

Panel Discussion: Creating A Spirit Of Inquiry In The Classroom

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ABSTRACT

A paucity of published literature exists related to the use of panel discussion as a teaching strategy. This article describes the panel discussion, the underpinnings of constructivism and the use of panel discussion to create a constructivist classroom environment. Details of planning, evaluating, and challenges of a panel discussion are also provided.

Keywords: Panel Discussion; Constructivism; Teaching Strategy; Community Health Nursing

INTRODUCTION

A limited amount of information is found in the literature about panel discussion as a teaching strategy. Most of the information references actual panel discussions regarding a particular topic rather than its use as a teaching strategy. The authors believe that panel discussion is a valuable teaching strategy that is advantageous to learning in a variety of disciplines. Because of its relative invisibility as a teaching strategy in the literature, the assumption is that panel discussion is underused as a teaching method in higher education. A review of several nursing education textbooks identifies multiple teaching strategies used in nursing education. The most common approaches to teaching include lecture, gaming, debate, questioning, problem-based learning, case-study, simulation, and role play (Bradshaw & Lowenstein, 2007; DeYoung, 2009, Fitzgerald, 2008; Rowles & Russo, 2009). In the few instances where panel discussion is mentioned, the topic is presented covertly and in conjunction with another teaching method such as group discussion (Fitzgerald, 2008). Details of the use of panel discussion as a teaching strategy to facilitate learning are provided in this article as it is used in a community health nursing course.

DEFINING PANEL DISCUSSION

Panel discussion and symposium are derivatives of the forum with each having its own unique features (Sisco, 1998). The Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines forum "as the place of public discussion." The forum has long been part of history in the United States and a method by which citizens shape democracy; an example is the New England Town meeting. In recent times and even on a daily basis, the forum, symposium, and panel discussion are used by citizens to discuss or debate political, environmental, or ethical issues. A forum typically has one resource person and is attended by a group of at least 25 people. A moderator guides discussion and the audience raises issues or asks questions of the resource person and each other and it has a semiformal feel. The symposium is more formal with two to five persons, who are authorities on a topic, present their content; afterwards the audience asks questions. A panel discussion consists of three to six persons who have specialized knowledge in an area and have a purposeful conversation with each other on a select topic. After the conversation, the audience asks questions of the panelists (Sisco, 1998).

Some experts believe that a difference exists between conversation and discussion. Conversation has a cordial tone and is used for the purpose of growth, whereas discussion is a more serious conversation where opinions are expressed and participants in the discussion are affected by expressed opinions (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). In the same way, the panel discussion has the tone of a conversation or discussion. One purpose of a panel discussion is to teach learners about various roles in a profession. For example, in a psychology classroom, the panelists may be counseling, school, industrial-organizational, research, and forensic psychologists. A panel in an

engineering course may include industrial, aerospace, biomedical, petroleum, mining, and agricultural engineers. This type of panel discussion lends itself to sharing knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of each of these experts in the field and has a conversational tone. In contrast, a panel discussion in a political science course may include a panel of politicians who affiliate with varying political parties. In this situation, the panelists discuss controversial issues such as the death penalty, energy, gun control, or health care reform. An economics class has panelists that may discuss the bull and bear markets, how to solve the debt problems in the United States government, or the existence or non-existence of recession. During these types of panel discussions, opinions are expressed which affect the panelists and audience and has the tone of a discussion.

PANEL DISCUSSION AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The traditional orientations to learning as presented by Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) include behaviorist, humanist, cognitive, social cognitive, and constructivist approaches. The panel discussion has underpinnings of creating a constructivist classroom environment; however, the making of a constructivist classroom is more than the teaching strategies used by the facilitator; it is about creating relationships between students, teachers, and ideas (Windschitl, 1999). From a constructivist perspective, learning requires that the learner be actively involved in the process of learning rather than passively learning and memorizing information (Gordon, 2009). In social constructivism, the student creates ideas through interaction between and with the teacher and other students (Powell & Kalina, 2009). From the viewpoint of social constructivism, creating knowledge involves talking about and sharing problems or tasks, and the process of learning is aided by experts in a particular field (Driver, 1994, as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Constructivist discussions are considered on a continuum where unstructured, student-directed conversation and authoritative structured, teacher-directed instruction are end points. Between the end points is the middle ground, the community of inquiry (Golding, 2011). A community of inquiry is a discussion about “topics of interest, in the service of constructing knowledge and common understanding, and internalising the discourse of the inquiring community” (Paradales & Giord, 2006, p. 306, as cited in Golding, 2011). Panel discussion is a teaching strategy that aides in creating a spirit of inquiry in the classroom and is discussed in the next section.

USING PANEL DISCUSSION TO CREATE A SPIRIT OF INQUIRY

A panel discussion is routinely used in one community health nursing classroom to familiarize nursing students with the roles and responsibilities of the community health nurse. In this venue, the strategy is shown to enhance students’ knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of a nursing specialty that students label as ambiguous. Entering the community health clinical practicum is a unique experience for nursing students. At this point in their education, students are confident practicing in a controlled hospital environment. Now they are expected to care for individuals, families, and populations in a variety of settings outside the hospital that are less controlled and where resources are limited (Leh, 2011). During these new types of clinical encounters, many nursing students experience feelings of anxiety, unrealistic expectations, and have preconceived ideas about the experience (Leh, 2011; Melincavage, 2011). In the unfamiliar setting of the community, students admit to vague and confusing ideas about the role and responsibilities of community health nurses along with little recognition of the value of community health practice (Leh, 2011). It is imperative to identify and discuss these preconceptions in order to ensure a successful learning experience and to develop decision making skills that are critical to nursing practice in all settings (Leh, 2007). Using the appropriate teaching strategy helps educators to facilitate meaningful conversation in the classroom. Panel discussion, a teaching strategy that is seldom considered by educators, gives students the opportunity to develop that spirit of inquiry with peers, teachers, and experts in the field. It also provides an opportunity for students to hear several people share knowledge and viewpoints about a topic that is controversial or that attracts multiple perspectives.

Using the example of the nursing course panel discussion, nurses from various community health specialties are invited into the classroom to share their passion for community health nursing and to enlighten the students about what it is they do on a daily basis. Inviting community health nurses from agencies and sites where students are assigned for clinical practicum allows students to ask questions of the panelists and learn about the roles and responsibilities of the nurses with whom they will be working with during their clinical rotation. Meeting the nurses face to face provides a comforting reassurance that the community health nurses are eager to share their

knowledge and support the student nurses as they begin their journey into a unique clinical specialty. At the conclusion of the panel discussion, it is expected that students will be able to: 1) identify community settings for nursing practice; 2) recognize the role of the community health nurse; and 3) appreciate the value of community health nursing.

Preparing the Students and the Panelists

Preparing students and panelists for the session is important to its success. Students need to be familiar with the general topic of the panel discussion so they are able to ask appropriate and relevant questions. In the case of the community health panel discussion, a few weeks prior to the scheduled event, students use their community health textbook as a resource to investigate the roles of nurses in home health, case management, school, public health, faith-based nursing, correctional nursing, and occupational health. In other disciplines, it is recommended that students use required textbook readings or internet websites, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics on the United States Department of Labor website (2011), as resources to learn about various specialties within a profession.

Students prepare two open ended questions to ask each panel member. The faculty member reviews the questions and chooses those that generate interesting and timely discussion and best capture the functions of the nursing specialties. It is these questions that students ask the panelists. While the nature of this activity is similar to the authoritative structured, teacher-directed constructivist discussion, this helps to facilitate and lead to the community of inquiry constructivist discussion wherein different questions arise and are openly discussed among students, panelist, and teacher to promote learning (Golding, 2011).

Inviting panelists who the moderator or faculty member knows professionally has advantages. Panelists who are enthusiastic, well informed, speak effectively, and have specific points of view regarding their area of community health practice aid in the success of the panel discussion. Invited panelists are informed of the purpose of the panel discussion, the learning objectives, and what is expected of them as panelists. To make this a win-win situation, panelists are invited to provide handouts or pamphlets to the class that describe their agencies, or advertise upcoming events, job opportunities, or professional development events for students.

Arranging the Panel

The seating arrangement of the panelists lends to the success of the event. The most important factor to consider, regardless of audience size, is that everyone is able to see and hear the moderator and panelists. Members of the panel face the audience and it is important that the chair of each panel member is positioned to allow the panelists to see each other easily. For purposes of the community nursing panel, long tables and chairs are arranged in a semi-circle and name tents identify the panelists and their nursing specialty areas. With larger groups, closed-circuit television and image magnification or using a raised stage to seat panelists are ways to facilitate visualization of the panel. Microphones may also be provided for each panelist, the moderator, and for students to ask questions. The moderator is situated at the end of the panel arrangement or in the midst of the panelists. If speakers' attributes are known, it is wise to seat those who are lively speakers at the end and quiet speakers in the middle to draw everyone into the discussion (Ramsborg, 1996).

Moderating the Panel Discussion

The moderator of a panel discussion is the key to its success. A moderator is responsible to introduce the panel, manage the designated time frame, and guide the discussion (Sisco, 1998). The moderator may be the classroom instructor, a selected student, or another faculty member. Depending on the timeframe and intended outcome, the moderator encourages panelist-panelist interaction and attendee-panelist interaction and discussion. These interactions between and with the teacher, panelists, and students help students to create ideas and are in consonance with the social constructivism viewpoint of learning (Powell & Kalina, 2009). A moderator understands the topic, goals of the discussion, the panel discussion process, and is sensitive to the various views and opinions of panel members and audience. To start, the moderator introduces panelists to the audience in a way that enhances their credibility and creates a relaxed atmosphere. In these opening comments, the moderator works to capture audience attention, then immediately shifts that attention to the central point of interest. A skilled moderator offers

comments that keep the conversation animated and moving, ensures that each panelist has an equal chance to contribute to the discussion, while at the same time controls the amount of time for each question. The presented information is summarized by the moderator at the conclusion of the session (Ramsborg, 1996).

Establishing a Format

Various formats for managing a panel discussion are appropriate, but it is important that a strict time limit be enforced for each part of the discussion. The following plan is used effectively for the two hour community health panel discussion. The moderator introduces the topic of community health nursing roles and responsibilities. Each panelist is given two minutes to introduce themselves to the class and give an overview of their practice area. Panelists are then asked to devote three minutes to presenting their views and opinions about the rewards and challenges of their practice area and their personal impetus for entering that specialty area. It is important that the moderator monitor the time spent on this aspect so the class has ample time to address their pre-selected questions to various panelists.

For the community health panel discussion, the faculty member, who acts as moderator, calls upon individual students to ask a preselected question of one panelist. The moderator arranges the questioning so that panelists speak on a rotating basis. **Figure 1 provides a sampling of student questions from the nursing panel discussion.**

Figure 1. Sample of Student Questions

What aspects of school nursing differ from the responsibilities of a school nurse of 20 years ago?
How are resources obtained and allocated within the local public health department?
How can nurses be more actively involved in determining the course and priorities of public health efforts?
What measures are taken to ensure the safety of the nurses when they are traveling to client homes or in the client home?
What do you feel are the greatest challenges in infection control within the prison system?
From the textbook description of an occupational health nurse, it appears that the nurse would be more of a workplace advocate rather than an employee advocate. Would you agree or disagree with this statement?

Following the question and answer segment, the moderator provides class members the opportunity to voice their views and opinions. Students are encouraged to express their fears and doubts related to entering the community setting during this time and panelists are also given time to ask the students questions. The moderator then closes the discussion and provides a summary of the knowledge gained from the activity.

The interactions throughout the session provide an opportunity to create relationships between students, teachers, panelists and ideas (Windschitl, 1999). While knowledge is created from the beginning of the panel discussion, the knowledge that is created during the sharing of views and opinions by students, panelists, and even the teacher is of the utmost value. It is within these interactions that the social constructivist view of creating knowledge and ideas is most apparent (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Here are the students who are experts at learning, and teacher and panelists who are experts in the area of community health nursing talking and learning with each other about the concerns and problems students have when entering the community health nursing culture (Driver, 1994, as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Evaluating the Strategy

As with any teaching strategy, evaluation of the activity is an integral component of the implementation process. Careful consideration of comments and recommendations of students and panelists directs modifications and revisions of the process for use with future panel discussions. At the conclusion of this particular panel discussion, the instructor solicits feedback from the students. A survey containing open-ended questions (see Figure 2) is distributed to each student in an attempt to identify students' perceptions of the strategy, obtain suggestions for improving the strategy, and to qualitatively evaluate the success in meeting the learning objectives.

Figure 2. Sample of Evaluation Questions

Was the physical environment appropriate to meet the needs for the discussion?
Were the panelists properly selected for the topic and the learners?
Was the moderator effective in initiating interest and controlling the flow of communication?
Were the selected student questions effective in eliciting responses to address the intended objectives?
Have your views and/or attitudes toward community health nursing changed after participating in the panel discussion?
If yes, how so?
What did you learn?
What are your suggestions for improvement for future panel discussions?

An analysis of comments reveals that students appreciate when panelists discuss issues or topics amongst themselves. They comment that it is refreshing to see nurses collaborate and learn from each other by asking questions or reacting to the views and opinions of other panel members. Students report that they are enlightened by the stories of the panelists and surprised to learn that this specialty requires more nursing knowledge and skills than they perceived prior to the discussion. For future panel discussions, it is recommended that panelists also have the opportunity to participate in this evaluation process. Figure 3 provides a sample of specific student responses to the questionnaire.

Figure 3: Sample of Student Comments

“I was able to put faces to specific community health nursing areas.”
“Although we learned it in lectures and readings, it is nice to actually see and hear examples of this.”
“There are so many aspects of community health that I was not aware of.”
“I never realized that school and correctional nursing are so in depth.”
“I learned how to deal with ethical dilemmas in many situations.”
“The panel was interesting, educational, and inspirational.”
“I learned how important it is for nurses in the community to collaborate with each other.”
“I learned what my role will be in the nursing community – I want to be a community health nurse.”

CHALLENGES

Consistent with other presentation formats, the panel discussion presents challenges and limitations. The success of the discussion is dependent on the skill of the moderator in guiding the discussion and on the knowledge and credibility of the panelists. An irresponsible panel member or moderator manipulates the informal nature of the discussion to promote a personal agenda (Ramsborg, 1996). If all panelists agree on a subject, the presentation is less dynamic. Similarly, if the discussion is over-rehearsed, spontaneity is lost. The main challenge for the educator is making the time commitment to plan and organize for the panel discussion.

CONCLUSION

Panel discussion as a teaching strategy is useful in various disciplines to foster student engagement in learning and aids students, teachers, and panelists to construct knowledge and ideas about various roles in a profession or about a controversial issue. When used in the community health nursing classroom, panel discussion brings awareness to the specific skills required to function in this setting and promotes a greater respect and appreciation for the specialty. While organizing the panel discussion does require time on the part of the educator and panelists, students reap the benefits of the knowledge gained with the use of this teaching method. Panel discussion is an effective teaching strategy worthy of adding to the educator toolbox to generate that "spirit of inquiry" in the classroom.

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