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Original Article

Application of Forum Theatre to Humanities Education for Medical Students: Focusing on Empathy

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Purpose: Humanities are increasingly being introduced in medical curricula and discussed in the medical education literature. How to teach or inspire students is the most important aim. Especially empathy, it is a conception, a real life reaction. We applied the Forum Theatre to break the ice.
Material and Method: A cross-sectional study to assess the empathy of all undergraduate medical students in a medical university was conducted using the Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy Student Version (JSPE) before and after Forum Theatre. Demographic data was obtained using a pre-test, semi open-ended questionnaire.
Results: A participation rate of 68.9% was observed. Total students were 60 (30 male) with average age 21.6±2.8 years old. The mean empathy score was found to be 86.58±13.83 and 86.16±15.50 respectively before and after Forum Theater. Empathy was found to be associated with gender of the participant, with female having a higher score, but not significantly.
Conclusions: No significantly difference before and after Forum Theater may be due to limited sample size and short time exposure. Furthermore, we require further studies to analyze and address the underlying factors associated with it.

Keywords: Forum Theatre, Humanities Education, Empathy

1. Introduction

In Taiwan, there is an increasing awareness of the need to include humanities in the medical curriculum. Medical humanities contain a lot of different themes such as history, ethic, skills of communication, economics, system of national insurance, empathy, and so on. Among them, empathy is the heart of clinical care and therefore needs to be the core of medical education. However, empathy is a concept, a reflection of our daily life, too. A conventional didactic approach gives medical students the already declarative knowledge about the empathy. It can not provide medical students the opportunity to practice and to explore attitudes and behaviors that can influence their own clinical practice in the future. So, the teaching of empathy to medical students is challenging under the traditional classmate lecture model or small group discussion. Empathy can only be caught and not taught (1.2). Furthermore, how to encourage and inspire medical students remains an important goal.

Forum Theater, one of Theater of the Oppressed, a term created by Augusto Boal in Brazil, was firstly developed in the 1950s (3). As the named, it contains stimulating discussion (forum) and exploratory debate (theater). It is largely based on the idea of dialogue

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and interaction between audiences and performers. Audience becomes involved in the stage characters via theater format. So, an audience has the opportunity to sharp their thinking, feeling, reflections and creative solutions to the challenges encountered from their narratives. Audience is not only as spectator under stage but also as actor on the stage. It is called spect-actors in Forum Theatre. Boal emphasized that this practice is not intended to show the correct path, but rather to discover all possible paths which may be further examined (3). The unique interaction way makes Forum Theater such a potentially powerful education tool.

In fact, it has been used successfully within education subjects in different area including healthcare related education with students from nursing, pharmacy and medicine(4-7). Based on the previous study, most of the participants had feedback with Forum Theatre that might influence their attitude and behavior and enhance empathy. In our study, we try to introduce most of the medical issues derived from ethics, legal, interpersonal communications and relationships, as well as our national health care system, to a newly developed hidden curriculum with the improvisation style of Forum Theatre. Moreover, we will include the case studies and try to build a better relationship between doctors and patients. Hopefully, this will improve the students' independent thinking, learning interests and empathy.

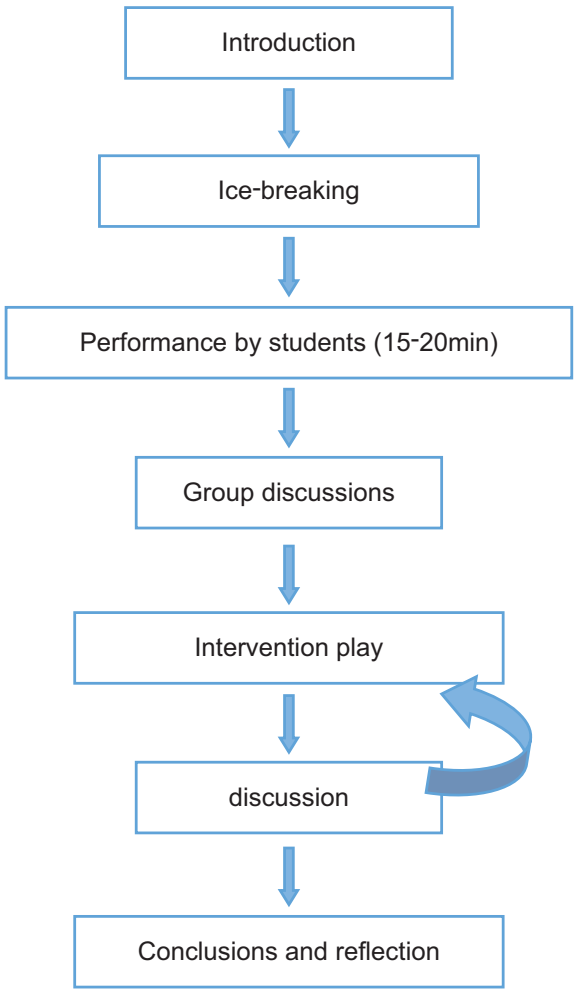


Fig 1. Process of Forum Theatre

2. Material and Method

A script created by medical volunteer medical students since September, 2017. After discussion with teachers, medical staffs, chairman in hospital and government officers, they decided to explore the topic about the impact of decreasing working hours and night shift of residents on the medical care system. Then a 3- hour workshop was performed by previous script-writing volunteer medical students. A month before the scheduled workshop, we invited all medical students from the first to fifth grade who were taking courses related to medical humanities in our medical school. We had two episodes with the same script in December 2017 and January 2018. The script could be shown by scanning the QR code at the attached file.

In the beginning, the teacher gave a brief introduction about Forum Theatre and the concept about spect-actors. For warming up and ice-breaking, a small game such as paper-scissors-stone for grouping was followed. It repeated and repeated until we observed that most of the students had smiling faces, relaxing body langue and more talking with each other. A complete theater was performed after students were attracted and focused on the stage. During group discussions, they shared and found to fall into a dilemma in the theater. For solving the difficult situation, students had a chance to replace the actor on the stage. After they witnessed the plays, the audience, by a show of hands, chose one of the plays depending on which role they struggled the most or identified with [3]. That play was the forum: the Joker

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Table 1. Empathy scores in different gender by pre-test and post-test

	Male(n =30)	Female(n =30)	t-test
Pre-test(Mean±SD)	83.84±10.74	89.37±16.07	p=0.12
Post-test(Mean±SD)	84.68±10.78	87.6±19.09	p=0.75
t-test	p=0.58	p=0.69	

Box 1: Qualitative Feedback of Forum Theatre

1. An innovative way of learning
2. Interesting
3. I'd love to try it
4. After the performance, I'm able to stand in the shoes of my role and willing to take actions
5. Unforgettable
6. I'm able to feel the empathy through role
7. Let me have a sense of participation
8. I really enjoyed in discussions on stage and under the stage.
9. It is a productive workshop.
10. Willing to express our thoughts

(in the Forum Theatre term for the facilitator who orchestrated the forum) at any stage of the dilemma faced up to the actors who was playing the role of the oppressor [3]. It could be repeated and repeated from different students depends on time and issue. (Fig 1) At the end of workshop, all the students were encouraged to write about and to reflect on themselves. During the workshop, the real-times interaction system-ZUVIO was going. For assessment the empathy, the Jefferson Scale of Physician Empathy Student Version (JSPE-S) before and after the workshop. JSPE-S is a questionnaire with twenty questions via a 7-point scale (8.9).

2.1. Statistical analysis

All analyses were conducted with Excel version 365 for Microsoft software. Difference between before and after groups were evaluated by using t test. The results were considered significant at a p value of less than .05.

3. Result:

There were 87 students were recruited; 60 (68.9%) of them completed the questionnaires before and after workshop. Male was 30 and female was 30. The average age was 21.6±2.8 y/o. The JSPE scores (mean ± standard deviation) were 86.58±13.83 and 86.16±15.50 before and after workshop respectively. There was no significant difference, p=0.87. We further analyzed difference between genders. For male, there was no significant difference before and after workshop, p=0.58. (Table1). For female, there was no significant difference, either (p=0.69). However, the female JSPE scores were higher than male both before and after workshop. The qualitative feedback of Forum Theatre was partly shown in Box 1.

4. Discussion

After Forum Theatre was applied to medical humanities class with the topic about the impact of decreased working hours of residents, the JSPE scores did not show significant different before and after class. Higher scores were observed in female students than male.

Empathy is the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. In the clinical practice, empathy has a very important role in association with sharing decision making, communication with patients, bad news information and other complex medical issues. The knowledge or concepts of empathy has been learned a lot since primary, juvenile and

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senior high schools by traditional teaching method such as lecture in Taiwan. In medical school, do we need more lecture about the empathy? Forum Theatre may be an another option. Our result showed there was no significant different before and after the class, but female students had higher JSPE scores than male. The result is similar to the New Zealand study (10). There was no significant different in JSPE scores irrespective of medical or nursing students after two-hour empathy training. In our study, only medical students had once Forum Theatre intervention to experience empathy. JSPE score is a popular and well validated tool for survey. It contains with twenty questions from different way to evaluate empathy. But the short time (such as 2-4 hours) course may be too brief to last impact on self-reported JSPE scores for our students.

However, for sex difference, we usually say"boys will be boys", "girls are emotional and sensitive". The gender stereotypes have perpetuated the notion that women are more empathetic and caring (11). A study from 127 community residents completed self-report measures of empathy and forgiveness (12). The results showed that women were more empathic than men. There was also image support. A functional MRI study was performed on 12 females (6 during their follicular phase, 6 during their luteal phase) and 12 males, measuring these tasks and self-report empathy questionnaires from Germany(13). The result showed females rated themselves as more empathic than males in the self-report questionnaires. And further analyses of functional data revealed females showed stronger neural activation across all three empathy tasks in emotion-related areas, including the amygdala. It is possible hormonal effects and stronger amygdala activation in females during their follicular phase. From above view, our result was similar.

Previous studies, scripts were well prepared at first and actors were professional. In our study, our theater performers were students and our script was created by students themselves after discussion with classmates, teachers, staffs in hospital and observation or related experience of themselves. It is different from other studies (4-7). One reason is our limited budget which is not enough to support professional actors and scenarists for once workshop. The other reason, the script developed by students might reflex more concerned issue of students and be more close to the real life of students. For this view, it might awake empathy easier.

We also applied real-time interaction system-ZUVIO during the workshop. ZUVIO allows teachers to prepare their lessons beforehand, conduct questions and answers during class, and help them quickly gather the opinions and answers of students, enhance interaction in classroom and be on top of the teaching situation[14]. In Taiwan, many students are shy to express their thinking in the public not only in element school but also in university. To solve this problem, ZUVIO can provide an open-space via their smart phones to speak out their words at the same time. It is the first time to use the system in the Forum Theatre. It brings more active positive and hand on. Students can speak louder by words and anonymous.

From the reflect feedback, there were three major direction (Box 1). First of all, most of students had positive feeling with the new teaching method. They were more concentrated in the class. They spend less time on sleeping, internet, doing anything with no relation to class context. Secondly, they were exciting to be spect-actors. Although, on the stage they needs more courage and more moral encouragement, they realized the new experience before and after on the stage. Finally, different views were presented from their classmates in the same issue. Empathy might be kept in students' mind and thinking naturally.

There were some limitations of our survey. First, this was just a 3-hour workshop. It is obvious too short to implant empathy for medical students. Furthermore, to add their future patients-doctor communications with more empathy is limited. It needs many times of Forum Theatre at different professional level including medical students, residents, even attending staffs. Second, our sample size is small. We need more diversity from departments such as nursing, social works and other healthy care providers. It might be close to the real life. Finally, most difficulties in Forum Theatre are how to handle the rhythm, how to focus on the discussions. Teachers and jokers need more experience and practice.

In conclusion, for medical humanities education,

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Forum Theatre is an interactive and impressed teaching method especially focus on empathy for medical students. It needs more time to prepare and is a challenge for both teachers and students.

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