

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES: PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Objectives and background: Students claim that education leads to better results when it is offered in a friendly and desirable environment. They also believe that instructors in possession of better communication skills and high capability to transfer concepts and experiences are more successful in creating decent learning environment and motivating the students. Taking into account that communication depends on individual's perception of it and that personality differences influence individual's perception, the present study tries to elaborate on nursing students' perception of their communication with instructors.

Methodology: Participants in this qualitative phenomenological study were 5 nursing students of Shahid Beheshti Medical Science University. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling. To collect the needed data, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted and the obtained data were analyzed using Colaizzi method.

Results: Analysis of the transcripts indicated four common themes mentioned by the participants including instructors' characteristics, communication factors effective in establishing communication, the students' characteristics and condition, and moral/humanistic concerns in communication.

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Conclusion: to improve communication between the instructors and students, the participants emphasized on issues such as the instructor's professional and moral characteristics, necessity of having communications in a mutual manner, observance of moral and customs codes, recognition of cultural differences by the instructor, and recognizing students as respectable people.

Keywords: Nursing students' experience, communication, instructor, phenomenology

Introduction

Social communication is a natural need of man and this need is of great importance in the nursing profession. In addition to general skills and knowledge, a successful nurse needs special communicative skills, as responsibilities of a nurse, above all, is to cover the patient's needs by communicating, intervening, and helping the patient throughout the treatment course [1]. Communication is an interpersonal process between two or more people. Throughout life, an individual meets different people in different situations with different experiences and characteristics. With some, we keep a long term relationship and with some it is a short experience. Naturally, man's differs with different people in different [2]. Man's need to communicate is comparable to his need of food. To understand our environment, society, and others, we need to make effective communications. Having effective communication is also important in learning environments [3]. A proper communication is specifically featured with mutual respect and discipline. Establishing a friendly and formal communication between an instructor and college students prepares the ground for debates and sharing ideas in the class, which in turn leads to growth of creativity and thinking power among the students [4].

Students claim that educational performance is higher in more decent and friendly environments. They also argue that instructors with higher communicative skills have managed to create more decent and motivating environments along with transferring concepts and experiences [5]. Abedini Kasgeri found in his study that the instructor's behavior and method of treating students and their independence is of critical importance. Criteria of a good university lecturer are mainly classified in four areas of personal characteristics, research works, teaching methods, and ability to communicate and advice. His results showed that 93.65% of the students expressed that the lecturer must have an acceptable personality among the students. Such personality encompasses characteristics such as good manner, respecting students and on the like [6].

To be successful in their work, instructors need high communication skills. Developing such skills is a crucial step in their profession. Interpersonal skills refers to abilities of participating in team work, training others, offering services, discussion, leadership and the capability to work with others from different cultures. Several studies have been carried out on the relationship between communication skills of the employees and their perception of professional performance. Despite all emphases put on communication skills, researchers have spotted shortcomings in employees' communication skills [7].

There is a paucity of research on communicative challenges between university students and instructors. Quantitative studies focus on several variables that are tested in-vitro, while several other variables are neglected as intervening variables. Some researchers believe that the statistics provided in quantitative studies lack the true concept and sole of the phenomena they claim they have studied. Others have taken a step forward and rejected the quantitative methods and argued that physical sciences have no way to explain human behavior. Qualitative approach in research work is a subjective way to explain experiences of individuals and perceive their internal emotions. Given that man's emotions and feelings cannot be expressed in numbers, qualitative research methods are suitable for surveying individuals' actions, reactions, and emotional responses [8]. The phenomenon of communication between a student and an instructor and other pertinent areas of concern has to do with humanistic and social values with a variety of complicated aspects. In light of this, researchers tend to carry out deep and comprehensive studies on the students' experiences. To reach the reality from the participants' (subjects) viewpoint, the authors used qualitative methods and to answer the research questions and to shed light on the student's experiences in their relationship with instructors, phenomenological method was adopted. This method puts emphasis on highlighting the phenomena so that they emerge in our self-conscious reality [9, 10].

Taking into account the importance of establishing communication between students and instructors, there are several questions to be asked including the nature of the communication, effective factors in emergence of this communication, and both sides' perception of the phenomenon. Additionally, given that this communication is deeply depended on how people perceive it and that personality differences influence people's perception, the present study is aimed to use daily and actual experiences of the students to build a clear image of

communication between students and instructors. More effective methods can be designed to avoid communicative problems by elaborating on the phenomenon.

Methodology

Hessle descriptive phenomenology was used to conduct this qualitative study. This method enabled us to gain rich information about the nursing students' perception of their communication with instructors. Qualitative study is carried out in natural and real environment and phenomenological study as the type of the study is a field study [11]. Since the goal of phenomenology is to perceive people's perceptions, the subjects were selected from people who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon. The sampling method was purposeful judgmental method. That is, the participants had complete information about the subject of the information and had experienced the phenomenon. The main source of information in a phenomenology study is deep interview with those having knowledge about the subject of study [12]. Five nursing students at the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Shahid Beheshti Medical Science University in academic year 2010-2011 were selected as the sample group.

To build an image of the students' perception of their communication with instructors, the participants were interviewed individually. The interviews were recorded on tape so that the authors could analyze not only each word used by the participants but also the pauses and other nonverbal clues. Interviews were unstructured and the participants were just asked to share their feelings. In observance of the participants' right, they were asked to express their consent to participate in the study and their voice was recorded.

Several key questions were repeated during the interviews. The answers to exploratory questions were analyzed in more details; "what is your idea about student-instructor communication?"; "what problems might be encountered in students-instructor communication?"; "what are the obstacles in the way of communication between students and instructor?"; "what is your definition of good students-instructor communication?"; and "what are your recommendations to improve students-instructor's communications?"

Data gathering was carried out until the authors were convinced enough data have been collected and the participants had nothing more to share.

Unstructured deep interviews were held individually using interview instruction. Minimum and maximum interview times were 30 and 90min respectively.

The interviews were recorded in MP3 format and transcribed as soon as possible and analyzed simultaneously. Face to face interview enabled the authors to collect firsthand information and uncover actual experiences of the participants. Observing facial expression of the participants enabled the authors to add to richness of the interviews. The original copy was kept in safe place and primary analyses on each interview were carried out before initiating the next interview.

The participants' contact details (email and telephone) were also recorded for further inquiries.

The interviews were carried out in professors' rooms, adviser's room, faculty site or in hospitals. The interviews were carried out with no time limits. The recorded interviews were transcribed word by word. By collecting the required information, analyses began [11]. Hassler descriptive analysis [10] uses a descriptive method to analyze the information obtained from humanistic experience. To this end, the researcher needs to place their thoughts and ideas in parenthesis, spot their viewpoints, set aside previous knowledge and presumption about the phenomenon, and remain neutral in analyzing the data [13].

The data were analyzed through Colaizzi method through the following steps:

Viewpoints and explanations expressed by the participants were examined thoroughly to determine specific parts of the interviews. Afterward, the key expressions were determined, extracted, and summarized. Then, the main parts of the interviews regarding one issue were combined.

Data analyses were performed along with sampling with three stages of encoding and determining the key themes. The key phrases were underlined in final review and then the phrases were categorized based on the themes. Afterward, the information was combined to find the final classification.

To ensure validity of the data and check the concepts introduced by the participants, transcribed texts were reviewed by four competent experts. To support the conclusions, phrases from the interview are provided in what followed.

Findings

Totally, 5 nursing students (female and male) took part in the study. The participants were from different cohorts (in their 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th semesters). The themes extracted from the interviews were all based on the students' perception of students-instructors communication.

Data analyses revealed four key themes including instructors' characteristics, communication factors effective in establishing communication, the students' characteristics and condition, and moral/humanistic concerns in communication.

Instructors' characteristics

When asked about the communication between the instructor and the student, majority of the participants mentioned behavioral features, personality, professional skills, and teaching capabilities.

Showing affection, sense of humor, patience, creativity, discipline, seriousness, and physical attraction were among the key characteristics of the instructor, which were important for instructor-student communication. A participant student (female, 4th semester) answered:

"I think a professor must have superficial and academic merits, he/she must be attractive and manage the class at the same time. One of my teachers, I remember, had a strong personality and full control over his class and at the same time he showed affection to the student. Many professors only have the first aspect; they have firm discipline but you find no trace of sympathy and affection in them."

Showing sympathy and forgiveness is one of the factors that the participants found effective in student-instructor communication.

"Professors are older than us and thus, I think they shouldn't react firmly to every disrespectful behavior of students. I think, however, that they should be more tolerant. An older person is not supposed to be so eager to challenge the student and fight with them." (One of the participant)

The participant No. 3 (male, 5th semester) expressed that professor's behavior is a communication challenge and that professors are supposed to be more tolerant while the student are required to show respect to them:

"Harsh reactions by professors only demotivate the student regarding the course... Although it is the students' responsibility to show respect to the professor in the class, the professor as the

older one is expected to be more tolerant. After all, students are naturally more energetic and less experienced and thus might make many mistakes.”

Of other characteristics of a good instructor to establish communication with the students are their professional merits and teaching capabilities. The participants highlighted scientific and professional bases, familiarity with psychology, and teaching techniques as professional characteristics of their professors. A female participant of 7th semester mentioned:

“Scientific background is crucial. All self-confidence a professor can show is rooted in his/her knowledge... one problem that we usually encounter with is that an internship instructor does not have the knowledge. I surely cannot communicate with such an instructor. In fact, you cannot trust such a person as your instructor.”

Instructor’s familiarity with principles of psychology can also help them to recognize the students’ emotions and characteristics; which also help them to show better reactions in the class. The participant No. 1 mentioned:

“Professor must be psychologist at the same time to show right behavior in the class. This is important if you ask me.”

In addition to scientific bases and knowledge of psychology, teaching technique is another professional aspect of a good instructor; which is also effective in having effective communication with the students. A student (male, 7th semester) said:

“In most of the cases, the problem is with teaching style... I think it would be better to mandate specific teaching styles rather than leaving it to the professor to choose which style is better. Some of the instructors assign only 15 minutes of class time to teaching and waste the rest of the class time to discuss irrelevant issues. Professors’ hand is open to teach the way they’d like.”

Another sub-theme of characteristics of instructors is their capacity and skill to understand the students. A key point in this regard is the instructor’s ability to understand and comprehend the

student's personality, motivate the student, and dedicate more time to the students and their problems.

Students are usually better with people who are more understanding because such instructors motivate students to learn. A participant (female, 7th semester) said:

"I feel more comfortable with professors who are more understanding. I mean it happens to all of us that we gradually forget what problems we ourselves had as a student. Professors who have experienced the same problems as the students do are surely more helpful."

Recognizing personality of students and dedicating time to students is one of the area of concern of the participants. A student (male, 7th semester) mentioned:

"The instructor can tell if the student has psychological problems, but he/she is not ready to speak with the student for even 5 or 10 minutes. They are not even ready to help the student."

Paying attention to the students' problem is another expectation of the student from their instructors. They believe that the instructor should care about students' problem including emotional and financial problems. In many cases, students miss their classes due to such problems. A student (male, 5th semester) said:

"Students have their own problems and professors need to understand the students' situation; otherwise, nothing good would come out of this, which is the case here."

A male participant (7th semester) stated:

"Some of my classmates have serious financial problems and need to work part time and miss many classes. It is not fair that the professor does not even bother to ask what their problem is or what is wrong with them..."

Factors effective in establishing communication

The second theme, which is comprised of sub-themes, refers to a set of factors that facilitate or prevent communication.

Mutual respect, respecting moral and customary codes, participation in class events, sharing ideas and being helpful, doing cultural works and learning how to establish communication are of the most frequent codes that facilitate communication. Mutual respect is a key factor in establishing and deepening communication, which facilitates realization of the objectives of communication. Participant No3 stated:

“I surely show respect for the professor who bothers talking and sharing with me or listening to my problem.”

Moral and customs codes are the boundaries that people define for their social relations. Observance of these codes is essential to establish communication with people. When people think that their privacy is neglected in a communication, they will cut the relationship. Participant No. 2 (male, 2nd semester) said:

“Of course there are lines that should never be crossed, otherwise, the professor will lose his/her characteristic and authority...problems are unavoidable when people cross their lines in their communications.... Our professors are good in treating the students. They care about all students. It is so good when the professor keeps his/her communication with all the students. Such communications are stronger in clinical courses. Even those who have never talked to the professors will have a short conversation during the course.”

People tend to have more conversations with more friendly individuals. It is easier to share and talk about your problems or keep the conversation when the communication is friendly and intimate. Student No.3 said about friendship between the professor and the student:

“...I only can say that both sides understand when they can have a friendly relationship and extend their communication beyond student and professor relationship...”

Being accessible is a key matter in being able to communicate. When people need to share, their friends or someone to share with can be really helpful in ensuring them that they are not alone. Students tend to be more open with the professors who are available when needed. Participant No. 4 said:

“Many professors are not ready to spend time with the students; they think, maybe, it is not the right thing to do. I think the professors should speak with the students and find out how do they think about the course. Instructing and lecturing are nothing more than unilateral communication...”

Necessity of doing cultural works and learning how to establish communication is another issue highlighted by the participants. Participant No. 1 said:

“We need to do some cultural work. The students should be taught to accept the professors the way they are and that the student should try to establish communications. There must be a communication educational course for students and all students should be required to attend the class and discuss their issues in groups.”

Threatening students, being over supportive, crossing the lines, reluctance to have intimate relationship, lack of responsiveness of professors, fear from the professor, discriminating among students, holding negative attitudes toward students, mere emphasis on textbooks, and religious concerns regarding social relationship are some of the codes that were frequently mentioned by the participants as factors that prevent establishment of communication.

Students believe that some instructors try to threaten the students as a way to control the class and this blocks all the ways to establish communication between students and the instructor. A male student (5th semester) said:

“The only thing they are good at is to threaten the students. If you do something wrong or disturb the class, the professor will never ask if there is a problem. He/she’ll only say “get out”...”

On the other hand, excessive friendly behavior and neglecting the students' mistakes by the instructor may motivate some students to cross the lines and cause more serious problems. Having over-friendly relationship leads to negligence of moral and customs codes and prevents establishment of communication. Participant No.1 stated:

"I don't like it when a professor becomes over-intimate. This leads to crossing the lines and it is not even good for the professor's character. The class will get out of hand... professor tend not to have close relations with the students; they think teaching is their only task. They find friendly relationships a threat to their discipline... many professors who have got close to their students have lost their control over the class. I think they just cannot find a balance in this regard."

The participant No.4 believed that over-friendly relationships with students and even joking with the student may bother others and create problems in establishing communications. On the other hand, fear of talking about problems is a problem in maintaining communications with the professor.

"The instructors should not allow their students take advantages of them. Their jokes should not bother others. Some instructors give so much room to the students that they even tell annoying jokes in the class... some professors insist on giving their numbers to the students while they are not there when you have question to ask, or they never answer their phone after working hours... it is always like this that the professors are entitled to all rights and the students are not; the instructor even has the right to change your grades. These things frighten many and some think that professors are like giants and even the department cannot stand in their way."

There is a possibility that student may take advantage of their relationships with the professors and because of this the professors tend not to have any relationship with the student outside the scope of class. A female student (7th semester) said about instructors' reluctance to have communication with students:

“One thing that I think convinces the professors to have negative attitudes about students is the notion that we (professors) have a lot of problems as well, but students take advantage of these same problems to skip classes.

Say 70 students out of 90 took advantage of their relationship with a professor, then he/she thinks that the 20 other students are the same. Then they conclude that being indifferent to the student and just holding the course is the best thing to do.”

Discriminate between students is another obstacle in the way of having conversation, which was highlighted by some of the participants. Apparently, professors sometimes show more friendly behavior towards female students and students with high grades. Participant No. 4 mentioned:

“Discrimination is one of the communication problems and some students’ rights are neglected by professors who discriminate. It is not fair to only care about the ones who are more talented.”

Participants No.2 said:

“Unfortunately, some of them tend to be harder on male students. I admit male students are sometimes more troublesome, but this does not justify discrimination against them.”

Students’ condition and characteristics

When the participants were asked if students ever appeared as a problem in the way of establishing communication, majority of them pointed out characteristics and problems of the students. Different cultural background, seeing professor as a guardian, being more open with professors of different sex, emotional problems, and financial issues were some of the frequently mentioned codes by the students.

Cultural issues are one of the main points to be concerned about before establishing communication. People’s beliefs and values are rooted in their culture and as different students come from different cultures, it is can be helpful to pay more attention to such differences.

Participant No. 4 expressed:

“Students come from different backgrounds and different cultures, So some students are more open to have conversations and some are not... usually it is harder to communicate with others during the 1st and 2nd semesters. Students do not know what lines should not be crossed and students usually miss this point and expect more than what they should, which leads to problems in students and professor communication.”

Some of the participants mentioned that students can solve many communication problems if they take the professor as their mother or father. Participant No. 2 stated:

“Student should learn to take their professor as their mother or father. After all, university is our second home. It is easier this way and students can establish communication with their professors and classmate as well.”

Gender influences on people’s way of communication. It is important if you are communicating with someone with the same or opposite sex. Some of the participants highlighted importance of gender and its role in communication. A student (female, 7th semester) said:

“One thing for sure, female students are better with male professors and male students with female professors. Take me for example; it is easier for me to communicate with male professors.”

Another issue highlighted by the participants was the necessity of paying attention to the student’s problem by the professors. Participant No. 3 stated:

“Students have their own problems and the professors, I think, should understand such problems; otherwise, nothing good comes out of the class... If a student seems worried for two consecutive sessions, the professor should call him/her to office and talk with him/her.”

Participant No.4 said:

“The professors should care about the student’s problem... this student has problems outside the university...romantic problems are not negligible... there are many in the class with financial

problems... some professor are kind enough to solve part of these students' problem or at least refer them to authorities who can help them."

Moral and Humanistic issues

Respective religious and tribal ties of the student, seeing students as an object, accepting students as human, seeing students as inferiors are some of sub-themes of moral and humanistic issues.

Culture and religion have profound effect on how people communicate with others. Cultural concerns also form the communication between people. It is essential to count in religious and tribal issues and respect them. In this regard, participant No.4 (male, 7th semester) stated:

"It is important to take into account people's religion and nationality. The instructor... keeps talking about Shiat, I am a Shia, but surely there are people with different religions who are not interested in listening to them..."

In some cases having a superior viewpoint to the student or being from wealthy social class influence communication. One of the areas of concern was social class difference between professors and students so that some of them see student as inferiors. Participant No.2 mentioned:

"You can barely have word with some professors. They don't find you worthy of having a conversation; although there are some professors that you enjoy having a conversation with them."

Participant No. 1 stated:

"There would be better atmosphere in the class if the professor stops looking students from above."

It is critical, to have conversation when both sides take each other as human being, and understand that nobody is perfect and mistakes are expectable. Regarding the sub-theme of accepting students as human being, participant No. 3 (male, 5th semester) mentioned:

“Above all, the professor and the student should recognize each other as human beings in different positions. None of them should see the other one as inferior.”

These expressions indicate the necessity of paying attention to moral and humanities in establishing communication in academic environment.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings showed the themes that, when put together, explain students' experiences and viewpoints regarding communication challenges. Four main themes including instructors' characteristics, communication factors effective in establishing communication, the students' characteristics and condition, and moral/humanistic concerns in communication were determined.

The participants highlighted characteristics, professional specifications, and skills to understand the students as the main points concerning the instructors' characteristics. Joibari and Sanago indicated that professional and educational competencies of clinical educators were the main characteristics of the instructors in the eyes of the students [14]. For the instructors, on the other hand, professional merits and academic/educational experiences were of the main characteristics of a successful instructor. They also admitted that they needed continuous and integrated retraining courses. One of the participants gave the highest point to personality of the instructors. Alavi and Abedi named characteristics of instructors and quality of their interpersonal communications as the main characteristics of a successful instructor [5]. By showing more sympathy with the student and being more supportive the instructors can play a main role in motivating the students. By creating motivation, these instructors facilitate learning performance and realization of educational goals. In short, the relationship between an instructor and a student and its effect on motivating the student is emphasized by many authors [15].

The second theme and the sub-themes refers to a set of factors that facilitate or prevent establishment of communication. Mutual respect, developing friendly relationship with the students, never crossing the lines, attending students' groups, consulting with students, doing cultural works, and training how to establish relationships were of the most frequent codes noted by the participants. The facilitators and preventers were mentioned as effective factors in communication with professors. Iemide et al. argued that development of communication skills

was one of the key elements in the education process [7]. Oltman et al. (2009) indicated development of positive interpersonal relationship with the students as an effective element in better learning. Type and quality of communications between the professors and students have considerable effect in training-learning performance [15]. They also emphasized that instructor-student communication has profound effect on academic achievements of the students. The nature of instructor-student communication is the main ingredient of a positive learning environment and facilitates realization of educational goals [17]. Participants in another study argued that education leads to better learning when it is offered in a more friendly and preferred environment. They also maintained that instructors with higher communication skills had better performance in transferring concepts and experiences and also motivating the students by creating decent environment [5].

The participants' experience and viewpoints regarding their position in their communication with professors indicated that different cultural background, seeing the professors as a parent, preferring communication with the opposite sex, romantic problems, and financial problems affected communications. Newberry (2010) argued that instructor and student's roles are different in different cultural backgrounds. Each one of them may have different reaction and response depending on their situation. Filling in the role of a kind mother in clinical education makes the students to feel more responsibility to learn and experience.... Students expect support whether academic or emotional [14].

The student's experiences with moral and humanistic issues are directly related to how they deal with moral and humanistic issues. The participants mentioned respecting religious and tribal background, seeing students not as an object, accepting students as human being, and having no sense of superiority toward students as the challenges of establishing communication. Von Douson (2011) argued in their study that tribal background and recognizing such difference by the instructor is important for creating decent learning environments. This gives the idea to people that they are free to have free relationships and enjoy the feedback that their nationality and identity is recognized and respected by others. In addition, students expect being treated as an adult. Many students complain of being treated with no respect by their instructors and this means that the instructor has a serious problem in their profession and way of dealing with and evaluating the students.

Joibari and Sanago (2009) highlighted the theme of good manner in their study with sub-theme of ability to establish educational communication, which is at the same time with respect, stress free, friendly, in which students understand each other's problems, and personality differences of the students are recognized. The students expect being recognized as human and for their personality differences. Participants in Alabi and Abedi (2007) claimed that more effective instructors were those who showed more support for the student in clinical environment. They believed that establishing proper communication, respecting students as human being, and improving self-confidence of the students by the professors create an environment in which the students could learn and experience with more self-confidence.

Based on these findings, the authors recommend more attention to the four main themes uncovered by this study. The authors hope that professors and educational managers could improve educational performance by taking into account these findings. In this regard, solving student-instructors' communication problems needs proper planning and policy making. Each one of these themes and the relationship between them can be studied in more details in the future.

Conclusions

Students' experiences regarding their communication with professors were evaluated in four key themes including instructors' characteristics, communication factors effective in establishing communication, the students' characteristics and condition, and moral/humanistic concerns in communication. To have better communications, the participants highlighted professional capabilities and morality of instructors, necessity of mutual communication, respecting moral and customary codes, recognizing cultural differences, and accepting students as respectable human being.

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