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SHORT REPORTS

Interprofessional ethics and professionalism debates: findings from a study involving physiotherapy and pharmacy students

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Abstract

Ethics is a core component of healthcare curricula and may provide ideal content for interprofessional education (IPE). An IPE debate in ethics and professionalism was developed for first year undergraduate pharmacy and physiotherapy students. A controlled “before-and-after” study was conducted. The opinion of students on IPE, the debate topics and debating was determined before and after the debate. While there was no impact on attitudes to IPE or healthcare professionals, students agreed that debating ethics through IPE was a valid teaching modality. Students found the debates challenging. They stimulated critical thinking and interest in complex and controversial issues. Students also found it of benefit to work as a team. We conclude that in-class debate is a useful way of learning together.

Keywords

Debates, evaluation, interprofessional education, interprofessional ethics

History

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Introduction

There is some evidence that debates are more effective than lectures for teaching controversial topics (Koklanaris, MacKenzie, Fino, Arslan, & Seubert, 2008) and encourage students to consider alternate points of view (Gervev, Connor, Drout, & Wang, 2009). Debates have been used in the education of health professionals, but a review of the literature failed to reveal reports of interprofessional debates. The purpose of this study was to determine if structured debate is a useful way of learning together.

Background

The debate structure, format and evaluation were based on the literature (Darby, 2007; Gervev et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2007). Students were randomized and divided into twelve debate teams of six members. Eight teams were interprofessional, having three physiotherapy and three pharmacy students, while the other four teams comprised pharmacy students only. Each team was directed to assign a first, second and third speaker, report writer, minute taker and team leader to encourage participation of all students. Students were randomly assigned to argue for or against their current attitude towards the issue. The decision to assign students rather than allow them to choose their positions was taken to promote objective analysis and avoid biased assimilation (Darby, 2007). The contemporaneous debate titles, selected to appeal to both pharmacy and physiotherapy students, were as follows:

This house believes that...

- healthcare professionals have the right to refuse to treat
- healthcare professions are under-regulated
- we are student healthcare professionals not healthcare students
- healthcare professionals facilitate the cheating athlete

A dedicated site was set up on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Students could access the guidelines, general information about debating, ethics resources, and the discussion forum set up to facilitate team communication. A fully cited report and minutes of the team meetings were submitted via the VLE. The debate contributed 75% to the group mark, the minutes and report contributed 20% and if the team “won” the debate, according to a poll of the audience as to which side was most convincing (rather than what side of the issue they most support) they were awarded an additional 5%.

Methods

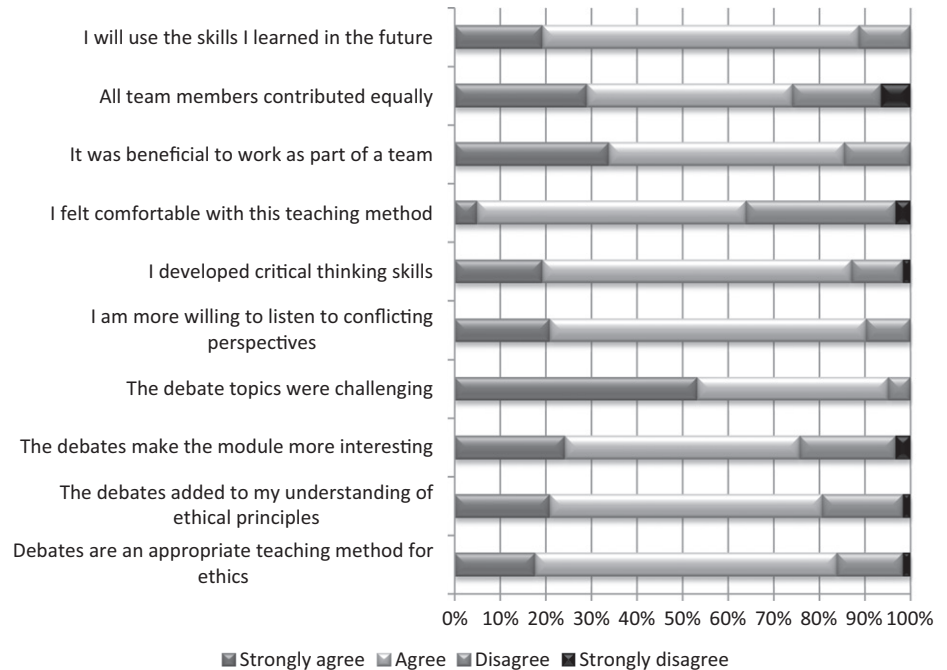
A controlled “before-and-after” study was conducted, with ethical approval granted from the RCSI Research Ethics Committee. Students were asked to complete the pre-debate questionnaires at the information session at the beginning of the semester and post-debate questionnaires immediately following the debates. The second year pharmacy students ($n = 55$), who did not participate in debates in their first year, were surveyed regarding the debate topics over the same timeframe. The four pharmacy-only debate teams allowed for an in-built control group with respect to IPE.

The validated instruments “The Readiness for Interprofessional Learning Scale” (RIPLS) and The “Attitudes to Health Professionals Questionnaire” (AHPQ) were used to assess the students’ attitudes to IPE and to healthcare professionals respectively (Lindqvist, Duncan, Shepstone, Watts, & Pearce, 2005; Parsell & Bligh, 1999).

Results and discussion

There were 76 (100%) responses pre-debate and 62 (82%) responses post-debate. There were matched pairs of pre and post intervention responses from 42 pharmacy students (84%; $n = 42/50$) and 20 physiotherapy students (77%; $n = 20/26$). There were 27 ($n = 46$) matched pairs of second year pharmacy

Figure 1. First year pharmacy and first year physiotherapy students' general views on debates and debating as a teaching methodology after undertaking interprofessional ethics debates.



students giving an overall control matched pairs response rate of 59%.

No significant differences were noted before and after the debates, or between the only pharmacy groups and the inter-professional groups, with respect to attitudes to IPE or healthcare professionals.

The debates did result in significant ($p < 0.001$) shifts in opinion on two topics, namely, that “healthcare professions are under-regulated” and “healthcare professionals facilitate the cheating athlete”. Opinions in the control group did not change suggesting that this finding is a true effect. We consider that significant shifts in opinion suggest encouragement of informed opinion. Debates have been criticised as having the potential to dichotomise complex issues, but this can be addressed by facilitating a class discussion after the debates (Darby, 2007) as was conducted after these debates.

The students were very positive regarding the debating experience. The introduction of debates was met with some apprehension, but students were significantly ($n = 61$, $p = 0.012$) more likely to disagree that they “do not like participating in debates” after the debate was conducted. Additional student evaluation was obtained after the debate (see Figure 1). As could be anticipated, the strongest held opinion was that the topics were challenging (95%; $n = 59/62$ of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing). Over 80% of students (83%; $n = 53/62$) felt that debates are an appropriate way to learn ethics. Over 85% (87%; $n = 54/62$) of the class agreed that they developed critical thinking skills.

The study was limited by small student numbers, only two professions and only one year of data. There was a large volume of missing data for the AHPQ, as students tended only to fill in the visual analogue scale relating to their own profession, prohibiting full statistical analysis.

Concluding comments

The intervention was designed to initiate early IPE, with a balanced number of professions, appropriate to the stage of the

curriculum. Students enjoyed the debates more than they expected to and found it of benefit to work as part of a team. The students were challenged into critical thinking and active learning. The interprofessional debates opened the students' minds to conflicting views, which is particularly valuable in teaching ethics. We conclude from this study that interprofessional debates promoted a positive attitude to learning. We believe that structured debate is a useful tool for teaching ethics and professionalism in an interprofessional context.

Declaration of interest

The authors report no declarations of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the writing and content of this paper.

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