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Navigating diversity with nursing students through difficult dialogues: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

The *Difficult Dialogues* project is an international initiative that promotes the development of the art and skill of civil discourse as an essential outcome of higher education. At the University of the Free State, South Africa, the project is implemented by the Centre for Teaching and Learning. When intergroup conflict started disrupting the academic performance of first year nursing students, the School of Nursing consulted with the centre to facilitate a *Difficult Dialogues* session. This article describes the engineering of a session programme to facilitate learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict in a constructive way. The rich data of a qualitative inquiry conducted via the Critical Incident Questionnaire are triangulated with literature and other feedback provided to describe to what extent the session contributed towards student learning. A number of participants indicated that they had learnt to respect diversity and had realised that they could co-operate as a team in spite of individual differences. As additional evidence, the students listed specific skills that could aid them in navigating diversity and conflict in future. Considering that the School strives to establish inclusion during the orientation of students, this case raises questions about the sufficiency of such endeavours. In conclusion it is asked to what extent nurse educators should be expected to implement strategies to address issues of diversity in the classroom on a continuous basis.

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1. Introduction and background

The *Difficult Dialogues* project promotes the development of the art and skill of civil discourse in higher education. The initiative originated in the United States of America (USA) where its main mission is to strengthen a democratically engaged society, hereby reflecting a commitment to pluralism and academic freedom [The Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression (TJCPFE), 2006]. This mission is pursued through the encouragement of respectful, transformative dialogue on controversial topics and complex social issues. University classrooms are ideal venues for creating democratic spaces in which students can master this art and skill of civil discourse.

Civil discourse involves respectful argumentation where competing points of view are expressed, considered and evaluated in an environment of mutual respect (Landis, 2008, p. viii). Handling controversy with civility is listed as one of the key

dimensions of leadership for positive social change and is deemed to be an essential outcome of higher education [Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) 1996, cited in Komives, Wagner & Associates, 2009, p. xiii]. Conversely, Barkley (2010, p. 111) explains that student incivility, ranging from a lack of consideration and respect to overt hostility and aggression, not only undermines the sense of community in the classroom, but also seriously disrupts the learning environment. As citizens of a democracy, students need to learn to resolve conflicts of interest constructively thus taking a nonviolent approach to dealing with difficult issues (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 223; Landis, 2008, p. viii). Therefore respectful discussions on contentious issues provide enriching and transformative learning opportunities for students (Jaschik, 2009; Mezirow, 2012, p. 80).

Efforts to help students achieve higher order skills are closely linked to the University of the Free State's vision to be "recognised across the world for excellence in academic achievement and in human reconciliation". One of the strategic initiatives of this university is the Human Project that strives, amongst others, to create a culture of inclusion through the promotion of respect, discussion, dialogue and dissent [University of the Free State (UFS), 2012]. The

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aim is to demonstrate the value of human reconciliation through “human togetherness and solidarity across social and historical divides”. Educators and students should learn, for example, to respect differences of culture, language, and national origins, which is evidenced by their willingness to put aside social differences and work together towards the achievement of academic and social success (Ramohai, 2013, p. 432; UFS, 2012).

In pursuit of the above, the *Difficult Dialogues* project was launched at the UFS in 2012 and is coordinated by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The centre provides professional development and support to enable academic members of staff to encounter controversy more effectively and to engage students in explorations of controversial issues relating to curricular content. Another initiative of the university was to establish a full-credit, compulsory, interdisciplinary module that engages all first year students in in-depth discussions to address issues such as ethics, race, and identity (UFS, 2012).

The School of Nursing supports the different strategic initiatives in the first year undergraduate programme. To further promote a culture of inclusion and to facilitate acclimatisation to the UFS environment, the School and the nursing profession, first year nursing students receive academic and social support from senior nursing students on entering the university. Since the parallel medium language policy of the university essentially segregates students in terms of heritage groups, the classes for the General Nursing Science module are combined to foster group cohesion. The students also undergo formal evaluation with the Student Counselling and Development division and are grouped together according to a diversity of learning styles. It is understood that a variety of learning styles contributes to enhanced group cohesion and performance. Moreover, through community service learning interaction and collaboration are encouraged, as students with language and cultural differences work together in pairs to achieve their module outcomes.

The first year facilitators consequently believed that the strategic initiatives by the university and the School would be sufficient to create inclusion. Unfortunately, in the last term of 2013, conflict arose within the group of first year nursing students. This conflict had a negative impact on their academic functioning by interfering with the completion of group assignments. Feedback received from the class in the form of written reflections indicated that there was racial tension and misunderstanding within the group, for example students belonging to different heritage groups were accusing one another of being rude. With examination time approaching, the educators were concerned that the intergroup dysfunction would have a negative impact on the academic performance of the entire class. They therefore consulted with the coordinator of the *Difficult Dialogues* project at the UFS to request mediation, because it was deemed important that those involved should be objective. A session of two hours was made available for a *Difficult Dialogues* session.

A session programme was subsequently engineered to help this group of students to learn how to navigate diversity more effectively and respond to conflict in a constructive way. It was important to conduct research to determine the extent to which this learning opportunity was successful in achieving the outcomes.

2. Statement of research problem, purpose and question

In the face of disruptive intergroup conflict amongst a class of first year nursing students, the question that arose was how to best engineer learning activities for this diverse group to learn to navigate diversity and respond to conflict in a constructive way. The purpose of the research was therefore to describe the extent

to which the session contributed towards the nursing students' learning in this regard.

The research question for this study was: To what extent did the session contribute towards the nursing students' learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict arising from diversity in a constructive way?

3. Definitions of keywords/concepts

The *Difficult Dialogues* project is an international initiative that is dedicated to the promotion of civic engagement, academic freedom and pluralism in higher education (TJCPFE, 2006). Within the context of this study the project was implemented to assist a diverse group of nursing students to establish a sense of connectedness and to explore responses to conflict arising from diversity.

Diversity within the context of this study relates to the complexity brought to every university classroom through the representation of various heritage groups; different personalities; learning styles; prior knowledge, for example perspectives, values, beliefs, attitudes; and various fields of interest (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 124; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, pp. 11–12; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 195; Roderick, 2008, p. 117).

Navigating, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, refers to finding the right way to deal with a difficult or complicated situation. Navigating within the context of this study describes the complexity that nursing students face when engaging with diversity.

Nursing students are persons undergoing education or training in nursing at an institution for nursing education and are registered with the South African Nursing Council (SANC) as a student nurse or a student midwife under section 23 of the Act No 50 of 1978 (as amended) (SANC, 1978). The participants of this study were first year undergraduate nursing students at a school of nursing.

4. Research methodology

The purpose of the study necessitated a qualitative inquiry, and a descriptive design was employed. Polit and Beck (2012, pp. 18, 505) explain that descriptive qualitative studies describe the dimensions, meanings and importance of phenomena.

The research was conducted at the School of Nursing, UFS and the population included 68 first year nursing students. As mentioned in the introduction, a variety of language and heritage groups were represented in this combined class of students. A profile of this population showed that the majority of students ($n=65$) were female, and only a small number were male ($n=3$). Comprehensive sampling, as described by McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p. 327), was applied as all the first year students were invited to participate in the session and 48 (70.6%) agreed.

The research technique used to describe to what extent the session contributed towards student learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict arising from diversity in a constructive way, was a qualitative survey. The Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) that consists of open-ended questions was selected to capture this data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, pp. 392–3) deem the open-ended question to be a very attractive device for smaller scale research as it catches “the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour”, which they consider to be the hallmarks of qualitative data.

The CIQ was originally developed as a classroom evaluation tool to discover what and how students are learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 48). The questionnaire is, however, considered

to be valid and reliable in supporting qualitative methods for assessment of critical reflection in general and specifically during research and the learning process (Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008, p. 407). It is also recommended by reputable authors in the domains of student engagement and civil discourse (Barkley, 2010, p. 328; Landis, 2008, p. 33).

4.1. Engineering of the session programme

In assisting the diverse group of students to achieve the session outcomes (learning to navigate diversity and respond to conflict in a constructive way) within the two hour time limit, a contextualised session programme was developed. This required engineering – mindfully constructing learning opportunities – through the employment of various discussion techniques. Considering that student engagement involves both active learning and motivation, the four essential motivational conditions for learners in a diverse learning environment (establish inclusion; develop attitude; enhance meaning and engender competence) were also considered (Barkley, 2010, p. 7; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, p. 34–35; Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 40).

It was deemed important to encourage team work, to improve communication skills and to facilitate learning about responses to diversity and conflict. Therefore the learning activities were specifically selected to establish a sense of connectedness and to explore approaches to addressing conflict arising from diversity. Some of the techniques included: recalling a memorable experience, paired listening, perception check, quick writes and video clips (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 73–75, 128–130, 139–140; Landis, 2008, pp. 28–29). In further support of the three objectives stated above the venue was specifically selected to be spacious and to contain moveable furniture. The room was prepared by arranging the seating in small groups and setting a place for each participant. A paper folder containing the programme, hand-outs for the session and note paper was placed at each seat. The rationale for this preparation was to convey a non-verbal message that each participant mattered; that collaborative, constructive and productive learning opportunities were to follow. The students were requested to sit with the members of their existing working groups.

To create a sense of self-determination, student expectations were clarified at the beginning of the session and a list of ground rules for discussion was compiled by the students themselves (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 52–56; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, p. 35). Ice breakers were used to set a relaxed tone and facilitate group interaction. In order to encourage team spirit and collaboration, each table was requested to identify a team name, develop a slogan and to design a mini banner. Full participation by each member was ensured by setting a time limit of 5 minutes to complete the exercise.

Discovery of the humanity of fellow group members was facilitated by asking pairs of students to find three commonalities beyond their involvement at the university. A link was formed between prior knowledge (perspectives, values, beliefs and attitudes) and learning content by requesting the pairs to recall an important lesson they had learnt from a significant person in their lives (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPerro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 13). According to Brookfield and Preskill (2005, p. 74) relating a personal experience assists students to ease into discussion on more difficult topics. In addition it was envisioned that it would stimulate deeper interpersonal engagement and the development of mutual understanding. By attempting to convey a sense of having listened very carefully to what had been shared, followed by a perception check, additional “sub-skills” of active listening were instilled.

A large proportion of time was devoted to the viewing of a video on conflict management in nursing practice. The video contained three scenarios depicting conflict situations in the workplace. Through role play, two possible responses were demonstrated. A snip was shown of how the situation was managed in a dysfunctional way, followed by a productive response. The participants were each provided with a worksheet and the video was paused after every scenario to allow time for them to make notes. The viewing of the video was followed by a group discussion. The teams were encouraged to make use of circular response, which involves the expression of ideas around the table, to facilitate equal participation and respectful listening (Barkley, 2010, p. 310; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 79). A scribe was appointed to take notes of the contributions that were made and to consolidate these views, time was provided for brief feedback from the groups. In closing, the teams were given an opportunity to convey their learning during the session by sharing their take home message. The lessons learnt were jotted on a flip chart and correlated with the expectations noted at the beginning of the session.

5. Data collection

At the end of the session each participant was asked to complete a CIQ. The questionnaire contains five basic questions that focus on critical moments or actions in a class as judged by the learners (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 48). For the purposes of the *Difficult Dialogues* project two questions were added with regard to the creation of an environment conducive to democratic discussion. The questionnaire therefore read, as follows:

1. At what moment were you most engaged as a learner?
2. At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
3. What action that anyone in the room took did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone in the room took did you find most puzzling or confusing?
 - 5.1. To which extent was the environment safe and conducive to democratic discussion?
 - 5.2. What might render it more conducive for discussion?
6. What surprised you most?

For the purposes of this study the questionnaires were completed anonymously to encourage candid, truthful feedback. On completion they were placed face down in the middle of the table and were gathered into piles by a research assistant.

6. Data analysis

The set of questionnaires was scanned and marked clearly according to the data source and the date of data collection. The raw data were organised by tabulating the individual responses according to the respective questions on the CIQ. In commitment to verification, a co-researcher checked the accuracy of the transferred data before proceeding with the analysis (Polit & Beck, 2012, p. 596). The data from each respective question were then separately read and re-read; colour coded and developed into first- and second-order themes before representing the findings and making interpretations (Cresswell, 2009, p. 186–189; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010, p. 111). The CIQ data were triangulated with the feedback provided by the group of students during the session.

6.1. Trustworthiness

This qualitative inquiry met three of the criteria for developing trustworthiness as described by Lincoln and Guba (1994) cited in

Polit and Beck (2012, pp. 584–585), i.e. credibility, confirmability and authenticity. The main contribution to this accomplishment was that the participants recorded the data in their own hand, thus reflecting the sentiment and context of their contributions. Dependability and transferability, however, could not be guaranteed. As the data related to human interaction within a specific context, neither the stability of data over time and in similar conditions, nor the applicability in other settings and groups could be assured.

The integrity of the research was further enhanced by triangulating data from the questionnaire with listed feedback captured during the course of the session. Furthermore, the discussion of the results draws from a broad theoretical spectrum in an effort to describe student learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict in a constructive way.

7. Ethical considerations

In this qualitative study both the principalist and particularist approaches were followed in consideration of the ethical aspects (Macfarlane, 2010, p. 20). The principalist measures involved obtaining the necessary institutional permission and ethical clearance to conduct the study, which included obtaining informed consent from the participants. The uncertain and unpredictable nature of the qualitative research process, however, presents the researcher with moral challenges in the field, requiring additional ethical measures (Macfarlane, 2010, p. 23). The particularist approach therefore recommends the pursuit of living virtues that direct the practice of the researcher throughout the research process. Consequently, in addition to the ethical principles of beneficence, respect for human dignity and justice, the researchers also aspired to live the virtues of respectfulness, sincerity and humility (Macfarlane, 2010, pp. 24–26; Polit & Beck, 2012, pp. 152–156).

8. Discussion of results

Each of the students who participated in the session ($n = 48$) submitted a completed CIQ, which implies a 100% participation rate of information rich data sources. In attempting to answer the research question, the last item on the CIQ: “What surprised you most?” provided the most useful data. Expressions of surprise usually indicate learning that has taken place and reveal assumptions that were held prior to the learning opportunity. This was confirmed by three participants who were surprised by their learning during the session:

“That I actually learnt a lot from this session. I was not expecting that.”

“That I learnt this much!”

“I learned new things.”

Additionally, two participants related their enjoyment of the session, whilst two others expressed having found it interesting and engaging. The underlying assumption held by these participants appears to be that they were not expecting the session to be enjoyable, interesting or engaging.

In determining to what extent the session contributed towards student learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict arising from diversity in a constructive way, the responses to the last item on the CIQ will subsequently be discussed. These findings are triangulated with the list of lessons learnt that was compiled during the discussion of the “take home message”. Furthermore, the responses to the other questions on the CIQ will provide information on what contributed to student learning and what hindered the process.

The majority of responses to the question of what surprised the students most were devoted to the theme of discovering commonalities and differences amongst themselves within this diverse group, together with their capability to co-operate as a team in spite of individual differences. Some of the more descriptive responses in this regard will consequently be shared.

Nine participants expressed their surprise at finding that they had a lot in common with fellow group members, for example:

“What surprised me most was the fact that we really have something in common with our fellow students.”

“Realising that there are people who are sharing the same interest with me in class.”

“That my group member and I have actually a lot of things in common.”

“Knowing that I have more similar things with someone I am not that close to.”

“That we as a group share same opinions and thoughts.”

“That everyone struggled with same things.”

These statements speak of fellow group members getting to know one another better and developing a better understanding for others by learning about their interests, opinions, ideas and problems. This interaction also contributed towards a discovery of differences within the groups, as five of the participants related their surprise in this regard, for instance:

“The way we noticed the differences among one another.”

“People had lot to say and we all think differently & act differently in certain situations.”

“The fact that even though we are doing the same course, we are different and unique individuals.”

These differences, however, do not deter group members from functioning well as a team and eight participants expressed their surprise at this discovery. A few of these contributions follow:

“That we are different but we can work together.”

“How people view things a lot differently but still find a way to work together.”

“How we actually worked together as a group and shared our views with each other.”

“How well our team could work together.”

Two participants attributed the capability of effective teamwork to good communication, as follows:

“That all of us can work well together if we communicate and voice out our opinion.”

“The power of good communication & how it affects our potential as an individual and a team.”

The responses relating to the students’ discoveries of their similarities, differences and teamwork are surprising considering that they had been functioning within these groups for the largest part of an academic year. In essence this denotes that they had been expected to work together, whilst they had not yet connected on an interpersonal level. This finding signifies the importance of creating opportunities for individual sharing in class. Ginsberg and Włodkowski (2009, p. 76) explain that connectedness in a diverse learning group creates a sense of belonging for individuals and ultimately the trust that develops leads to a spirit of tolerance that allows a measure of uncertainty and dissent. They continue that intrinsic motivation is elicited, not only when students’ social needs are met, but also when their authentic selves are recognised. The statement about “the power of good communication” supports this notion as it indicates a sense of how individual and team potential may be unleashed through good communication.

Table 1
Take home message: categorised

<i>Mutual respect</i>
Respect (other) points of view
Accept people for who they are
<i>Mutual understanding</i>
Do not make assumptions
Understanding and considering others
Not to dismiss someone who brings up issues
Acknowledge the other person's views rather than dismissing them
<i>Communication</i>
Good and positive communication skills – not degrading others
Proper communication to avoid negativity
Voice out
Listen to each other and share opinions
Be aware of facial expressions and body language
<i>Proactive approach</i>
(Apply) skills in the workplace
Restorative approach – build others up; correct a situation
Be the change you want to see in others
Be helpful – be a source of information for someone (e.g. help them to find something)
Be proactive
Make it your business to “know” – do your part!! (e.g. get to know the forms used in the hospitals)
Don't discourage others
Be brave enough to stand for what is right

As previously mentioned, the findings from the CIQ are triangulated with the list of lessons learnt that was compiled during the discussion of the “take home message” on conclusion of the session. The categorised list of contributions is presented in Table 1.

On categorising these responses, four main themes were identified, namely mutual respect, mutual understanding, communication and taking a proactive approach. These are briefly discussed.

Mutual respect is considered to be one of the two essential conditions in setting up an environment for productive dialogue; the other being mutual purpose (Watt, 2012, p. 137). Ginsberg and Włodkowski (2009, p. 75) explain that a respectful environment values the integrity of each person. This is reflected in the statements listed in the table above. Factors contributing to learning in this regard were possibly the setting of ground rules for discussion and the activities that were selected to facilitate a discovery of the personhood of fellow students. The creation of such respectful spaces welcomes one's sense of worth and self-expression without fear of threat or blame (Ginsberg & Włodkowski, 2009, p. 75). In turn, knowing that one's perspective matters, causes people to feel respected, safe, capable and accepted (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 26; Ginsberg & Włodkowski, 2009, p. 75). Watt (2012, p. 139) confirms that allowing persons to be authentic in the space of these dialogues cultivates mutual respect.

Brookfield and Preskill (2005, p. 226) add that respectful recognition also counteracts the tendency to label, categorise, stigmatise or form stereotypes. In this instance communicative learning emerges as participants strive to understand what is being communicated rather than following the natural tendency to label, categorise or form stereotypes (Mezirow, 2012, p. 77). *Mutual understanding*, which involves reflective judgment and is considered to be an adult learning capability, is therefore fostered in an atmosphere of non-judgment, where various perspectives are openly shared (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Acquiring the ability to take another's perspective is not only essential in responding constructively to conflict, but is also considered crucial in developing democratic trust (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 26; Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 224).

The statement “do not make assumptions” forms part of the development of mutual understanding, which includes a

questioning of assumptions. This requires critical thinking and the discovery of the temporary nature of knowledge, thus leading to transformative learning. Kreber (2012, p. 323) summarises this as follows:

“The ability to reflect critically on the assumptions underlying what is communicated to us, and those informing our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions, is of fundamental importance in order to address the challenges, responsibilities, and complexities associated with adult life.”

Kreber (2012, p. 323) continues by quoting various exponents in the field of educational philosophy and other authors in concluding that critical reflection on assumptions is imperative for sustaining positive personal relationships; productivity and well-being in the workplace; as well as a healthy democracy. The development of mutual understanding is therefore a fundamental adult life skill that enriches one's personal functioning and expands into other contexts, including citizenship in a democracy.

The statements about *good communication* reiterate the comments made in this regard in the CIQs. It is well-known that good communication forms the basis of constructive conflict resolution (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, pp. 223–224). The students' awareness of the fact is reflected in their responses stated above. They also captured the essence of civil discourse that involves the ability to express themselves in such a way that others are not offended or dismissed. Their statements additionally support the norms of courtesy that enable civil discourse, such as active listening, taking turns to talk and acknowledging different perspectives (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 272; Mezirow, 2012, p. 81).

The statements categorised according to the theme of *taking a proactive approach* contained actions to be taken in future. The contributions convey a sense of personal responsibility in achieving the session goals and relate to the recommendation of taking a “restorative approach”. A restorative justice approach involves the development of good mutual understanding, taking personal responsibility and working with all parties involved to consider action steps for future reference. This is acknowledged as a constructive process for responding to and resolving conflict with civility and compassion (Weigand & LePau, 2012, p. 151).

The list compiled by the students, to summarise their take home message, contains the essential skills which according to Johnson and Johnson (2010, p. 223) are required for integrative problem-solving negotiations. This involves disputants working together to create an agreement that benefits everyone involved (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 223). Consequently, the group, at the very least, was aware of the basic skills that could aid them in navigating diversity and responding constructively to conflict in future.

On being asked at what moment they were most engaged, six participants responded that they were engaged throughout the duration of the session. The majority of the participants (27), however, found activities involving interaction with peers to be most engaging. Some of these contributions referred to interaction in the general sense though engaging in discussion (8), sharing (4) or providing feedback to the larger group (4). Others referred more specifically to the setting of ground rules for discussion (2) and the paired listening activity of sharing lessons learnt from a significant person in their lives (9). A selection of the more descriptive responses to this question follows:

“From the beginning of the lesson when we as students had to discuss what we have in common.”

“I was engaged when doing group discussions.”

“I was most engaged when I was sharing my thoughts with the person next to me.”

“When we were discussing as a group and also individual reflections and where we spoke about what we have learnt.”

“At the moment where we had to share important lesson learnt with a fellow learner. I was most engaged because I had to share and I also had to listen to my fellow classmate as she was sharing her important lesson that she learnt.”

The second most engaging activity was found to be the video; supported by 16 participants. Only four participants found the short PowerPoint presentation to be most engaging and two participants valued facilitation as opposed to lecturing:

“When they engaged with us by teaching and not lecturing and trying to steer us to the right direction.”

“The moment the lecturer began (she was energetic and we participated too).”

A small group of participants (5) found the team building activities, such as making a team flag or the competition involving them having to look for a hidden image of a bee on the PowerPoint slides, to be most engaging.

Both actions by fellow-students and the facilitators were noted as being affirming and helpful. The majority of responses to this question related to the open sharing (16) and collaboration (14) within the groups. Some of these statements are listed below.

Open sharing:

“Opening up and speaking our views.”

“Sharing our differences and common qualities.”

“When they were listening.”

“Engaging with my group one-on-one.”

“When one of the students shared her story, it was helpful because I could relate to her story.”

Collaboration/participation:

“Participation of all the students and group members around my table. Working together.”

“People raising their hands and giving feedback. It boosted my confidence to give feedback too.”

“Group members - explaining questions that I didn't fully understand.”

“Noting down our ideas; listening to what others have to say; adding to what we say.”

“When others participated, I felt comfortable to participate.”

Actions by the facilitators (10) that were found to be helpful were: providing an opportunity for participation; asking the group to give feedback; repeating what was said to gain clarity and show that attention was paid to what was said or shared; and the creation of a respectful environment. This included encouragement of sharing thoughts and ideas:

“Never being shot down, but encouraged in developing my thought or idea”

“Response of facilitators to our answers.”

“The lecturer by giving (us) chance to give feedback.”

“The lecturer being active in speaking loud and making the lesson enjoyable.”

“When they were asking if we were still fine.”

“Repeating back what was said or shared to gain clarity and show attention was paid.”

Individual comments related to finding the opportunities for reflection, good communication and getting to know one another, as well as the team building activities and the video clip to be helpful and affirming.

A confluence of factors, such as the facilitation of the session, the venue and grouping arrangements, as well as responses by fellow-students contributed towards making the environment

conducive for democratic discussion. These statements reaffirmed themes already addressed in the discussion of results.

Nine participants reported never feeling distanced as learners during the course of the session. One of these participants attributed this to active participation in the learning process:

“None, considering that we were asked to participate in everything.”

The same activities that engaged some students caused others to feel distanced, for example the video (7), the PowerPoint presentation (6), discussion (7) and providing feedback (2). This indicates the necessity to cater for diversity by engaging students in a variety of learning activities (Wakefield, 2011, p. 28). Four participants attributed their feeling of being distanced to distractions, such as a short snippet of background music that was played at the end of the video, the ice breaker and a team building activity (finding the bee).

The majority of responses (13), however, related to insufficient academic stamina. Eight of the participants felt distanced towards the end of the session and one of these explained finding it hard to concentrate for two hours, as follows:

“Last discussions, two hours are long to concentrate so I zoned out.”

Other responses also related to the maintenance of attention. One participant found it difficult to remain focused when finishing an activity before the others; two others found it hard to keep up when facilitating questions were asked and yet another reported being distracted during the course of the session. One student demonstrated self-awareness by attributing his/her feeling of being distanced to having arrived late.

“I was distant because I arrived late so it got confusing.”

The majority of participants (30) noted that they had found nothing puzzling or confusing. Six participants, however, referred to the behaviour of fellow students, for example:

“How many people who are usually quiet spoke up.”

“I saw one group where only one member did most of the work.”

“When people kept interrupting others while talking even though we did have ground rules”.

“I think other people did not say exactly what they are feeling.”

“One of the students talked about us being a source of information so I was confused until she elaborated.”

Three participants reported being unclear about instructions and two others found it difficult to think of responses to two different activities, namely the lesson learnt and coming up with a name for their team. The remainder of the responses to this question were individual and made reference to the PowerPoint presentation, discussion or having to listen to another person and the team building activities.

9. Consolidation

The results provide evidence that the nursing students learnt to navigate diversity and respond to conflict in a constructive way. In considering what facilitated this learning the study confirmed that the achievement of learning outcomes within a short time frame necessitates the engineering of a learning opportunity. It should preferably include an assortment of learning activities to meet the learning needs of a diverse student population.

The creation of an environment conducive to learning requires careful preparation. The content to be included should be considered in relation to the planned learning activities, the time

available and adequate provision should be made for meaning making. Setting up the room according to the planned learning activities conveys a non-verbal message that participants matter and it creates an expectancy that the learning opportunity will be of a collaborative, constructive and productive nature.

In a diverse learning environment collaborative activities have proven most useful, as opposed to formal presentations. Collaborative activities enable students to hear instructions and content in more accessible language as used by their peers. In the process self-directed learning is stimulated through direct involvement with the content and learning is enabled by repetition and sharing.

The person and skills of the facilitator are significant as a presence is created before a word is spoken. Brockbank and McGill (2009, p. 204) explain that one is present by virtue of one's posture, gesture and tone of voice, hereby carrying across one's position in relation to the group by merely being in the room. Within a diverse learning environment, the facilitator needs to convey respect, warmth and an openness that invites discussion in a genuine way (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 29–30; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009, p. 75). By relinquishing an authoritative position to encourage a sense of mutuality, facilitators have an opportunity to model the democratic dispositions they would like students to mirror (Baxter Magolda, 2014, p. 31; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 12, 45). This should preferably be an ongoing and growing process where expectations of students become gradually more complex.

In addition, this study illustrated the importance of creating opportunities for individual sharing in class. This was facilitated by paired listening and circular sharing activities that encouraged equal participation and further promoted a sense of connectedness and mutual respect. This was further enhanced by the facilitators acknowledging contributions, linking these to earlier statements and encouraging more responses. In so doing the facilitator is decentralised as an only source of knowledge.

Obtaining feedback on learning opportunities is crucial to gauge the learning that is taking place, to determine which learning activities were most suited and how learning could best be enhanced within a certain context. The feedback received in this study indicated, for example, that some students were not clear about instructions. It may therefore be helpful to encourage the class to ask for a repetition of instructions or to call a facilitator whenever they need clarification in future. The students could also be encouraged to ask questions or make use of clarifying and perception checks within their groups to enhance communication and learning.

The need for the students to build academic stamina was also identified. In response to the specific areas of difficulty mentioned by the participants of this study, academic stamina could be boosted by gradually expecting more of the students in terms of concentration, time on task and workload.

10. Limitations

The results cannot be guaranteed, as future responses to diversity and conflict cannot be predicted. The students did, however, display their capability of connecting with one another and co-operating as a team. They could also list strategies for future use. Considering the fact that the study explored the usefulness of “best practices” in facilitating learning in this regard, generalisation to other contexts should be investigated in future.

11. Conclusion

In assisting a diverse group of first year nursing students to learn to navigate diversity and respond to conflict in a constructive

way, the engineering of a session programme was found to be valuable. Providing multiple means of engagement was essential as the same learning activities found to be engaging for some students, caused others to feel distanced from learning. Through the provision of variation all learning styles were accommodated. The creation of a welcoming and respectful environment, where students were encouraged to connect with one another and participate freely, contributed to their learning. The facilitation of the session through the encouragement of equal participation, as well as the acknowledgement and linking of student contributions were also noted as being helpful and affirming.

Receiving class feedback to gauge learning and student responses to learning opportunities was important. This information provided guidelines as to what to continue doing and what to adjust in future. Continuously focusing on what and how students are learning is deemed essential in providing the necessary support to facilitate academic success. The value of the study was therefore the exploration of best practices for facilitating learning in a diverse population of students, including how to elicit their internal voices and encourage participation and collaboration.

Facilitating learning about navigating diversity and responding to conflict in a constructive way was found to be a complex process. Considering, for example, that the School of Nursing had made an effort to establish inclusion on entry to the university, this case raises questions about the sufficiency of such endeavours. In conclusion it is asked to what extent nurse educators should be expected to model democratic practices in the classroom that support citizenship in a democracy.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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