

Cinematic Technology

The Role of Visual Learning

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Using movies as a classroom teaching strategy can provide a dynamic learning experience that engages students in learning complex material and enhances and visually illustrates lecture content. The authors discuss their use of movies and its outcomes in teaching psychiatric and mental health nursing.

The act of learning takes many forms. Learning styles can be classified according to the preferred sensory modality of the learner when internalizing knowledge. The primary sensory modalities are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.¹ One tool to aid their experience is visual learning, a method of teaching and learning that associates ideas, concepts, and information with images and techniques.² Film, a medium that taps into visual learning, allows users to experience an event visually, see a behavior, and feel a change in someone's affect. From a learning perspective, a film allows students to observe and understand clinical content, in our case a psychiatric mental health (PMH) condition, and have the opportunity to empathize with the actor's circumstances. Film offers an alternative teaching tool that students enjoy and is feasible as a result of advances in technology.

Cinematic Technology

Colleges are investing in applied science as students increasingly rely on computers, online courses, distance learning, and smart boards that enhance how information is presented and facilitate learning.³ Technology, through e-learning, simulation, and cinematic portrayals of real-life experiences, shapes the way in which our students learn and apply knowledge. Nurse educators are progressively integrating simulation into the learning experience, using SimMan and Medi-man.⁴ Simulation can bring a clinical case study to life for students by mimicking what is seen in real-life situations. Although considered an effective teaching tool that can model medical and surgical scenarios, simulation may be self-limiting because it cannot accurately portray the expression of individual affect and behavior.⁵

Film offers a visual portrayal, often a personal narrative, of the emotional aspects of living with a mental illness that students can use to strengthen their conception of PMH disorders. It has been noted that it is through our visual sense

that we can better absorb information and incite emotion.⁶ Film may have tremendous influence on learning, because the viewer develops intimacy with the subject of the film and forms a unique connection with the characters.⁶ Films are significant methods of teaching that can provide students with insight regarding mental disorders, as well as an awareness of how a mental disorder can impact someone's entire life. Motion pictures can positively influence students' perceptions about PMH by realistically portraying subject matter that is often negatively biased because of misinformation.⁶

Carpenter et al⁷ incorporated a full-length movie into an intersession course to break up a very long day. The authors described how by using movies in their class they offered a way for the students to initiate class discussion. Upon completion of the film, the students worked on a reflection, sharing their feelings and thoughts with the other students in the class. The authors stated that the use of this film enhanced the students' learning and discussion of the class topic.⁷

Parker and Faulk⁸ used feature films in a learning activity during a health systems class. The authors concluded that use of films in the classroom allowed their students to gain a better understanding of the theoretical basis for a nurse's actions and not just the clinical concepts. The authors distributed a list of 10 questions to guide the students' reflections and group discussions. The authors concluded that showing the movie and the subsequent allowed the students to gain an enhanced understanding of the lecture content.⁸

Wall and Rossen⁹ used film and music as teaching strategies in a psychiatric nursing class. Their opinion was that today's college students prefer viewing movies as opposed to reading a text. The authors developed a teaching approach that used film analysis. The assignments helped the students explore their own beliefs and feelings toward mental illness and to identify with the characters in the film. The assignments involved a written project and a group presentation. The authors believed that using film and music in their classroom enhanced the learning experience of their students and the knowledge they would not have been able to obtain with traditional textbooks alone.⁹ Herrman¹⁰ described several methods of using film clips in class as a way

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of creating discussion time and enhancing critical thinking. The author believed that using film allowed students to experience a condition vicariously through the actors' or the clients' viewpoints. Quite a few examples of films are included in the article; these are suggested to enhance learning and build on existing teaching practices that are pleasurable for both students and teachers.

Film in the Classroom

We teach a senior-level, baccalaureate PMH nursing course that exposes students to theories and concepts that highlight mental health awareness and provides a distinction between mental health and mental illness. The course has 2 components: a series of didactic lectures and a hospital-based clinical rotation. The goal of the combined course is to promote critical thinking with the use of the nursing process to recognize psychiatric symptoms. Because of literature reports as to the benefits of film as a teaching strategy, we decided to use films to reinforce and highlight selected content.

We selected a mixture of relatively current films that covered content learned in the course. For each class, 1 film was selected that represented the mental health disorder discussed in that particular lecture. Some of those films were found in psychiatric nursing textbooks.^{11,12} We also selected the films by viewing them on our own, based on the description of the plot. The clips that were used in class were chosen after viewing the film several times and selecting appropriate scenes for teaching.

At the end of the lecture but prior to viewing the film clips, students were given a brief synopsis of the characters

featured in the film and a number of educationally focused questions reflecting the PMH content that was presented in the movie. During the film, students jotted down their multi-axial assessments as well as answers to the questions for subsequent discussion. Students applied critical-thinking skills to assess the ways in which the characters' illnesses affected their behavior, their relationships, and ultimately their lives. Brief summaries of the films that we have used are included in Table 1.

Class time consisted of a 4-hour lecture. Instruction for viewing the film was approximately 5 minutes, and the film clips were about 20 minutes long. During that time, the students were writing answers to the questions that were handed out. Class discussion afterward took approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

We asked the students to reflect on how the selected film illustrated the PMH disorder during the last 10 to 15 minutes of the class. Faculty summarized students' positive and negative comments to help us select future films. Overall comments were positive, and students rated the use of film in the classroom as helpful, informative, and a fresh approach to teaching. Several students commented that the experience of seeing the psychiatric disorder in action allowed them to better understand the experiences of patients that they were encountering during their clinical rotation.

Using Films to Understand Lecture Content

Because of the high volume of required material for this course, the authors selected certain topics for film clips, mainly disorders that the students may witness during their

Table 1. Synopsis of Films Used in the Course and Clinical Laboratory

Title of the Film (Year Released)	Brief Synopsis	Learning Points Illustrated in the Film
<i>Good Will Hunting</i> (1997) Directed by Gus Van Sant Starring Robin Williams and Matt Damon	A young man named Will Hunting is a janitor at MIT. He has a gift for mathematics. He is an extremely troubled victim of child abuse and suffers from attachment disorder. He receives help from a psychologist to find direction in his life.	Stages of therapeutic communication Attachment disorder (child abuse)
<i>Mr. Jones</i> (1993) Directed by Mike Figgis Starring Richard Gere, Lena Olin	Mr Jones, a man suffering from bipolar disorder, and his relationship with a female doctor who takes interest in his treatment	Mood disorders Bipolar disorder
<i>A Beautiful Mind</i> (2001) Directed by Ron Howard Starring Russell Crowe, Ed Harris, Jennifer Connelly	A brilliant mathematician learns that his secret life as a cryptographer is a result of his mental illness.	Schizophrenia
<i>28 Days</i> (2000) Directed by Betty Thomas Starring Sandra Bullock, Elizabeth Perkins	A big-city newspaper columnist is mandated to enter a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center or go to jail, after ruining her sister's wedding. She had stolen a limousine and drove under the influence, ending in a severe car accident.	Substance abuse
<i>Girl Interrupted</i> (1999) Directed by James Mangold Starring Winona Ryder, Angelina Jolie, Whoopi Goldberg, Brittany Murphy	Based on a true story, a young writer in the late 1960s, depressed and directionless after high school, attempts suicide. This lands her in Claymore, a mental institution where she befriends other troubled young women on her unit.	Personality disorders (borderline and antisocial) Eating disorders
<i>Born on the Fourth of July</i> (1989) Directed by Oliver Stone Starring Tom Cruise	A biography of Ron Kovic who, paralyzed in the Vietnam war, becomes an antiwar and pro-human rights political activist after feeling let down by his country who he fought for.	PTSD

inpatient psychiatric clinical rotation. Although time is insufficient to view the entire film, the clips provide exposure to real-life illustrations. The film clips take fewer than 20 to 25 minutes of class time of a 4-hour lecture.

Therapeutic Communication

For our lecture on therapeutic communication, the authors selected film clips from *Good Will Hunting*. This film depicts many of the concepts taught in this introductory laboratory in a realistic manner. The characters in the film illustrate excellent therapeutic communication skills as well as all 3 phases of therapeutic communication.¹³ It also addresses the meaning and consequences of child abuse and the attachment disorder that can result from severe abuse as a child.

The film tells the story of Will Hunting, a young man who is both a prodigy and working class tough guy from south Boston who works as a janitor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Although Will Hunting has genius-level intellect, a photographic memory, and an overpowering gift for mathematics, he works as a custodian at MIT and lives alone in a sparsely furnished house in a run-down south Boston neighborhood. As a child, he suffered from abuse and lived in several foster homes; however, he subconsciously blames himself for his unhappy upbringing and turns this self-loathing into a form of self-sabotage in both his professional and emotional life.

During the first week of class, Will solves a number of difficult graduate-level problems, taken from algebraic graph theory that a professor left on a chalkboard as a challenge to his students, hoping someone might find the solution by the end of the semester. The professor becomes obsessed with discovering the person solving his difficult problems. When Will is sent to jail for several misdemeanors, the professor uses the opportunity to examine Will's intellect. As part of the conditions of his release, Will must see a therapist and work with the mathematics professor.

The therapist, played by Robin Williams, creates a real-world application of therapeutic communication, active listening, and the use of silence. Through therapy, the young man, played by Matt Damon, brings life to defense mechanisms of silence, empathy, rage, and anger. The therapist illustrates transference and depicts the cutting-through layers of injury for a client to accept the past and move forward. After the film, the students identify a possible diagnosis for Will, jot down their perceptions of Will, and answer several questions, such as the following:

1. What would Will Hunting's life have been without therapy?
2. What type of therapeutic techniques did you notice during the "working" phase of the film?
3. What were some of the symptoms of attachment disorder from which Will Hunting suffered at the beginning of the film?

Mood Disorders

For our lecture on mood disorders, we chose the film *Mr. Jones*. The film is about a musician, played by Richard Gere, who provides a distinct representation of bipolar I disorder.

The opening scene depicts Mr Jones as euphoric, joyful, and full of life. He is also quite seductive and compelling and spends an exorbitant amount of money. He refuses to comply with taking his prescribed medication because he feels good when he is manic; however, he states that the "lows are really low." Thus, students witness firsthand what patients experience with bipolar disorder and view the effects on their lives. They diagnose Mr Jones based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* multi-axial assessment and reply to several questions, such as:

1. What is the chief complaint?
2. What treatment plan would you outline?
3. What are the expected outcomes?

Psychotic Disorders

For our lecture on schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders, we use the film *A Beautiful Mind*. The film portrays the horror, terror, and anguish of a schizophrenic patient. The film provides an excellent depiction of the major obstacles and difficulties of treatment for this severe type of mental illness. The film portrays the real life of Dr John Nash, played by Russell Crowe, who won the Nobel Prize for economics in 1994. The film also reveals the reality of non-compliance with medication and the adverse effects of psychotropic medications. Nash eventually decides not to comply with his medication regimen because of the adverse effects and their effects on his relationship with his wife. He struggles to confront his hallucinations and makes strides to eventually get them under control. The students identify a psychiatric diagnosis based on *DSM-IV-TR* criteria. They discuss whether Nash's noncompliance with medication is both safe and realistic. Their reaction to electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is one of astonishment. They discuss how realistically the film portrays the treatment and how barbaric it seems, as some of them have already seen ECT in their clinical rotations. They consider what questions they would ask in this particular situation during their note taking, as well as reporting other observations about the patient's behavior.

Substance Abuse

In the lecture covering substance abuse, the students view clips from the film *28 Days*. This film portrays a young woman, Gwen Cummings, played by Sandra Bullock, who uses alcohol, acetaminophen and hydrocodone (Vicodin), and other prescription medications for recreational purposes. Gwen attends a mandated 28-day rehabilitation program, in lieu of jail, after she arrives drunk at her sister's wedding and falls into the wedding cake, steals a limousine, and crashes it into a house. The film vividly portrays what it is like to go through withdrawal and psychologically come to terms with an addiction. In addition, the film offers an accurate depiction of life in a 28-day rehabilitation facility.

Students respond to questions regarding the client's family history, shown in flashbacks in the film, and formulate a *DSM-IV-TR* diagnosis. They review the status of Gwen's relationship with others and the ways in which it affects her addiction. The students expressed sadness as to how prevalent this illness is and how destructive it can be for

all family members who are involved. Some of the students are assigned to a detoxification unit as their clinical site, and they discuss the similarities in the film and their patients such as hand tremors, nausea, vomiting, and especially the denial. They also create a treatment plan and list expected outcomes for this patient.

Personality Disorders

For the lecture focusing on personality disorders, we selected the film *Girl Interrupted*. The film encompasses several disorders and also keeps the students' interest due to the young and popular actors involved. The film takes place in the 1960s when a young woman, Susanna Kaysen, played by Winona Ryder, is in a psychiatric institution after a suicide attempt. At the institution, Susanna meets other women with a variety of psychiatric problems, including Lisa, diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, played by Angelina Jolie, and Daisy, who has an eating disorder, played by Brittany Murphy. The film is about life in an all-female psychiatric unit and vividly depicts personality traits that have gone awry.

The students are especially intrigued and excited by this particular film. The large cast of popular actors of their own generation makes it interesting for them, plus the fact that it is based on a true story. They expressed the fact that the story is very real to them and portrays a number of issues that many young people face even today. The students analyze the 2 main characters, Susanna and Lisa, and formulate a *DSM-IV-TR* criteria diagnosis, record observations about the client's behavior, and create a treatment plan and expected outcomes. They are surprised as to the drama surrounding a patient with borderline personality disorder such as Susanna, and how unstable and impulsive her behavior is. They are fascinated with Lisa's character and how aggressive and manipulative someone with antisocial personality disorder can be. The fact that the movie is portraying a female with this disorder is interesting to them, especially how she manages to break the law and becomes physically aggressive.

Anxiety Disorders

For the lecture highlighting anxiety disorders and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), we chose the film *Born on the Fourth of July* because many victims of war, or other natural catastrophes, develop survivor guilt.⁶ This film depicts the life of Ron Kovic, played by Tom Cruise, who is suffering from PTSD as a result of combat in the Vietnam War. He experiences tremendous guilt because he may have accidentally killed his comrade. He has a difficult journey living with the memories of his war experience.

The students discussed what it must be like to have survivors' guilt after a war and how Ron was haunted by the fact that he thought he killed his army partner. In addition, they discussed PTSD and how victims of war or natural disasters can suffer endlessly from the aftereffects. They talked about his nightmares and flashbacks and how he felt compelled to visit with his friend's family and tell them the truth. The students assess the histories of the character and his family and then formulate a *DSM-IV-TR* diagnosis. They identify the client's behavior, formulate a treatment plan, and anticipate outcomes.

Conclusion

The addition of film to a traditional didactic PMH lecture can enhance the classroom experience by adding variety. Using films as a teaching approach was energizing and created more interest and interaction in the classroom. This trip into popular culture improved class dialogue and fostered discussion among students that otherwise may not have occurred. Students demonstrated improved understanding of the mental illnesses portrayed in the films. Students' learning was improved through class discussions of film content, and the students increased their awareness of mental disorders. An open exchange of ideas was facilitated in the class as well. The many nuances of the films resulted in a highly interactive level of student participation.

The films created a higher level of cognitive processing than did discussion of the textbook content. This was noted by reviewing the handouts that the students filled out during the films. The students stated that they appreciated this unusual approach to learning about PMH disorders and that it made the concepts more real and pertinent to the lecture series. Students reflected on this in their class evaluations.

Cinematic technology and education, when incorporated into an educational curriculum, can be a creative and interesting way to stimulate critical thinking and classroom discussion. Many fashionable films depict a mixture of mental illnesses and common mental health issues. Faculty should take the time to view several films and evaluate whether they are right for their particular class.

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