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# STUDENT EMPATHY: A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Sherry Lovan, Ph.D., Western Kentucky University

*A class of senior students in a community nursing course wrote "Dear Diary" journal entries that conveyed a deep understanding of empathy. This assignment served to connect the students with people in different stages of life. The journal entries provide an example to demonstrate how classroom assignments can effectively encourage students to place themselves in another's shoes, which is the basis for empathy.*

## Introduction

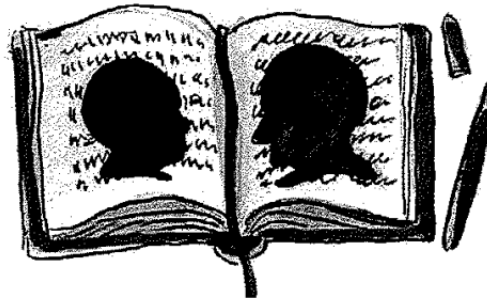
Nurse educators around the world are challenged to present complex material to a diverse group of students in a relatively short span of time, typically over a period of two years. With the current nursing shortage expected to worsen, it is probable that this time frame may be condensed as nursing education programs investigate ways to accelerate the education process and graduate larger numbers of students. While in nursing school, students are expected to learn critical concepts, manage a variety of clinical situations, gain experience as critical thinkers, and incorporate caring into the mix.

Rowles and Russo (2009) suggested that nurse educators continually search for the best way to teach and empower nursing students for learning. Even though the task is not easy, educators incorporate technical skills, nursing science, and the art of caring into a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum. Empathy, which is a component of caring, is often described as the ability to put oneself in another person's circumstance. While nurse instructors can certainly role-model empathy with students, effective methods to teach empathy are rare. In their study, Evans, Wilt, Allgood, and O'Neil (1998) investigated empathy scores in nursing students and found a need for new approaches to examine a student's basic empathy level.

A review of the literature reveals that nurses have low levels of empathy (Hills & Knowles, 1983; Reynolds & Scott, 2000). In addition, there are few examples of effective

teaching strategies that promote this behavior in students other than role-play. Reynolds, Scott, and Jessiman (1999) proposed a need to identify which components of empathy education were effective in teaching nurses how to offer empathy in the clinical environment. Kunyk and Olson (2001) found that the conceptualization of empathy used by nurses is of paramount importance to the profession. They suggested that understanding patients, their needs, their emotions, and their circumstances is fundamental to nursing practice and that empathy is the foundation of that understanding.

Most nursing faculty would agree that empathy is important and should receive attention as a common thread throughout nursing education. To promote empathy in senior community nursing students, I assigned textbook readings that discussed the health concerns of older adults, men, women, children, and adolescents. A large portion of this content was a review of material presented in previous nursing courses. As an attempt to engage the students with the content presented, I asked them to complete readings of the chapters and select one population that



interested them most. Next, I assigned each student to write a "Dear Diary" journal entry using imagery about the life of a person in the population they selected. Imagery is described as a reflection on the personal experiences of another person (LaMonica, 1993). Students could write about someone they knew personally, as long as they applied the content of the text to the entry. I posted a "Dear Diary" journal entry about a senior widow woman (a personal friend of mine) for students to review as an example. Finally, students submitted this assignment to an academic web site where classmates read and wrote comments in response.

What occurred after the students submitted their responses was a pleasant surprise. The entries were informative and presented material from the text in a manner that was interesting to read, true to life, and unique in that it was from many different student perspectives. After reading the students' submissions, I gained an appreciation for the various backgrounds and insights of my nursing students. The demographics of the class revealed largely traditional college-age, Anglo European, and female students. The small number of male, minority, and nontraditional students contributed yet another valuable dimension to the Dear Diary entries.

Some entries were funny while others were disturbing; however, all provoked powerful and serious messages that affect people in different life stages. The students wrote about topics ranging from children who experienced bullying in school to senior adults plagued with loneliness and isolation. Other common issues included breast cancer, high-risk adolescent behavior, childhood obesity, domestic violence, teenage pregnancy, child abuse and neglect, and the effects of poverty. After completing the assignment, I asked the students if they would like to have their Dear Diary journal entries published. The class unanimously agreed and signed permission slips to publish their work. The following paragraphs represent a sample of the writings from this senior nursing class.

### **Dear Diary Entries: Elementary-age children**

Child One: I am glad to be home. School is no fun anymore. Today on the playground, Tommy called me Fatty McFatson, and a lot of kids laughed. Then he called me Butterball. I got really mad and punched him in the face. That was bad because I got in a whole lot of trouble and Mom had to come pick me up from school. I don't want to be big anymore. It makes me really upset when other kids make jokes or when we have to run in gym class and I don't run as good as the other kids. Whenever we play dodge ball, I always get picked last and I get embarrassed. Sometimes I get really really sad. I don't even want to go hang out with my friends and I just want to stay in my room and play Nintendo. Sometimes I tell Mom I am sick so I don't have to go to school. On Saturday, Mom and I went to the mall to buy some new clothes and I got real mad because none of the clothes I wanted would fit me. It's just really frustrating. It is all Mom's fault.

Child Two: Today was another rough day at school. I keep telling myself that it WILL get better, but I am running out of faith. I was extremely tired today and I kept getting in trouble for sleeping in class. I wonder if they really know why I am sleepy. I hope they think I was up talking on the phone with a cute boy instead of what really happened. My dad is unbelievable. I can't believe he says those terrible things to my mother. I hate when she cries. I stayed awake all night sleeping by her door so I could hear if she was ok. Every time I heard Dad get up, I ran and hid in my room. I hope he didn't see me. He would be so mad and take it out on her. It's always me. I don't even want to go to cheerleading anymore because he drinks every time we have a game and Mom isn't there to make supper. I have begged to stop going, but Mom continues to make me. She says she will not let him ruin my life like he does hers. I wonder why she stays with him. I will never let a guy treat me like that, diary. I am going to be treated like a princess forever and my kids will never cry all the time like I do. Is it bad sometimes I hope Dad doesn't come home?

Sometimes I think I am going to hell for wishing that. Do you think I will, diary? I know I am supposed to honor my mother and father, but it is so hard, diary. I wish you could talk back so someone would know what I go through. Just one person, that's all I want. There is nobody that will keep my secrets like you, though. I am so thankful to have you. I love you. I will write tomorrow. Dad still isn't home. It is 9:30 pm and his dinner has been ready for hours. My poor mom, she worked so hard on it. I will let you know how tonight goes.

### **Adolescent Life**

Adolescent One: Today I went to my first doctor's appointment since I found out that I was pregnant a few weeks ago using one of those home pregnancy tests. Actually going to the doctor today started to make this whole thing a reality, especially when I heard the heartbeat for the first time. The heartbeat was so fast. . . . and so real. The doctor told me that usually patients do not get to hear the heartbeat at the first appointment if it is before 12 weeks, but I was able to because I had waited so long to seek prenatal care. I just can't believe there is a baby growing inside of me. The nurse talked to me about what I can expect during the pregnancy. She also asked me if I had ever used any contraceptive methods or if I had been taught about safe sex before. My mind thought back to an appointment I had before entering high school and I remembered the nurse trying to counsel me about safe-sex practices, but stressing that abstinence is the best way to prevent health issues. I remember rolling my eyes at her and thinking, "I don't need you to tell me any of this and I don't need to listen to you. None of this is ever going to affect me." Now, I wish so badly that I had listened to her.

Adolescent Two: I am so hungry, I could eat anything! I could even eat broccoli! Mom said that we can go the store in a few days to get some food. I do get to eat breakfast and lunch at school and I don't even have to pay for it! Almost every night when I go to bed, my stomach hurts. I can barely go to sleep I am so hungry. Mom was really sad today. I heard her talking on the phone to Nana. She said she was scared about not having a place

to live next month. I wonder if we are moving. I wonder if I will have to go to a new school. I like my teacher; I don't want to move again. My ear has been hurting a lot, too. Mom said that she can't find the time to take me to the doctor because she can't leave work. She said her boss would fire her if she left. What a meanie! I wish his ear would hurt like mine, and then he would understand and let her off. Sometimes I get in trouble for not paying attention in school, but I do when my ear doesn't hurt so badly. I miss Dad a lot. I don't get to see him very much, and he hardly calls anymore. I wonder if he ever misses me. I try to be really good so he will want to see me. I remember we had a big, nice house with lots of food and toys when Mom and Dad were married. I wish we were still a family. Things were a lot different then.

### **Men's Health**

Man One: What a day! I had to go to the doctor today. I went to the free cholesterol screening at the drug store a couple days and it didn't turn out so good. The nurse there referred me to get a second test from my doctor. When my wife heard this, she did the usually nag, nag, nag. . . . preach, preach, preach, and nag some more. I didn't want to go to the doctor, but you know who won that argument. I haven't been in like two years, so why start now. Who has time to go to the doctor anyways? I work 45-60 hours a week trying to support my family, a wife, and two kids, one of whom is a teenage boy who won't listen to anything I say and eats like he's starving all the time. So anyways, I went to the doctor and he got the results back. Now I'm on some kind of new medicine, which is great because I'm already on insulin for my diabetes, which I can also thank my wife for because I wasn't gonna go to that appointment either. So now I have a nice, fat prescription bill to deal with on top of everything else. Now the doc wants to schedule me for a colonoscopy since I'm 50. I hate getting old!!! He also says I'm way too stressed out and need to relax. He also says I need to start working out. I tried joining a gym and that lasted for like two weeks. Who has the time to throw in exercise on top of everything else? I barely see my family as it

is. It's time to go finish my proposal for the morning, polish off half a fifth of vodka, smoke my cigarette, and get ready for this crap all over again.

Man Two: Today was a long day. I had an early meeting at the office today, where my boss chewed me out in front of everyone. He made me look like a fool, and I wanted to punch him to show everyone who really was the fool. But I need to make a living for the wife and kids, so I just took his crap. After work I went to the gym to lift weights and play basketball. My knee started to hurt again while playing and continued even after I stopped playing. I told my wife about it when I got home. She started in on her lecture about going to the doctor. When am I going to have time to go? The doctor's office is open only during the time that I work, and we cannot afford for me to take a day off. Plus, if I went in for my knee pain, I'm sure they would find something else wrong with me. I don't need any more stress in my life.

### **Women's Health**

Woman One: Today was a life-changing experience for me. Today I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I went to the doctor for a mammogram and the test came back abnormal. I went to the doctor to find out results of a biopsy of a lump that was found in my breast. I had walked into the doctor's office full of hope, knowing that there was nothing wrong with me. I'm in my late 50's and I have lived a good life. The doctor walked in and I could tell from the look on his face that something was wrong. The room that had started out bright and cheerful suddenly became dark as I listened to the doctor tell me that I had breast cancer. Thoughts just ran through my mind. What am I going to do? I have children still at home to take care of. What will happen to them if I die? Who is going to take care of the house? Most of all, who is going to take care of me?

Woman Two: Today was a very stressful day. I had to get the kids up to go to school and all the while Riley was having another nosebleed and Kelsie needed help with her homework, which she waited to do until 15 minutes before class! Because I had to get

the kids up and ready, I was almost late for work myself. I only had time to take a quick drive through McDonald's and grab me a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit and a coffee. I never have time to cook these days. Balancing work and all the financial problems we have is taking a toll on me. I barely have quality time to spend with my children anymore, especially since the divorce. I'm so worried about everything that I'm starting to get seriously depressed. I've been having weird pains in my right shoulder and back when I move around a lot or walk for long periods, but I think it's because of stress. It makes me feel like I can't breathe or something. I just need to go to the chiropractor, but I can't afford it. I pray every day my kids and me don't get sick. I don't have insurance because of my job and I don't qualify for Medicaid because my income is too high.

### **Life of an Older Adult**

Person One: Today has been a true blessing. My grandson came by to see me this morning and told me of his life. He told me how well he was doing in his college courses and how hard he had to study. It was a joy to see his face, the face I see less and less. I remember when my lovely grandchildren came to visit more. It was less lonely then. Now they are getting older and are leading lives of their own. I hate to be any trouble, so I don't call them as much as I would like. I just wait for them to call me or make a surprise visit. My grandson has become so handsome. Before he left he smiled and gave me the biggest hug. He told me how much he loved me and how good I looked. I smiled back trying to hold back tears. I wanted to keep him there with me, to offer him a home-cooked meal, but he and I both knew I don't cook much anymore. Cooking takes a lot of energy for an 81-year-old woman and food has become so expensive. I knew he wasn't being truthful when he told me I looked "good." I've seen the mirrors. I know how time has treated my once young-looking face. I know how unsteady my walk is because of my knee and chronic back pain. The face and body I see in the mirror is now a stranger to me. I recognize the eyes that stare back at me, but even they

have neglected me over the years. It is they that have caused many falls around the house.

Person Two: This is day 25 of my journal writing and I feel the same as yesterday. Ever since my stroke a month ago today, I have felt helpless because I still have much weakness in my left side. I don't know how to hope for the best anymore. I pray about it often. Maybe it's teaching me patience. Maybe my prayers are not being heard. Ever since my husband John died, I've just been lost within myself. I've spent countless days wondering when my day will come...when I don't wake up. I just pray that I die a peaceful death. Hopefully I will be granted that much.

### Conclusion

It is disturbing when research suggests nurses possess low levels of empathy (Hill & Knowles, 1983; Reynolds & Scott, 2000). Perhaps through assignments such as the "Dear Diary" journal entries, nurse educators can emphasize the importance of empathy in patient care and nursing practice. Reynolds and Scott suggested that the consequence of low empathy shown by nurses could lead to patients not being understood or not feeling understood. Without empathy, nurses also may fail to provide necessary information, fail to provide adequate emotional support, and increase a patient's stress level. The Dear Diary journal entries demonstrate that nursing students have diverse backgrounds and rich life experiences to share with others. Students teach one another through sharing their thoughts and experiences, which can ultimately create a powerful learning environment. The Dear Diary assignment taught me that students have the ability to be equal partners in learning about empathy. I will continue to use the Dear Diary assignment in my community nursing course and encourage other educators to incorporate this type of assignment to facilitate empathy in all students.

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