Using Theater to Explore Poverty and Food Insecurity Issues in an Undergraduate Community Nutrition Course

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Background
Research has demonstrated promising benefits of arts-based education in other health-related disciplines. For example:

- A systematic review of arts-based pedagogy in undergraduate nursing courses revealed benefits in improving knowledge acquisition, empathy, emotional state, attitude toward others and ethical maturity.1
- The incorporation of theater, observation of works of art and drawing activities has been effective in fostering broader awareness of others, self-awareness and communications skills among medical students.2
- Analysis of visual art has impacted the perceptions of occupational therapy students, influencing their perspectives, emotions, therapeutic encounters and integration ‘outside of the box’.3

Few studies have investigated the potential role of arts-based education in nutrition and dietetics coursework.

- A literature search revealed only one published manuscript addressing the arts in connecting classroom content with real-world issues and social problems.4
- To our knowledge, no studies have been published to date on the use of theater in nutrition and dietetics curricula.

Objective
To explore the potential of theater as part of an undergraduate community nutrition course in shaping students’ attitudes, beliefs and empathy toward individuals experiencing food insecurity and living in poverty.

Methods
Participants: Students (n=11) enrolled in an undergraduate community nutrition course at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford, Connecticut. All were majors in nutrition or public health.

Intervention: Students attended a 1-hour live theatrical performance on campus with professional actors that addressed the everyday experiences of families living in poverty and confronted a wide range of social issues connected to food insecurity.

Evaluation: Mixed methods cross-sectional design.

- Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS):
  - Validated, 39 Likert items
  - Administered pre- and post-conference
  - Students indicated level of agreement to statements regarding poverty and food insecurity

- Written reflection paper:
  - Assigned for homework post attendance
  - Students responded to questions addressing:
    - Topics in published literature on the arts and student learning in health-related disciplines5,6
    - Their views related to poverty and food insecurity
    - Expectations about the performance
    - Responses coded by thematic analysis and coding assessed for inter-rater reliability

Table 1. Changes in mean empathy scores on Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS), pre/post attendance at a theatrical performance that addressed poverty and food insecurity (n=11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Possible Scores1 (Lowest – Highest)</th>
<th>Pre-Test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-Test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Change t (DF)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UPPTS Empathy Score</td>
<td>39–195</td>
<td>85.6 (14.3)</td>
<td>75.4 (13.6)</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lower scores suggest a positive, more empathetic view of those in poverty. Higher scores suggest a negative view and lower level of overall empathy toward those living in poverty.

Table 2. Changes in mean scores2 for each factor on Undergraduate Perceptions of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS), pre/post attendance at a theatrical performance that addressed poverty and food insecurity (n=11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors (Subcategories)</th>
<th>Pre-Test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-Test Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t (DF)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attitudes toward welfare programs</td>
<td>2.76 (0.48)</td>
<td>2.45 (0.48)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sense of poor people being different or “other” from non-poor</td>
<td>1.96 (0.50)</td>
<td>1.68 (0.47)</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Belief in need for institutions and individuals to do more</td>
<td>2.02 (0.59)</td>
<td>1.65 (0.51)</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Belief in equal opportunity among poor</td>
<td>2.43 (0.40)</td>
<td>2.12 (0.69)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Belief in fundamental right to food, shelter and healthcare</td>
<td>1.24 (0.40)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Attitudes about resources and access to change situation</td>
<td>1.75 (0.60)</td>
<td>1.66 (0.65)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean scores on Likert scale (1 to 5). Note: Some questions on UPPTS are reverse scored when analyzing data (e.g. responses of “1” scored as “5”, “2” scored as “4” and vice versa).

Conclusions

- Theater can be beneficial in providing students with opportunities to broaden their perspectives on real world issues.
- Observing a live theatrical performance allows students to learn different points of view and experience a range of emotions beyond the content addressed in traditional course readings and assignments.
- Theatrical performances that address the stories of real people can be particularly impactful.
- Future studies with larger samples are needed to better understand the potential role of theater in nutrition curricula.

References

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