

## **Incivility and disruptive behaviour among midwifery students: Strategies to reduce poor behaviour in the classroom and help students engage with the learning process**

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### **Abstract**

Incivility and disruptive behaviour among student midwives in the UK interferes with teaching and disrupts the learning process for other students. Uncivil behaviour is of particular concern for those training student midwives as the learning environment is often seen to reflect how the student might behave in clinical practice when he or she qualifies... In order to practice, midwives in the UK must be determined to be of good character; based on their conduct, behaviour and attitude. Therefore a report of poor behaviour might prevent a graduate student from registering with the Nursing and Midwifery Council [NMC] and working as a clinician.. This paper aims to put forward theories to explain why students might be disruptive in the classroom and suggests recommendations to manage such behaviour.. The application of a number of educational teaching and assessment strategies, relevant to midwifery education, are made.

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The BSc in Midwifery is a vocational degree offered at a higher education institute in central London, United Kingdom. Student midwives are taught and assessed in clinical practice for sixty per cent of their degree programme and for the remaining forty per cent, through academic work.

One of the modules on the programme, Psychological Sciences and Public Health module (PSPH) introduces students to disciplines which underpin midwifery knowledge, for example Sociology, Psychology and Law. The aim of the module is to offer students an understanding of the social and cultural contexts that influence constructions of health and illness in women, children and families. (PSPH Module Handbook). The module content is delivered through lectures in a transmissive, didactic format and the assessment consists of a 3000 word written essay.

The objectives of the module are to encourage the student midwife to see women and families in a social context, to help them understand health and social care practices and to

offer a basis on which to gain a critical understanding of the social, moral and cultural relationships at the heart of health. The aim of the assignment is to provide an opportunity for students to creatively examine aspects of the everyday social realities of the local environment which impact on the health of the women and families that they care for. The learning outcomes are referenced to the UK NMC standards of practice for midwives, (Nursing and Midwifery Council 2008) and an emphasis on the relationship between the theoretical aspects of the module and their relevance to clinical practice is made. It is not unusual, however, for students who are completing medical or other allied health degrees to experience difficulty relating sociological and psychological theories to clinical practice or to understand their relevance (Benbassat, Baumal, Borkan and Ber, 2003).

### **Pedagogical challenges**

The pedagogical challenges presented in this paper, and which will be discussed, are those of uncivil, disruptive and disrespectful behaviour of midwifery students during the PSPH lectures. Disruptive or uncivil behaviour is of particular significance for those students studying vocational degrees. The learning environment often reflects how students, at a later time, might represent themselves to those using the service. (Lashley and de Meneses 2000). The BSc in Midwifery programme is not only an academic qualification, but also enables students to registrar with the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council and work as a midwife. Part of the requirements to register as a midwife is that you are of “good character”, good character being based on conduct, behaviour and attitude [NMC 2010]. Students who display disruptive or uncivil behaviour, therefore, risk being prevented registration with the NMC (Nursing and Midwifery Council 2010) and from working as a midwife in the UK.

This paper puts forward theories as to why students might be disruptive in the classroom and how this behaviour might affect the teaching and learning experience of other students. This paper also suggests teaching strategies to manage uncivil and disruptive behaviour among students.

### **Rationale: Why do students engage in disruptive behaviour and how does this impact on student learning?**

The pedagogical challenges that will be presented, and which the paper hopes to resolve in future teaching, are incivility and poor behaviour of midwifery students particularly during delivery of the Psychological Sciences and Public Health module. Incivility and poor behaviour are often linked to student motivation (Moore et al 2007) therefore this paper will be discussing motivation of students as part of the teaching and assessment challenge.

### **Disruptive and uncivil behaviour of students**

Disruptive behaviour can be defined as behaviour which is intentional and which disrupts or interferes with the teaching and learning process of others (Barrett et al. n.d.). This behaviour has been defined as ranging from an unwillingness to participate in the learning process to rudeness [Morrisette 2001]. The disruptive behaviour of students, encountered by the author, includes extreme lateness, side conversations and ringing cell phones. More challenging behaviour also observed by the author includes, making negative remarks about the content of the lecture, talking and laughing during the lecture or challenging the lecturer on her knowledge of the subject area.

Several theories have been proposed on the factors which contribute to incivility of higher education students. Some theories suggest that the changing characteristic of students who currently enter higher education and the increased conflict which occurs as a result is to blame. For example, many students currently see themselves as consumers of education and this might explain their increased hostility if they do not receive the grade they expected (Morrisette 2001, Nordstrom et. al. 2009, Baker 2009). Other theories have attributed students' use of electronic mail, personal computers and chat rooms to anti-social behaviour. Electronic media often provides students with poor examples of social norms and behaviour. Those students who see nothing wrong with poor behaviour, such as encouraged by electronic media use, are more likely to engage with it (Nordstrom et. al. 2009).

An additional theory to explain student behaviour is provided by Baker et. al. (2008) These researchers suggest that children born during the periods 1982 and 2000 have certain characteristics which cause them to be more likely to engage in disruptive behaviour. They refer to these children as "millenials" and suggest that this generation are more likely to be disruptive as (1) they have a deep seated belief in their own entitlement and (2) there is parental pressure to earn good grades and gain admission to "good" schools.

While some of the above factors may go to explain the disruptive behaviour of midwifery students, it is unlikely that the "students as consumers of education" theory fits. Midwifery BSc programmes based in the UK provide all students with unconditional university fees and bursaries, so consumer attitude in this scenario seems unlikely. A study conducted by Mishra et. al. (1992) might provide a more plausible explanation. In their study, a sample of academics working in higher education, were asked to list a number of disruptive behaviours they had encountered while teaching undergraduate students. From the list obtained, the researchers identified a number of "control statements" which implied that poor behaviour from students occurred as a result of teachers trying to control students in order to produce the best learning environment in the classroom. The authors conclude that if academics can be persuaded to

shift the locus of control and empower students in the conduct of their learning and assessment, disruptive behaviour could be reduced.

Other theories could also be used to explain disruptive behaviour. Students in higher education who are poorly motivated are believed to display more disruptive and uncivil behaviours and this is substantiated in the literature (Moore et al. 2007). What is done to students at university often affects their motivation to learn (Seifert 2004) For example many students may start off with good intentions and are intrinsically motivated to adopt deep approaches to learning, as the programme approaches, they often become extrinsically motivated and adopt surface or rote learning approaches (Fry et al 2009). This superficial approach to learning can be observed in students' behaviour for example, poor facial expressions, body language and lack of engagement while in class (Moore et al 2007).

The pedagogical challenges that are presented in this paper, therefore, are disruptive and uncivil behaviour by midwifery students. The discussion is based on the premise that disruptive and uncivil behaviours may be due to a lack of control students are experiencing over their learning. This paper also suggests that disruptive behaviour might be caused by a student's lack of motivation (Seifert 2004). Based on these beliefs, a number of ways in which these pedagogical issues might be addressed will be explored, namely through management of (1) teaching and (2) assessment processes.

### **Strategies to address disruptive behaviour and lack of motivation among students**

Two strategies will be presented in order to address the pedagogical challenges and the rationale for these strategies will be supported with appropriate theory and literature.

#### **(1) teaching of students**

Teaching strategies in higher education generally aim to engage students in learning and encourage them to take responsibility for their learning. This in turn should increase motivation and reduce the level of disruptive behaviour (Moore et al 2007). Consideration of theory in relation to teaching and learning is important in the development and delivery of any programme in higher education. Typically students either take a deep approach to learning (typified by an intention to understand and to seek meaning) or they take a surface approach (typified by an intention to memorize information and complete a task) (Fry et al 2009). Students may also develop approaches to learning in response to the learning situation they are confronted with, so learning therefore is both personal and situational (Biggs 1987).

Students have preferred learning styles, for example they may be categorized as activist, pragmatist, reflector or theorist and these learning styles may affect how they learn (Smith 2001). The preferred learning style of any individual will include elements from two or

more of these categories. The preferred learning style of an individual may also have a relationship to a particular disciplinary framework (Fry et al 2009). For example midwives and other health professionals tend to have a learning style which is convergent and which uses a learning ability which combines abstract conceptualization with active experimentation, i.e. emphasis on the practical application of ideas (Wolf and Kolb 1984). Consideration of the learning style and approaches to learning are therefore important in teaching students since some particular disciplines may have considerable difficulty in developing skills that relate to different classifications of knowledge.

If students are to be encouraged to engage with a deep approach to learning, rather than a surface approach, adaptations to the learning environment need to be made. This is in order to facilitate both students approach to learning and their preferred learning style. For example evidence suggests that those students who might be described as activists in their learning style, require an environment which offers new experiences and challenges, while those described as reflectors need time to observe, reflect and think. Additionally, theorists need opportunities to question and stretch their intellect and pragmatists respond to practically based learning activities. These approaches to learning and learning styles need to be taken into account when designing delivery and content of programmes.

Teaching strategies are also important in increasing student motivation and enabling students to have more control over their learning and a number of theories have been put forward to suggest this. Students must engage with the content of the learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding (Ramsden 1992). Additionally, fostering a sense of student control over learning and encouraging an interest in the subject matter frees students from over dependence on lecturing staff. Student engagement allows students to feel involved and motivation is encouraged when students feel that they are part of the lecture (Morton 2009).

Other theories on development and learning have emphasized the role of social and cultural contexts and processes (Vygotsky n.d. cited in Van Der Stuyf 2002). Vygotsky n.d. (cited in Van Der Stuyf 2002), for example recognizes the importance of considering the social environment in which teaching takes place. Such theories are central to concepts such as “scaffolding” and “situated learning”, which promote teaching which is individualized and which is based on the students own “zone of proximal development” or prior knowledge and ability to internalize new information. Using scaffolding as an educational theory provides instruction just beyond the level of what the learner can do therefore the teacher or lecturer provides support structures in enabling the student to get to the next stage or level. One of the advantages of

scaffolding is that students do not passively listen to information but build on prior knowledge and form new knowledge. Scaffolding approach allows positive feedback to be given to the student and which if done properly will motivate the student so that they will want to learn. The scaffolding approach allows the student to have some control over their learning environment (Van Der Stuyf 2002).

There are a number of ways in which the learning and teaching theories discussed above could be implemented into teaching to increase student midwives engagement and consequently reduce disruptive behavior. The following section provides a number of suggestions on how this might happen by offering some practical solutions.

A first action might be to administer a learning styles questionnaire, such as the one developed by Honey and Mumford (1992), to groups of midwifery students, before teaching commenced. This would help establish the learning styles of the students involved and therefore help those who are teaching to be better informed in adapting the learning environment to the student's characteristics. Second, since the mode of delivery in the PSPH module is a one hour transmissive lecture, gaining and maintaining student's interest is important in increasing their motivation to learn. Following the attributes of an outstanding lecture, as described by Morton (2009), the lecture should be delivered in a way that is informative, interesting and engaging, as well as organized, easy to follow. The presentation should be presented in a logical way. Expected learning outcomes should be introduced to the student at the beginning of the lecture. Signposts to indicate the structure and direction of the lecture should be used and statements and phrases highlighted to link the lecture and the key points of the lecture (Morton 2009). This will ensure that key points are not missed and students are able to make sense of the material presented. Third, in order to make the lecture more relevant for students, some relevant current event or news story on women's health could be introduced and linked to sociological or psychological theory.

To accommodate different learning styles of students, different strategies to present lecture material could be used. To begin with, the lecture could start with a short video clip [3 minutes] from YouTube or some other internet website in order to provoke students to think about the subject in a more critical and challenging way. Following this a series of questions or statements could be posed to the students for their consideration, while they were watching the video. The video would then be followed by a series of group discussions of these questions or statements. Students would be encouraged to discuss how the video presented in the material could be relevant to clinical practice and to their role as a midwife. This would allow students to be disruptive in a constructive way, which means they would be able to talk to each other during

the lecture and express their opinions, but without this being disruptive to the lecture or disruptive to learning.

Following this, a further suggestion might be to support the discussion from the students with about twenty minutes of transmissive teaching. During this time presentation of some of the most salient points from the lecture topic would be made using PowerPoint, with some brief information regarding the content of each of the points. To conclude the teaching session, the students could engage in the teaching by actively encouraging them to participate in the lecture. For example, students could be presented with a clinical scenario that had theoretical underpinnings linked to a sociological or psychological issue and then asked a series of multiple choice questions. An electronic voting system could be then used to establish students' beliefs and views. The answers obtained through this process could then be presented to students, as topics for further discussion for the remainder of the lecture. In this way, all characteristics of learning styles within the group would be satisfied.

## (2) **assessment of students**

Motivation is often linked to assessment in higher education (Ramsden 1992) and it is believed that those students who are traumatized or cynical about the assessment process become amotivated and tend towards more disruptive behaviour (Ramsden 1992). This can also include those students who do not understand how the assessment process is conducted (Hoskins and Newstead 2009). Assessment is an important part of a students learning and can be used as a way of encouraging interest, commitment and intellectual challenge. If assessment of students is presented as a way of demonstrating understanding and learning, rather than of earning a grade it can motivate students, give them control over their learning and provide opportunities for students to show how much they understand (Brown 2004). If possible, assessment should (1) support and therefore enhance student learning (2) provide certification for progress or transfer (3) act as a form of accountability to stakeholders [Lines n.d.]. Assessment also needs to be valid, transparent and students need clarity about the actions that are to be drawn as result of the assessment [Lines n.d.]. Since students use a variety of approaches to learning and respond differently to different styles of teaching, it seems appropriate therefore that good assessment should involve a variety of methods to provide a more accurate and complex depiction of student achievement (Rust 2005). In consideration of these theories, provision of a more student focused process of assessment should be aimed for.

Norton (2009) advocates formative assessment and feedback in the curriculum as opportunities to give students positive feedback and subsequently increase their engagement and motivation with the programme. Therefore more opportunities to give informal feedback to

students during the delivery of the module, perhaps through student seminar presentations, small group discussions and debates, should be included in the curriculum. One recommendation, that might encourage students to have more control over their work and to develop a more self-critical and independent stance, might be the introduction of an assessment where two deadlines were set for student assignments – one for formative assessment and one for summative assessment. Students would receive a fairly detailed written feedback on their first draft and return an improved version which would then receive a mark. As part of this assessment students could also be asked to defend their own work as this would increase their sense of responsibility and control over what they were being taught and also give them a degree of information about how they might need to improve (Ramsden 1992). In order to do this, students would be required to ask for feedback about their assignments from their peers or self-assess their own work.

Finally, as teaching staff should be prepared to discuss with students, what an appropriate answer to an assessment would have consisted of (Ramsden 1992) there should be some form of communicating this to students. One way of supporting this might be to provide a “model” essay, written by the module leader, and made available to students in order that they might understand what was expected of them.

### **Conclusion**

Disruptive and uncivil behaviour are often synonymous with poor social norms, student characteristics and consumerism in education. Student behavior has also been linked to the lack of control students might have over their learning environment and with lack of student motivation. This paper has indicated that by adopting teaching styles and delivery of material aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the improving the design and conduct of assessment, students can be helped to engage in their learning, thereby reducing disruptive behavior. The strategies put forward in this paper are designed to give students more control over their learning environment through increasing their responsibility and engagement with the learning process.

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