Plato’s cave and Aristotle’s collections: dialogue across disciplines

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This paper describes a joint effort between the Department of Theatre and the School of Nursing at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA. The purpose of this collaboration was to design and evaluate techniques commonly used in theatre programmes to help doctoral nursing students understand philosophical content. Various theatre workshop techniques are commonly used with undergraduate theatre students in order to help them bring abstract ideas to physical life. In other words, these techniques and exercises help bridge theory and practice. Doctoral nursing students must learn abstract philosophical content as well as the ways in which this content might appear in clinical practice. For example, knowledge of the differences between Platonic and Aristotelian ideas of reality is an important part of their development as scholars.

Using specially designed theatre games, a dramaturge constructed a series of exercises that enact the well-known myth of Plato’s cave, and in so doing conveyed its key ideas. Students then went on to explore key differences between the Platonic and Aristotelian ideas of reality embodied in two contrasting games.

An outcome of this workshop for these students was a deeper, more thorough understanding of a key philosophical text as well as the tensions between two foundational philosophers in western history. In addition, students learned tangible methods of applying insights to their clinical practice. In the authors’ view, this collaboration illustrated an integrative approach to learning life and work, and they concluded that theatre arts and nursing could be a complimentary match in cross-disciplinary teaching.

The key difference between Plato and Aristotle is the basic understanding each has of the ultimate nature of reality. Plato, a more theoretical philosopher, believed that any particular aspect of reality was an instantiation of an abstract and perfect or ideal form of reality. He was a rationalist, locating ultimate reality in an eternal, immutable world of ideas/forms. True knowledge of reality was knowledge of forms which could only be derived from reason. For Plato, knowledge derived from the senses, that is, perception was considered unreliable. Aristotle, on the other hand, was a more practical thinker and believed that one discovered principles by reasoning from the ‘real thing.’ For Aristotle, knowledge of reality was based on experience: all knowledge of reality being anchored in perceptual experience. For him, reality exists within the concrete spatio-temporal objects of this world. Aristotle was a realist, he believed in an observation-orientated understanding of the universe that emphasized purpose. He rejected Plato’s two-tiered philosophy on reality, maintaining that all that is real is part of one world, not two different but connected ones (Shand, 2002).

The theories and concepts Plato and Aristotle would have used in daily life to perform practical tasks differed by world view, thus producing different practical results. This scenario is analogous to modern clinical practice wherein nurses use the nursing process to guide their work, but may arrive at very different plans of care, prioritizing their actions based on the complexity of their experiences with real and ideal forms in practice.

By exploring the contrasting ways in which Plato and Aristotle might have seen the world, we hoped...
to demonstrate to doctoral students the different ways in which it is possible to approach clinical practice. The goal was to help students identify differing understandings of clinical reality in the work place. Because theatre techniques are useful in bridging theory and practice, we wanted to see if they were effective in helping students understand the central idea of Plato and Aristotle and the difference between them. Specifically, we wanted to know if theatre techniques can enhance students’ capacity to appreciate the concepts of Plato’s ‘ideal’ and Aristotle’s ‘real’ as well as how these ideas might show up in clinical practice.

We reviewed available literature in The ARTS, ERIC, PsychInfo and CINAHL databases to determine the degree to which drama is used as a teaching method with students and clients. Although 1058 abstracts were retrieved, there were only eight nursing citations that referred to the use of drama to communicate with patients (Birdsall & James, 1999; Peter, 2000) and to encourage learning in nursing students (Fursland, 2001; Hurst, 1993; Riseborough, 1993). However, only two articles had relevance to our particular interest. Penney & Warelow (1999) discussed the theory–practice gap in nursing, and argued that ‘reflection in action’ has the potential to change nursing practice and can be facilitated by dialogue or action, as in plays and theatre games. O’Connell & Clerkin (1997) described a collaborative effort in which sophomore nursing and senior theatre arts students were paired for role-playing that simulated patient interviews. No other literature was found that explicitly used theatre techniques or games to facilitate nurses’ ‘reflection in action’ on practice.

The authors, a nursing faculty and a dramaturge from the theatre department, respectively, developed theatre games designed to reflect Platonic and Aristotelian ideas which are described below. They facilitated a 2-h workshop in which eight nursing doctoral students were the actors in the theatre games. These students were a self-selected, convenience sample, acquired in response to a general e-mail, an announcement of the project that was sent to all PhD students. The University Theatre Department generously donated use of their black box theatre for this workshop. The actual theatre games were led by the dramaturge. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of Massachusetts and written informed consent was obtained before the start of the workshop.

‘Plato’s cave’ exercises

All the actors sit in the audience, as in the allegory (Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, 4th century BC), facing a white wall back lit by a ghost light. Actors were to guess from the shadows what objects were being held. In the first step, the dramaturge held up various objects in the light so that shadows were projected on the wall. She then rotated the objects 90°. The actors were to guess the objects. The Platonic idea is that the shadows are not reality for two reasons. They are only what can be seen and what can be seen is ephemeral and not precisely defined. By rotating the objects, the dramaturge is conveying that the shadows are transient and not immutable.

In the second step, actors looked at the ‘real’ objects and tried to imagine their perfect (ideal) form. ‘Real’ objects are ephemeral because they are not immutable, they can be damaged or destroyed. The objects are, in some sense, incomplete because they do not show the full range of possibilities of what the object can be. For Plato, the ‘ideal form’ is therefore more real, more perfect, more enduring and shows more possibilities.

In the last step of this exercise, the actors were asked to think about a disease as analogous to an ‘ideal form’ and a symptom as analogous to an unreal form. For example, they were asked to envision the (ideal) disease from isolated symptoms such as an elevated temperature or a rash and to consider the implications for clinical practice. The overall aim of these exercises was to help students develop a habit of mind in which they would look through the objects at hand to see the abstract patterns that lie beyond.

Aristotle exercises

In this game there were two identical sets of objects and the goal was for actors to match objects to objects. The aim of the exercises was to help students develop a habit of mind or strategies that would help
them remember a unique collection of objects after having observed them. An actor was chosen and the rest remained in the audience. One set of objects was arranged on a table in a seemingly abstract configuration, and on a second table identical objects laid in a heap. The actor had 25 s to look at the random arrangement of objects on the first table, which was then screened from view. The actor was then asked to arrange the corresponding objects in the exact same configuration without looking back and the total number of correct placements was recorded. The exercise was repeated with a different configuration and again the number of correct placements was recorded. The entire exercise was repeated with a second actor, after which each actor talked about what strategies they used, what worked and what didn’t, and any special mnemonics that were used.

In the second step, the game was repeated but the actors had only 10 s in which to look at the objects. However, this time, the actors could use a notepad to sketch the pattern of the configuration of the objects to help reconstructing the pattern. After the reconstruction, the facilitators asked the actors what they noticed in the game and to describe any strategies that helped.

In the third step, the game was repeated allowing the actors 15 s to look at the configuration of objects. After sketching the configuration, the actors handed their sketch to someone else and described the patterns before attempting the reconstruction from the heap of objects. After the reconstruction, the facilitators asked the actors the same questions.

At the conclusion of the workshop we offered students pizza and soda in a social setting. They were asked to complete evaluation forms that were designed in keeping with the strategies outlined by Stassen et al. (2001). Students were asked to describe the strengths and limitations of the workshop and to give recommendations for improvement. They were asked to give one example of something they learned or something they wished they had learned. Finally they were asked if the workshop contributed to increasing their knowledge and understanding of Platonic and Aristotelian notions of reality. The following two quotes reflect some of the students’ observations.

Performers who did the matching exercises did better the first time rather than the second. It’s like they hung onto the very first images best….Much like in the allegory what they (prisoners) knew first (shadow in the cave) was what they were most comfortable with [knowing].

Two people can see an image at the same time and have totally different perceptions, regarding the image. As a nurse scientist it reminded me to continue to challenge myself and push myself to look at things in different ways.

Students could not observe and remember a unique collection of objects without employing abstract and ideal patterns or forms. In fact, they found the Aristotelian memory exercise much harder the second time. In discussing this in terms of clinical practice, they agreed that as nurses they mostly operate from a set of rules based on experience and algorithms.

Students reported that any notes or drawings were interpreted in relation to past experiences of the person using the sketches. The most important aspect in remembering the configurations was whether or not the student had previous experience or knowledge of the object. When students relied on their knowledge, their performance was better than when they made notes that were either too complete or too abstract.

In thinking about the exercises in relation to practice, students reported that their past experience with particular symptoms or situations was more helpful in understanding a given situation than if they approached that situation with strong, preformed ideas. The latter were limiting while the former allowed them to understand the situation more accurately and completely.

From a nursing perspective, these theatre games provided a way to explore complicated and abstract ideas of reality and helped students to understand their own philosophical preconceptions. These ideas are relevant to practice and the games offered a creative way to help students reflect on how they use these views in making sense of particular symptoms in relation to ideal patterns or diseases. From a theatrical perspective, the games explored a new use of theatre beyond the conventional notion of performance of a play, demonstrating that theatre games could be used to expand the subject matter that can
be dramatized. The workshop explored performance not as self-referential, but as an extraverted means of discovering aspects of lived experience in the world. Continued collaboration between nursing, philosophy and theatre could enrich all of them.

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References


