

The Liberal Arts, Then and Now, and Their Application to Nursing Education

Hirokazu HASEGAWA¹⁾ and Robyn FAIRHALL²⁾

Abstract : The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of the liberal arts in nursing education. Liberal arts subjects and their links to critical thinking, competency, empathy and patient understanding are explored and the use of liberal arts in nursing in Australia, America and Europe is identified. The benefits of the study of liberal arts in an increasingly technical world made ever smaller by globalisation are discussed.

Key words : Liberal arts, critical thinking, competency

The educational philosophy of the Berlin University, founded by Karl Wilhem von Humboldt, was based on the idea that the mission of the university was the provision of education in the liberal arts and cultural subjects. After the students increased their knowledge of culture they could then try to acquire specialised subjects and become specialists in particular fields. The process of specialisation in education can be viewed as the construction of a house, with the foundation of that house being the liberal arts. Modern education, however, has become increasingly specialised and subdivided. Globalisation has also led to increasing standardisation of education in many fields throughout the western world. Now we cannot play any international sport without using international rules.

This standardisation of society has been important in the areas of science, technology, economic activity, international law, lifestyles and international communication. The process of standardisation of societies can be traced back many centuries. In the Middle Ages there was Medieval Latin instead of English and theology instead of science and technology.

Application to Nursing Education

How then can this process be seen to have impacted on nursing education in the 20th century and beyond. The movement of nursing education into the tertiary sector, which began in the 1920's and gained momentum in the 70's and 80's, has resulted from several forces. Foremost among these has been Nursing's desire to achieve recognition as a profession in its own right and to develop its own unique body of knowledge to support its claim to professional status. Another influence has been the recognition of the need for a broader education for nurses in order to develop the skills necessary for nursing in the modern age.

With the movement of nursing education into tertiary institutions came an emphasis on integration of the liberal arts into the professional curriculum (Rowe, 1996). Exposure to the liberal arts enhances the student's understanding of health and illness. It can inspire students, bring new insights into the practice setting and develop awareness of the wholeness of the person for whom we care. The liberal arts assist students to develop flexibility and problem solving skills, make decisions and resolve conflicts, both professional and personal (Stowe and Igo, 1996). They help students

1) Professor, Department of Social Welfare (retired) 2) Lecturer, Department of Nursing

本研究は、平成10年度日本赤十字秋田短期大学共同研究費助成によるものである。

develop empathy and compassion and allow a broader understanding of the world in which we live. A study by Rowe (1996) showed that nursing students linked liberal art subjects such as the behavioural and social sciences with the development of communication skills, critical thinking and the concept of the whole person. They identified these subjects as providing them with the tools and understanding needed to examine themselves and their patients in comprehensive ways.

Critical thinking is seen as central to the liberal arts because these subjects foster development of the ability to identify and question underlying assumptions, to consider the context of events, to analyse implications and to propose alternatives. The liberal arts use a written knowledge form, encouraging students to read critically and to express themselves articulately. Writing becomes a tool for thinking, for generation of ideas, and for generating solutions (Wold and Moon, 1996). Literature exposes students to different ideas, viewpoints and experiences and encourages them to explore the meaning and significance of this information. It increases their understanding of the needs and experiences of others. Liberal arts are integral parts of some medical and nursing courses in Australia and the United States of America. It has been proposed that adding liberal arts subjects to pharmacy education will assist pharmacists to identify the human dimensions of medical treatment (Talley, 1996).

Another factor supporting the inclusion of liberal arts in nursing curriculums has been the growth of the competency movement in western societies as a way of demonstrating educational outcomes and ensuring minimum standards in education and practice. Competency has become the aim of nursing education and this requirement has been formalised in England by the UKCC in 1988 and in Australia by the demonstration of set competencies as a requirement for registration. Competency in both these countries is "assessed through learning outcomes, which are intended to show communication, interpersonal, management, critical, problem solving and analytical skills" (Bradshaw 1997, p.348). These are the very characteristics a liberal education is believed to develop. Demonstration of critical thinking by graduates is also a significant criterion for accreditation of nursing programs in America (Jenkins and Turick-Gibson, 1999).

This then has been one of the driving forces behind recognition of the benefits of, and requirement for, the inclusion of liberal arts in the educational programs of nursing students. Nursing educators recognised the benefits of liberal art studies some time prior to the development of the competency movement, which occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s, but the competency movement has increased the recognition of the benefits of liberal arts study in the minds of employers and government. This recognition has led to a strengthening of the arguments used by nursing educators in justifying their inclusion in nursing curricula.

Yet there continues to be disputation about the priorities of Nursing education in many quarters. Technology, which is essential in health disciplines such as nursing, has encouraged an emphasis on technical skills and illness as the primary focus of nursing education (Moyle, Barnard and Turner, 1995). Technical skill without compassion, however, reduces the patient to object status and limits the quality of care provided. Wajcman (in Moyle, Barnard and Turner, 1995) "argues that technological knowledge increasingly alienates both the patient and the nurse in order to create an impersonal, dehumanised health care system" (p.5). If nurses are to avoid this objectification of their patients they require educational opportunities which allow the development of insight and understanding. As previously discussed, the humanities are considered one of the best influences on the development of such knowledge. The liberal arts and humanities encourage us to know ourselves, and with that knowledge comes a sensitivity to the experiences and needs of others.

We can not know how a situation really feels unless we experience it for ourselves but it is impracticable as well as impossible for student nurses to experience all of the situations in which patients find themselves. The liberal

arts allow them to understand these situations through reading about the experiences of others. An example of this method is Oliver Sack's book, 'The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat' (1987). This book uses short stories to describe the experiences of patients with a range of neurological conditions. Books written by individuals who have experienced such conditions allow the student to see the experience from the patient's perspective and broadens their understanding of that experience, and their role in the care of those patients. This takes them beyond the physical and medical, into the realm of emotion and meaning. Such understanding can only improve their ability to provide care for patients. A range of such books are introduced as part of the nursing program at Monash University because of the benefits they have been shown to provide for the students, such as development of empathy, situation analysis, and recognition of individual care planning needs.

Psychology and sociology are essential components of nursing curriculums because they enable the student to understand the context of illness and the effects of society, and individual variation, on illness behaviour and development. Cross-cultural studies are also considered essential to the nursing curriculum because of Australia's diverse cultural mix. The study of ethics comprises a substantial part of the curriculum due to the many ethical dilemmas that confront nurses on a daily basis and an increasing public expectation that nurses will act as patient advocates to protect patient interests in situations where ethical dilemmas occur.

The curriculum of the School of Nursing at Monash University places emphasis on the use of liberal arts in nursing education especially in the first year of the program where emphasis is placed on development of critical thinking and analytical skills. Written communication is emphasised due to the need to clearly communicate with other nurses and health professions in the health field. It is essential for the nurse to be able to state clearly, and to analyse correctly, events that occur in the workplace. Student nurses are assisted in the development of these skills through the use of a variety of teaching techniques. These include an examination of relevant literature, use of role play, study of liberal arts subjects and appropriate class room activities.

The debate continues as to the best use of the limited time available to nursing educators but that very lack of time is one of the strongest arguments for inclusion of the liberal arts in a nursing curriculum. We do not have time to teach the students everything they need to know. The most valuable skill we can give them is to teach them to learn. We cannot teach them all the skills a nurse must master in his/her career but we can equip them to become lifetime learners whose knowledge base will be able to grow as innovations in medical and nursing care continue to develop at an ever accelerating pace. To conclude this discussion I leave you with one last thought. Do nurses need a liberal education to let a patient die? No, but they must know literature, philosophy and psychology to manage family dynamics, cultural differences and the grieving process (Bingham 2000)

REFERENCES

- Bingham R. (2000) "The River Running Through Us: Exploring the Implications of Nursing Education", AWHONN Lifelines Vol 4 (4), Aug/Sept, pp. 63,64.
- Bradshaw A. (1996) "Defining 'competency' in nursing (Part 1): a policy review", Journal of Clinical Nursing Vol 6 (5), pp. 347-354.
- Moyle W., Barnard A. and Turner C. (1995) "The humanities and nursing: using popular literature as a means of understanding human experience", Journal of Advanced Nursing Vol 21 (5), May, pp. 960-964.

Rowe N.M. (1996) "A study of baccalaureate nursing students' linking of liberal education with their professional nursing education", The Ohio State University 1996 Ph.D.

Stowe A.C. and Igo L.C. (1996) "Learning from Literature: Novels, Plays, Short Stories, and Poems in Nursing Education", Nurse Educator Vol 21 (5), Sept/Oct., pp16-19

Talley R. (1996) "Lessons from the other literature", American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy Vol 53 (5), March, p. 517.

Jenkins P. and Turick-Gibson T. (1999) "An Exercise in Critical Thinking Using Role Play", Nurse Educator Vol 24 (6), Nov/Dec, pp. 11-14.

Wold K.L. and Moon G.F (1996) "A New Image of Nursing Faculty Participation in Undergraduate Education", Nurse Educator Vol 21 (4), July/August, p.5