, programmes tackling stigma in mental health stigma, and discrimination, programmes tackling stigma in mental health have, in part, been critiqued to be largely uninformed by the lived realities of people with mental illness and their families. The forum theatre approach that was applied meant that the play was constructed directly from the narratives of service users and service users and service users and played directly to the student audience.

The themed written comments in the evaluation forms following the forum theatre facilitated the telling of a collective story at a ‘stop’ point. It is the student’s personal identification and perception of the unfolding drama that ignites group discussion due to each individual observing different elements of the play. The play immerses the students and stimulates problem solving and collaborative thinking. It is a way of informing the audience about the (unfortunate) life choices that she makes. The story concludes in an unsatisfactory way for the protagonist. Feldhendler (1994) stated that the forum theatre production is creative place to debate and rehearse change with the aim being to use theatre as a way of informing the audience about the difficulties people face and moving them to take part in the larger agen of society into active transformers of the dramatic situation.

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Could happen to me (identified aspects of their own life that mirrored the play)

Has happened to me (recognised the behaviour of the characters in the play)

This is what I will do differently (as a healthcare practitioner)

**To the Future**

Whilst the quality of service user involvement may vary, universities now accept that service user input is integral to the education of nurses and allied health practitioners.

Service user involvement can take many forms and can be done in many different ways and there is no single solution to fit every situation. The use of forum theatre in this venture provided an interactive method to share personal narratives in a powerful and engaging way which enhanced the student experience within the classroom.

The service users involved in the project cited numerous personal benefits such as increased levels of confidence in speaking to a large group and when acting with the staff they felt it was more of a collegiate connection working as equals rather than a staff and service user tokenistic liaison. When the play was shown to the student group, it was the presence of the service users in the classroom that provided the authentic educational learning object to interact with. The forum theatre approach provided an opportunity to re-enact service user stories whilst maintaining anonymity and offered a uniquely interactive element which presents extra learning opportunities for the students.

This collaborative style of meaning making in health and social care classrooms can be usefully replicated for other projects and cover a variety non-mental health topics. This project centred on stigma however the method would equally be attributable to subjects such as Dementia care, end of life care, enhancing compassion, assertiveness, delivering significant news and so on.

The use of interactive theatre for this event provided a window into the mind, the soul, the heart of humankind and the study of this should arguably be the aim of nursing in higher education. For our students, the interactive theatre brought a story to life and brought life to learning.

**Reference**


