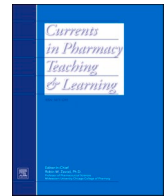




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When pharmacy and theater collide: How diversity can develop inclusive communication skills

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ABSTRACT

Background: Effective communication with patients and colleagues is key to a pharmacist's ability to provide effective person-centered care. Neurodivergent patients face many barriers when interacting with health professionals; increased awareness and understanding are therefore paramount to the pharmacist's role. This paper describes an innovative teaching partnership between a school of pharmacy and an inclusive theater company which aims to develop awareness and skills of undergraduate pharmacy students in relation to communicating with patients with autism and/or learning disabilities.

Educational activity: Forum theater and role-plays were used to complement existing communication skills teaching in Years two and four of the undergraduate MPharm (Master of Pharmacy) program. The sessions were designed and delivered in partnership between academic teaching staff and a theater company of neurodivergent actors. An online evaluation form was used to obtain student feedback on these sessions (two Likert-style questions and three open format questions).

Critical analysis of the educational activity: Of the 241 students who attended a session in 2021, 70 (29%) provided feedback. Feedback was positive, with 99% of respondents finding the session useful. Students spoke about how they found the sessions supportive and enlightening, helping them to reflect on their own communication skills. As a result, the teaching has been developed and now expanded through all years of the undergraduate program. While conscious of challenges such as funding and finding the right partner, the authors recommend this rewarding initiative to fellow academics.

Contribution to literature

More than 15% of the United Kingdom (UK) population identify as neurodivergent and whilst general advice around how to most effectively communicate with neurodivergent people exists, there remains a paucity of literature supporting effective communication in healthcare settings. The death of Oliver McGowan in 2016 starkly highlighted the health inequalities faced by people with autism

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and learning disabilities, and resulted in the UK's Health and Care Act 2022 requirement of mandatory training for health and social care professionals in regard to caring for such patients. This consists of an e-learning package plus either a one-hour online interactive session or one-day face-to-face training, depending on job role. At Cardiff School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences we have developed an evolutionary program of training, co-created with neurodivergent individuals, that enables the pharmacists of tomorrow to understand the healthcare experiences of neurodivergent patients. The program also provides the undergraduate students with ongoing opportunities throughout their degree to develop and refine their communication skills in order to most effectively gather information from, and relay information to, this vulnerable patient group. To the best of our understanding, this is the first example of such an educational and training approach within a UK School of Pharmacy, and this paper shares our experiences to inform and encourage fellow pharmacy education colleagues.

Background

As health professionals, a key aspect of pharmacists' everyday role is to communicate with patients, the public and colleagues, and the quality of that communication is key to the effectiveness of those interactions. Good communication has been recognized as "a fundamental aspect of quality patient care",¹ and research has shown that effective communication results in improved patient outcomes, both psychological and physical.^{2,3} As a result, communication and consultation skills form a key element of undergraduate pharmacy education, with UK Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) students required to "demonstrate effective communication at all times and adapt their approach and communication style to meet the needs of the person" according to the General Pharmaceutical Council.⁴ Communication skills training had traditionally focused upon supporting patients with a range of acute and chronic conditions. However, such patients' communication needs were generally straightforward as they were able to understand and respond to the student without any additional issues.

'Neurodiversity' is a term used to describe the fact that all people vary in their neurocognitive functioning – around 15% of the UK population identifies as neurodivergent.⁵ The term is commonly used to highlight that neurodivergent individuals (including people with autism or other conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities) may think or interact with the world differently from the majority, but that this is in no way a pathology or deficiency.^{6,7} Despite this, research has found that neurodivergent patients experience many challenges and barriers in accessing health care and health-related information, impacting on both their physical and mental wellbeing.^{8,9} Often the issues relate to health professionals making false assumptions about understanding or failing to consider the patient's individual needs.¹⁰ It is becoming increasingly recognized that raising awareness of neurodiversity amongst health professionals is essential for them to be able to adapt their consultation skills to provide optimal care to all patients.^{11,12} Indeed, the UK's Health and Care Act 2022 requires qualified health and social care professionals to undertake mandatory training on learning disability and autism, although this requirement does not extend to undergraduate healthcare students.¹³

Hijinx is one of Europe's leading inclusive theater companies, creating opportunities for learning disabled and/or autistic actors to create theater and film that aims to confound expectations and change people's perception of disability.¹⁴ Hijinx productions involve actors with and without disabilities who work together as equal partners. Their productions have toured globally to over 20 countries, and the company is internationally recognized as leaders of inclusive performance.

Hijinx provide professional performance training for 70 learning disabled and/or autistic actors, at five training Academies across Wales. These uniquely talented actors then become trainers themselves, as they are at the heart of Hijinx's award-winning, specialist training program for external groups and individuals. The highly interactive and engaging training sessions are designed to empower participants with the confidence and skills to communicate well with learning disabled and / or autistic adults. There is currently no published literature on how training such as this supports student health professionals, including pharmacy undergraduate students in their professional development. This case report therefore aims to share one School of Pharmacy's experiences in working in partnership with neurodiverse actors as part of the pharmacy undergraduate students' communication and consultation skills learning.

Educational activity

In February 2020, Cardiff School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences partnered with Hijinx to deliver forum theater sessions as part of the communications teaching for students in Year 2 and Year 4 of the undergraduate integrated MPharm course. Forum theater is a lively and engaging way of exploring the challenges that can arise when communicating with a learning disabled and/or autistic patient. A scenario is played out twice; on the second performance the audience is encouraged to stop the action and add suggestions or direction to steer the way the scenario unfolds.¹⁵ The sessions were initially funded by the School, with additional funding to support the project obtained from Arts & Business Cymru in 2021.

Each Year 2 and Year 4 student took part in one of these compulsory sessions, which sat within a series of traditional communication and consultation skills workshops for that academic year, where students role-play a range of scenarios with each other, staff or actors playing the part of the patient, client or fellow health professional. In some cases, students take it in turn to be an observer or marker to provide focused feedback to the student playing the role of the pharmacist, while in others feedback is provided by a staff member and/or actor. Advance information relating to relevant aspects of consultation skills, such as use of technology in consultations, is provided where necessary but generally there is no preparatory work required by the students. The sessions are run in workshop rooms or consultation rooms and the larger group of around 40 students is typically split into pairs or trios depending on the activity.

During this initial collaboration, Hijinx were able to deliver a series of role play-based training sessions. Two scenarios were used in

each session and each student attended one session. The scenarios were based on simple clinical queries (wanting to buy a sticking plaster and asking advice for a sore head) but were played by actors demonstrating two different personality types which each required a different communication approach. In 2021, the scenario was adapted and focused on a neurodivergent patient, who did not usually manage their own medications, collecting a new medication from the pharmacy. The medication was being used to treat Type 2 diabetes; however, the focus of the session was not on the condition or indeed the medication but around how the pharmacist provided information on the use of the medicine to the patient. Learning outcomes for the sessions therefore focused on reflecting on the communication skills of the pharmacist and recognizing ways in which such communication skills can be adjusted to specific circumstances in order to aid patient understanding. The scenario was jointly developed between academic and Hijinx staff, the actors then rehearsed the scenario and sought clarification from academic staff where needed. Rehearsals were filmed to aid in this process and to act as an additional learning tool to remind students of the activity in later years of the program.

The Year 2 forum theater sessions, which were jointly facilitated by academic and Hijinx staff, started with the students viewing a rehearsed role play between a neurodivergent actor playing the part of the patient and a neurotypical actor playing the part of the pharmacist, involving numerous examples of poor communication on behalf of the pharmacist. Students were asked to consider the communication skills presented to them which then informed discussion with the facilitator. The scenario was then re-played with students encouraged to stop the action and explore different, and potentially more effective, ways of communicating with the patient. The actors took onboard the students' direction to continue the interaction with the view to improve the communication skills of the pharmacist.

Year 4 students were exposed to the same clinical scenario but the session was conducted as a fishbowl session rather than forum theater. Split into groups of no more than 8 students, each student had the opportunity to directly interact with a neurodivergent actor, taking them through a portion of the consultation. With support from a Hijinx facilitator, students had the opportunity to reflect on their own performance as well as that of their peers and provide feedback / thoughts on how the communication could be improved in real-time.

All too often in classes, we find students approach case-based scenarios with the assumption that there will be a 'clinical' issue to address, sometimes forgetting that they are dealing with a person. It was not possible for them to do this in these sessions - communication was the key skill being explored and developed. These sessions opened their eyes to the possibility that a case may be complex not because of drug- or disease-related issues but because of the non-clinical nature of the interaction with a patient. These sessions provided students with the opportunity to interact with vulnerable patients, with different communication needs, in a safe and non-judgemental environment.

Students were asked to complete an optional anonymous online evaluation form after the teaching sessions in 2021 to share their thoughts on the teaching, the data was then copied to Microsoft Excel 2019® for review and descriptive analysis. Students could complete the form at any time after the session; reminders were not sent. The evaluation form was the standard training feedback form used by the Hijinx company to inform development of their training activities. The form consisted of two five-point Likert-style questions relating to how useful the students found the session and how likely they were to recommend it to a peer, plus three open format questions asking students what was useful (if anything), what could be improved, and asking them to describe one piece of learning which they took away from the session. There was also opportunity to add any further comments. Anonymized data from the evaluation was provided by Hijinx to the School to help academic staff to understand students' experiences and views of the session to determine opportunities to expand the collaboration. Formal ethical approval from the host institution was not required as this was classed as an evaluation of teaching rather than research, and therefore did not fall within the remit of the ethics committee.

There was no formal assessment of students' skills specific to these sessions at this stage, although what they learned in the sessions fed into their preparations for their end of year Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) where they role play a range of scenarios with actors and are assessed on their problem solving, decision-making and communication / consultation skills. As the aims of the sessions were focused more on recognizing good practice and raising awareness, rather than practically developing the skills, it was not felt to be appropriate at this time to build stations focused on communicating with neurodiverse patients into the OSCEs. Nevertheless, students could choose to include reflections about what they had learned from the sessions in their mandatory Continuing Professional Development records which form part of the assessment of the Professional Development module in each academic year.

Critical analysis of the educational activity

This case report aimed to describe an innovative approach to teaching by partnering with learning disabled and autistic actors to deliver training on inclusive communication skills. While it is recognized that the School is in the fortunate position of having such a local theater company to work with, it is hoped that the case report can inspire other educators to be alert to potential opportunities. Although there is no literature specifically relating to working with inclusive theater companies to support healthcare students' development, the benefits of working with colleagues from the field of theater have been previously demonstrated.^{15,16} The School also works with independent actors, both in terms of teaching and assessment of communication skills, and it is likely that such opportunities for partnerships are more widely available.

In terms of evaluation, out of the two year-groups who took part in the sessions in 2021 ($n = 241$), 70 (29%) completed the evaluation form. It is recognized that this low response rate limits the generalizability of the feedback obtained; a reminder email may have helped increase response and is considered for future evaluations. While recognizing limitations of the low response rate, the feedback from the students who responded was overwhelmingly positive 99% ($n = 69$) were either likely or very likely to recommend the training to peers or colleagues and 99% ($n = 69$) found the content of the sessions either extremely or very useful. Comments from

the students allowed an understanding of the aspects of the sessions they felt to be beneficial, although it cannot be said this was the feeling of the entire cohort. Comments on the most useful parts of the sessions included being exposed to a patient with learning disabilities (“*Seeing consultation with someone with a learning difficulty and seeing some of the barriers that need to be overcome*”), having the ability to reflect on a role play (“*Loved the discussion part on what we could do to improve. Helped me see things differently and reflect*”) and to actively inform the development of the scenario through the ‘STOP’ action (“*Stopping the actor to tell him how to change his actions and hearing other people’s ideas on how to do this.*”) The session was believed to be supportive and engaging in focusing on communication skills (“*It was a safe space where we could all discuss what went well and what we might do differently in future*”) and to highlight certain areas of communication the students had not considered previously (“*Provided me with a different thought process towards how to deal with that type of situation which is great, as there is limited training/preparation available*”).

A key and unique element of the training sessions was the opportunity for the students to also receive real-time feedback on their communication style and approach from the actor themselves. The actors were able to share their personal experiences of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ communication they had encountered across a variety of healthcare settings and help provide the students with a steer of how to handle elements of the consultation that were more challenging. Receiving feedback during the session, whether from peers, facilitators or from the actor, allowed students to modify their approach during the session as required. Evidence has shown that this adds to the authenticity and potency of the experience for the pharmacy students.¹⁷ The fourth-year students in particular valued the feedback they received from the actors, facilitators and their peers; they reported that this allowed them to reflect on their own communication skills. They also enjoyed providing feedback in real time within their small groups and the exposure to patients and circumstances they had not previously encountered.

From both years, the most cited area for improvement ($n = 20$) was to increase the duration of the sessions to allow more opportunity for discussion and to explore the patient’s views and experiences of healthcare to a greater extent and to enable exposure to a larger number of patients and scenarios.

The students commented that the sessions had raised their awareness of how to communicate with individuals with learning disabilities. They had reflected on both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of their interaction, the importance of professionalism and empathy, how to adapt to the individual, as well as ensuring the patient’s needs are met rather than the scenario being driven purely by the healthcare professional.

Some examples of student testimonials include:

“The different approach to the case helped my understanding of communication in the wider sense and I feel more comfortable in entering consultations with patients who have difficulty in communicating.”

“Thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of this workshop. I appreciated having really small groups and the friendly atmosphere the facilitators created. Both the facilitators and actors gave valuable feedback that I will use for the rest of my career.”

“Helped me see things differently and reflect”

“A huge thank you to the actors and everyone involved, this will be a memory of uni[versity] that I will carry with me throughout my professional career”.

These sessions appear to have been rewarding for students, and informal feedback from the staff and actors involved was likewise positive and supported the student views. Of particular note has been the recognition by students of the importance of developing these communication skills to meet the needs of a diverse patient population. It is nevertheless recognized that these are subjective views rather than objective assessment of the effectiveness of the session in improving the students’ skills in communicating with neurodiverse patients. Such objective data is not currently available, given the challenges of including the skills in formal assessments and the fact it is not possible to guarantee students will have the opportunity to demonstrate these skills on clinical placements. It is, however hoped that ongoing development, informed by this feedback, will enable teaching and assessment of these skills at the “does” level of Miller’s pyramid.¹⁸

Indeed, building on the success of these sessions, the partnership with Hijinx is continuing. As a result, from 2022, students in all four years of the MPharm program now undertake activities with the actors. To complement the current Year 2 and Year 4 sessions, teaching has been introduced to Years 1 and 3 in collaboration with Hijinx.

To deliver person-centered care,¹⁹ it is first key to understand the needs of the person to which care is being provided. Therefore, prior to the Year 2 forum theater sessions, Year 1 students now explore the experience of neurodivergent actors in a variety of non-clinical scenarios presented in a forum theater style. These sessions therefore provide the opportunity for Year 1 students to observe and interact with the actors in order to better understand their perspective of experiences of communicating with others. This will help lay the foundations for future interactions with neurodivergent patients as part of the MPharm and beyond.

Following on from the success of the forum theater sessions, this academic year students in Year 3 developed a resource to help pharmacy students improve their awareness of neurodiversity, including tips for improving consultations with patients with autism or learning disabilities. After reflecting on their Year 2 session, they were asked to submit questions to the Hijinx actors relating to the actors’ own experiences of communicating in a pharmacy setting. The actors provided answers in video clips which were then used by the students to create resources as a group activity. These were then shared with fellow MPharm students. This new session will be reviewed and further developed moving forwards.

As the sessions have been newly introduced in Year 1 and 3, their focus and the way they were delivered will be reviewed and reflected upon for future cohorts. As an example, since 2022 was the first time both Years 1 and 2 engaged with Hijinx, the Year 2 sessions will need to be adapted for 2023 to ensure that they are informed and build upon what the students have already achieved in

Year 1. This will be through students in Year 2 actively engaging in the role play with the neurodivergent actor as opposed to the previous more observational role. The school will work closely with Hijinx to ensure the spirality of the learning outcomes from year to year.

This partnership and the resulting teaching has been viewed as an extremely positive endeavor; however, it did not come without its challenges which should be considered by anyone seeking to set up a similar initiative. The nature of the partnership with Hijinx was invaluable with all aspects being developed through an equal partnership based on mutual respect and a clear understanding of the needs of the aims of the initiative. Identifying a suitable partnership to achieve this is key and may be a challenge for those wishing to set up a similar partnership. Funding is another important consideration. Despite success in obtaining some external funding from Arts & Business Cymru, there were additional costs to the School. These costs were felt to be offset by the benefits but nevertheless need to be considered.

The collaboration between the Cardiff School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and Hijinx has proven to be a great success. Given the paucity of information about this important topic, the authors hope that this paper will encourage other pharmacy schools to explore similar opportunities to support their students in developing their communication skills. With such opportunities comes the ability to undertake more formal evaluations to understand whether this form of teaching can ultimately enhance the experience future pharmacists can offer to all their patients.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no known conflicts of interest for any of the authors.

Authors' statement

All authors have seen and approved the final, amended, version of the manuscript being submitted. The article is the authors' original work, hasn't received prior publication and isn't under consideration for publication elsewhere.

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