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**MADNESS IN THE MOVIES: AN EVALUATION OF THE USE OF CINEMA TO  
EXPLORE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN NURSE EDUCATION**

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# **MADNESS IN THE MOVIES: AN EVALUATION OF THE USE OF CINEMA TO EXPLORE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN NURSE EDUCATION**

## **ABSTRACT**

The research literature on the use of cinema in nurse education is relatively small. This study evaluates student nurses' learning experiences of a new undergraduate elective module called *Madness in the Movies*. Ethical approval was granted to conduct the study. Data were collected through an online survey and a social media discussion forum. The anonymous online survey responses were collated via *Survey Monkey*. Content analysis was conducted on the data from the *Facebook* discussion threads to understand, interpret and conceptualise the meanings from the data. All study participants agreed that their understanding of mental health issues was enriched, their attitudes and beliefs enhanced and their confidence to talk about mental health concerns increased significantly. This module provides a fruitful approach to encourage critical reflection on mental health issues in a safe environment that closely mirrors authentic practice experiences. The module facilitates the development of students' knowledge, values and attitudes in relation to person-centred mental healthcare.

## **Highlights**

- The views and opinions of student nurses around portrayals of mental health issues in films are presented
- Students' understanding of mental health issues was enriched through participating in the module
- Students' articulated their reactions to watching films through a discussion forum and related this to their own practice
- Addresses a gap in the current research literature (Diaz-Membrives et al. 2016)
- Implications in terms of nursing practice and education are discussed.

**Keywords:** mental health, cinema, film, nursing education, nursing practice

## **INTRODUCTION**

Popular cinema can greatly influence societal beliefs about mental illness, diagnosis, mental health practices and practitioner attributes (Darbyshire & Baker, 2012; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Furthermore, cinematic portrayals of mental illness can have a significant impact upon public perceptions of and reactions to people who experience mental health issues particularly around stigma, marginalisation and discrimination (Chouinard, 2009). Although some representations are negative, some commentators argue that many film images of mental distress, though challenging, can be positive and empathetic (Harper, 2008; Kelly, 2006). However, the depiction of available treatments and the role of mental health practitioners are generally negatively portrayed (Baghar, 2005; Byrne, 2009).

The use of popular cinema in health professional education is becoming more evident in the literature and is part of a trend to introduce the humanities subjects into the science-based curriculum (Datta, 2009; DiBartolo and Seldomridge, 2009; Kalra, 2013; Kerby et al., 2008; McKie, 2012; Oh et al., 2012). Health educators have explored the use of popular films for teaching medical students in general (Darbyshire and Baker, 2011; Wilson et al., 2014) and trainee psychiatrists specifically (Gramaglia et al., 2013; Kalra, 2011). However, this approach is less prevalent in nursing and midwifery education and training, although it has been recognised that film can have a significant impact upon student learning (Diaz-Membrives et al. 2016; Fieshi et al., 2015; Kalra, 2013; Zauderer and Ganzer, 2011), particularly on the capacity to reflect and thus to construct meaning and understanding (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Parker and Falk, 2004; Taylor, 2000). Cinema, as a powerful medium, has the capacity to invoke strong emotions and feelings and may influence the viewer's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and ultimately their behaviours (Byrne, 2009). In terms of mental health issues specifically, several studies have investigated creative ways of tackling stigma and innovative ways of addressing government concerns about societies' negative responses towards people who experience mental health problems (Dale et al., 2014; Harper, 2008).

Some studies have looked at film depictions of treatments such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and its perceived use as an instrument of social control (McDonald and Walter, 2009; Sharma and Malik, 2013). One study, that examined film representations of mental health nursing, found that practitioners were still being negatively portrayed, and seen purely as custodians in an ‘aberrant, secret and dangerous world’ (DeCarlo, 2007). However, there are relatively few studies that focus specifically on mental health issues and the portrayal of ‘madness’ in cinema in relation to nurses and nursing practices (Anderson, 2003; Hyde & Fife, 2005; Kerber et al., 2004; Masters, 2005).

### Module description

The Madness in the Movies module is an elective module spanning 6 weeks for students in second year of a four-year multidisciplinary Bachelor of Science Honours Nursing Degree Programme (See Appendix 1). The module is open to all nursing students regardless of discipline. The overall aim of the module is to introduce students to the portrayal of mental illness in popular cinema and to encourage them to develop a critical approach to reading film. The films used in this module were chosen to address particular mental health topics (Table 1). The choice of films was guided by the knowledge and experience of the lecturers in terms of mental health practice, education and their deep appreciation of film.

**Table 1:** Films used and the topics addressed

<b>Film</b>	<b>Topics</b>
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975)	Institutions, systems and treatments
Monster’s Ball (2001)	Depression and anxiety
An Angel at my Table (1990)	Schizophrenia
Human Traffic (2000)	Drug and alcohol use
Transamerica (2005)	Sexuality and gender issues
As Good as it Gets (1997)	Obsessive compulsive disorder

Having viewed each film in class, students were instructed to log onto a private *Facebook* page created specifically for the discussions. The lecturers would generally start the

discussions by posing questions related to aspects of mental health and encouraged students to reflect upon the potential influences and impact on their own practice. For example:

1. Film as a medium can really challenge us and get us to think about mental illness and how it is portrayed. Discuss.
2. How accurate is the stereotype of psychiatric systems and treatments portrayed in the film? Is this still prevalent today? What has changed in terms of policy and developments in practice?
3. What particular aspects were raised in relation to mental health and emotional well-being? How are the issues you have identified e.g. physical abuse, drug and alcohol use, depression, grief, etc. addressed currently in mental health practice?
4. Having viewed the film, what characteristics did you enjoy? Consider the characters, the content and the cinematic techniques used that made the film appealing to you?

Two guides to narrative film analysis were adapted by the lecturers and disseminated to students to help them in formulating and expressing their views and ideas. The first paper (Dwankowski et al., 2014) addressed film contents such as genre, setting, plot and structure, imagery and film facts. It also included cinematic effects such as soundtrack, lighting, editing and use of camera. The second paper (Jacobs, 2013) encouraged students to explore deeper meaning including implicit (how the characters grow), explicit (the moral of the story) and symptomatic (sociological) content. Different approaches to interpretation are discussed such as contextualist, psychological, feminist, Marxist or culturalist viewpoints.

## **METHODS**

### **Aim and objectives**

The aim of the study was to evaluate the students' learning experience and specifically to determine the extent to which students had achieved the module learning outcomes.

The study objectives were to:

1. Explore students' understanding of the depiction of mental health issues in popular cinema;
2. Establish the extent to which students had used a range of tools to critique and analyse portrayal of mental illness in film;
3. Determine the extent to which students had compared and contrasted the portrayal of mental illness in film with current trends and approaches to mental health;
4. Identify the extent to which students related the analysis of mental health in film to their own personal development and professional practice.

This paper will report primarily on the findings related to study objectives 1, 3 and 4.

#### Design and data collection

The study used an exploratory mixed methods design utilising qualitative and quantitative approaches (Cresswell & Plano Clarke 2007). An end of module anonymous survey consisting of a 15-item questionnaire was developed specifically for the project and used to gather data on the module organisation, delivery and assessment. A further 2 questions elicited students' perceptions of their own personal and professional development as a result of engaging with the module. The questionnaire used a combination of Likert Scale and short answer responses. The questionnaire was examined for content validity by a group of colleagues from the authors' department with extensive experience in educational research who found the questions to be comprehensive and appropriate to the concept being measured (Rebar, Gersch, Macnee & McCabe 2011). The questionnaire was also examined for face

validity by a group of students not registered for the Module who judged the questions easy to understand and to complete (Rebar, Gersch, Macnee & McCabe 2011).

Data were also collected from the *Facebook* group discussion threads. Signed consent was sought through an identified gatekeeper and the discussions were anonymised through the removal of any individual identifiers and substituted with codes.

### Participant profiles

A total of twenty-two students enrolled on the module. Fifteen students responded to the online survey and sixteen students agreed to the use of their *Facebook* discussions in the study. The details of the study participants and their related nursing disciplines are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Study participants and nursing discipline

<b>Nursing discipline</b>	<b>Survey % (n)</b>	<b><i>Facebook</i> discussions % (n)</b>
General	13 (2)	19 (3)
Mental Health	80 (12)	81 (13)
Intellectual Disability	7 (1)	0 (0)
Children's & General	0 (0)	0 (0)

### Analysis

The anonymous online survey responses were collected and collated via *Survey Monkey* (Survey Monkey Inc., 2015). Content analysis was conducted on the data from the *Facebook* discussion threads to understand, interpret and conceptualise the meanings from the data (Rebar, Gersch, Macnee & McCabe 2011).

## Ethical approval

The study was reviewed and ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the relevant Research Ethics Committee. All study files were stored in accordance with the Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003 (Government of Ireland, 2003).

## **STUDY RESULTS**

The survey results are presented in the table below. \*

**Table 3:** Questionnaire items and results

<b>Items</b>	<b>Response % (n)</b>
The module met my expectations	100 (15)
The format (film then discussion) was helpful	100 (15)
The workload for the module was about right	93 (13)
The two papers on film analysis were helpful	100 (15)
Time in class spent critiquing films was about right	87 (13)
Time in class spent discussing mental health issues related to the film was about right	87 (13)
The online discussion was a useful aid to learning	100 (15)
The module enriched my understanding of mental health issues: Somewhat Greatly	60 (9) 40 (6)
The module encouraged my questioning of attitudes and beliefs about mental health issues: Somewhat Greatly	47 (7) 53 (8)
The level of confidence in formulating and expressing opinions on mental health issues has improved: Somewhat Greatly	33 (10) 67 (5)
The structure of the post film discussions was helpful	60 (9)
Opinions were valued in the post film discussions	100 (15)
Opinions were valued in the <i>Facebook</i> discussions	94 (14)

In addition to the items summarised above, two open-ended questions related to the students' overall experiences of the module were also asked. The first question asked students to identify positive aspects of the module. Some students commented favourably on the teaching and learning environment including the demeanour of the facilitators, who were perceived as 'open, supportive and flexible,' and who provided a 'creative space' and

‘positive atmosphere’ in which participants could express their views and opinions. A significant number of participants recognised the benefits of the post film discussions and valued the choice of films and the ‘diverse genres’ used. Most people liked the online discussion as an alternative assessment strategy to the end of term examination. It was seen as an ‘engaging and alternative way of learning.’ One person particularly liked the ‘fun atmosphere.’

The second question invited students to make suggestions for future module developments. Some students recognised the challenges of watching films that were sometimes seen as ‘dark’ and ‘emotionally draining.’ Some would like more choice in the films shown and suggested using the polling facility in *Facebook* to enable this. Overall, the majority of students had a very positive experience of the module and could see clear enhancements both in terms of their ability to analyse films and in relation to developments within their own nursing practice.

#### Analysis of the Facebook discussions

A significant number of participants (n=16) consented to their discussions being used in the study. The discussions involved students’ reactions to the films in relation to their own beliefs and understanding of current mental health concerns connected to their own practice experiences. Following content analysis, the main issues arising from the discussion of each film is presented and discussed below.

#### Challenging mental health stereotypes: One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

Many of the students acknowledged that mental health services, in Ireland and elsewhere, have been steadily changing in recent times. Consequently, there is a greater emphasis on the ethos of recovery, more choices, greater service user empowerment and more family and carer involvement (Department of Health and Children, 2006: Department of Health, 2014).

When asked to consider the depiction of mental health systems and treatments, *One Flew*

*over the Cuckoo's Nest* helped students to compare and contrast historical portrayals with the contemporary mental health landscape. As one participant observed:

We've progressed a hell of a lot as nurses in the treatment of psychiatric patients.

Everything is becoming more community based and we are trying to treat people in their homes, community health centres, etc. Over all, we have become a lot more humane and compassionate. (Student 7)

Many students agreed that, as a society, we now have more 'enlightened' approaches to mental health issues. People are being encouraged to talk about their problems and to seek alternatives to the strictly biomedical conceptualizations of mental health:

There is also a greater emphasis on talking therapies as opposed to simply heavily medicating....family involvement in care with recovery being the goal. Working together with the client just was not the case back then (Student 3)

The growth of voluntary groups, the importance of giving people a voice, and human rights was seen by some as increasingly significant in terms of providing progressive and responsive services:

Independent groups began to form such as *Shine* [previously Schizophrenia Ireland] who played a major role in advocacy in our country. It's still a taboo subject at times but we've come a long way from locking people up behind gates, bars and walls.

Their rights as an individual are now recognised. Onwards and upwards! (Student 9)

In terms of diagnoses, students were asked if they thought the main character was 'mad.' A majority of students did not think so rather, that he had 'eccentric' or 'roughish' characteristics. They were trying to better understand elements of his behaviour:

I don't think McMurphy [main character] was mad. He definitely tried to influence and manipulate situations to make them work for him. I do think he found a sense of belonging and acceptance with his fellow "patients" within the hospital setting that he

maybe hadn't found before in the "outside world". There was an occasion where  
McMurphy had planned and could of escaped through an open window but he  
didn't.... (Student 13)

Students were asked to think about power relationships particularly concerning the nurses  
and other care staff and their behaviour and attitudes towards patients. For one student,  
minority issues played a significant part:

I think the fact that staff are from minority groups such as African Americans and  
women who didn't typically have much authority during that period in time also  
affected the way they treated the patients. They went from having little or no power to  
having full power over the patients who were predominantly white men and were the  
dominant social group at the time. (Student 7)

The autocratic stance of the Nurse in Charge was seen as anathema to current day thinking,  
attitudes and person-centred practices within mental healthcare settings, as one person  
explained:

Today treatment is focused on working with the patient towards recovery rather than  
harsh discipline enforced by the ward manager. Her distant and apathetic practice  
could stem from the training she received when she was a student. She may have been  
taught to run a ward with an iron fist instead of comfort and empathy. (Student 2)

### Understanding mental illness: Monster's Ball

The ways in which mental health services are configured and delivered have been  
transformed in recent years and conceptualisations of mental health issues have changed. In  
line with national and international directives, practitioners are no longer purely concerned  
with diagnoses *per se* but seek to have a better understanding of clients' subjective life  
experiences (Health Service Executive, 2014; Mental Health Commission, 2008). In the

second film, *Monster's Ball*, students were asked if they saw any evidence of mental illness and, if so, to articulate how it was manifested. Most people felt that they did not 'see mental illness' in the main characters, despite identifying key features of depression:

Sonny, he appeared to have low mood, he was very lonely and he was turning to alcohol to comfort him. As for Leticia, she had all the factors in which mental illness could appear. She had suffered bereavement in losing her son and the father of her son. Also she was struggling financially to keep her house and eventually lost her job. She was also abusing alcohol and wasn't in control of her emotions. Didn't see mental illness though. (Student 14)

When students were asked whether some of the apparent psychosocial issues could effectively be addressed within the mental health system, almost half of them agreed with the following analysis:

I think that if a person receives a diagnosis these issues are much more likely to be addressed. If a person is in the mental health system they can be taught life coping strategies, and offered support, therapies and medication. Unfortunately these characters all seemed to slip through the cracks and were left alone with their problems. Sadly, this happens in the real world too. (Student 8)

Some students began to perceive differences between 'severe' mental illness and 'just other life difficulties.' One person thought that the film was 'more about mental distress than mental illness.'

#### Personal resilience and survival: An Angel at my Table

The third film, *An Angel at my Table*, told the story of Janet Frame the New Zealand novelist, who is misdiagnosed with schizophrenia, hospitalized, receives ECT and narrowly escapes psychosurgery. Most students found the film 'difficult to watch,' 'painted a negative picture,' and 'dark and gruelling.' One person felt that 'films like these perpetuate stigmatizing

attitudes towards mental illness.’ Although students found the film challenging on many levels, some of them would recommend the film to others:

When people watch these films now, they often don't realise how far mental health services have come and how different things are today. I do agree that it is inspirational how Janet went on to achieve so much in life, despite her difficulties.

(Student 9)

Janet eventually leaves hospital and goes on to be nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Some students felt that the ending was ‘positive’ and ‘offered hope’ to people in similar situations:

Things seem to pick up for Janet when she leaves the treatments and lives with another writer pursuing the career she always wanted. This shows us that maybe we can bounce back from difficult encounters in life, no matter how many we have and how bad we feel at that moment and time. If we stick to what makes us happy we will get there with the support of family and friends and believing in ourselves. (Student 1)

In terms of innovations and developments within mental health services, some people could see the benefits of contrasting treatments available in the 1960s to current treatments:

We can see how far the mental health system has improved since Janet's time in the institutions and how she and others were treated. This is an aspect I find intriguing and would recommend others watch it so see the differences between now and then.

(Student 6)

### ‘Them’ becomes ‘Us’: Human Traffic

Students responded very positively to the film *Human Traffic*. Many saw it as a refreshing shift from the challenges of the earlier ‘hard hitting’ and ‘emotionally draining’ films. They seemed to identify with and liked the characters:

It was such a feel good film. It touched on the good and bad side effects to drug use, which I thought was good as it was very realistic and not biased to either side. The evidence of paranoia and post-drug depression were evident, but it pivoted about the "come down" of drugs rather than a serious, lifelong problem. I totally agree with Jip when he states, "we're all fucked up in our own little way". He totally hit the nail on the head! (Student 12)

Students recognized the importance of 'friendship, support and loyalty.' There was a kind of 'normalising' feeling experienced around mental health concerns. According to one student, people experiencing mental health issues 'are us,' and not 'the alien other.' Most people felt 'uplifted' by the film and thought that through the use of humour, good music and interesting characters, important psychological and social issues could be tackled effectively.

#### Social inclusivity and diversity: Transamerica

Our penultimate film, *Transamerica*, provided rich subject matter around relationships, psychosocial supports, and resilience. For most students, this was their favourite film. Whilst viewing the film, students were asked to consider particular aspects that were raised in relation to mental health and emotional well-being. People were able to effectively relate the film content to practice issues, in particular insights into an individual's internal world. As one person articulated:

The challenge for anyone working in the mental health field is always to elicit and understand what a person is thinking and feeling whilst recognising that this may be in contrast to their appearance and behaviour. This is especially so in matters of gender identity (the gender that you feel you should be) and gender dysphoria (a condition that describes the feeling of being trapped in a body of the wrong sex).

*Transamerica* offers the viewer the experience of just such an assessment, through the eyes of Toby, from his first encounter with Bree to the final scenes. The film raises an

awareness of the psychological conflict an individual may experience if they decide to be open about their transsexuality and illustrates the courage that is required to make such a life choice. (Student 12)

Others recognized the importance of caring attributes such as empathy and compassion whilst some students questioned the validity and ‘helpfulness’ of medical diagnoses such as Gender Identity Disorder (GID) or body dysmorphia:

The film dealt honestly with important matters such as gender identity issues, a controversial topic in relation to mental health problems. As mentioned in previous comments I disagree with this being considered a type of diagnosis or label that can be put on a person and believe that everyone has their own right to express themselves and their identity. What struck me about the film is that Bree did not find happiness or the ‘cure’ she was hoping for after her surgery because of her experiences. I empathised with Bree, her life after surgery was not as satisfying or perfect as she had planned it due to the disapproval of her family and the breakdown of her relationship with Toby, which made the film relatable and realistic. It conveyed the importance in support systems and relationships with loved ones when a person is going through significant change and difficult times. (Student 11)

Many students felt a strong connection with the main character’s counsellor and identified positive qualities displayed in terms of a therapeutic nurse-patient relationship. Also, the importance of considering wider mental health issues was expressed:

The power medical professionals have over people's lives was very well illustrated in the scene with Bree and the doctor. I thought you could really feel her desperation as she was practically begging the doctor to let her go ahead with the operation. I also think it highlighted the beneficial effects of a positive therapeutic relationship in the scenes with Bree and her therapist as she was warm, empathetic and totally

professional and you could see the trust and mutual respect they had for one and other. I too disagree with gender identity disorder being diagnosed as a mental illness but I think due to issues such as stigma, transphobia and social isolation it is important for us as future health care professionals to understand LGBT issues.

(Student 7)

The final film, *As Good as it Get*, was chosen by student poll. The film depicts a character's experiences of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Although students appeared to enjoy the 'light-hearted' presentation of the condition, most agreed that it was not a 'true portrayal.' For one student, although it was 'uplifting,' it 'was not realistic in terms of recovery from mental health issues.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study has confirmed the value of popular cinema as a medium to explore the types of issues that may arise for student nurses in their practice. All students in this study found it beneficial to have the opportunity to reflect upon and articulate their opinions, attitudes and beliefs about mental health issues. The core teaching and learning strategies (in class and online discussion) allowed students to respond to 'real life' situations (well beyond their scope of practice and experience) in the safety of the classroom without the professional responsibilities of the clinical environment (Kirkpatrick et al. 2001). Furthermore, their understanding of mental health issues was enriched through their participation in this module. Reflection was a key component of the learning activities for this module both in the classroom and online. This correlates with current thinking about the value of reflective practices which identifies the ability to reflect as a key skill for healthcare professionals (Brett-McLean et al. 2010).

As the module progressed there were evident gains in students' confidence in formulating and expressing opinions, both written and oral, on mental health issues. Billings

& Halstead (2009) and Schmidt (2004) recognise writing as a useful way of promoting personal reflection, critical thinking and judgement. Examples of written assignments in courses utilising cinema in health education include person reflection essays, position debate papers, journals and film critiques (Oh et al. 2013). For the current study, students were expected to contribute to a *Facebook* discussion forum following their viewing of each film. This type of discursive writing is much less formal than the methods identified in similar courses. Social media, such as *Facebook*, is interactive and conversational, with students sharing, testing and developing their professional knowledge, attitudes and beliefs with their peers, and with us. We noticed that through this process, students who appeared to be less engaged in classroom discussion were often the most prolific contributors to the online conversation. Leonard & Johnson (1998) have identified the phenomenon of the ‘reticent student’ who is unwilling to engage in the dialogical teaching and learning approaches that are widespread in nursing education. By using *Facebook* we were able to improve the potential for interactive learning by providing a more egalitarian and emancipatory environment where the more vocally reticent students had an equal opportunity to express themselves.

Students appeared to identify with the portrayal of mental health issues in more recent films. In the earlier films, such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) and films set in an earlier period, *An Angel at my Table* (1990), students saw no relevance to their experience of current mental health settings and available treatments. They were however, able to use these films as a basis to discuss developments in mental health treatments and services. The film, *Human Traffic*, provided a turning point for students where they appeared to display a more empathic response to what they were viewing. They seemed to be forming a connectedness with the characters in the film and were able to think more about the specific mental health issues that characters were displaying such as stress and anxiety. Students were

able to maintain open minds and safely discuss any concerns both in the classroom and online. Also, in *Transamerica*, students appeared to identify strongly with the two main characters and questioned key issues around person-centred care such as human rights, diagnoses, ethnicity and culture, sexualities, treatment options and therapist attributes. Person-centred care recognises an individual's unique characteristics, being respectful of a person's rights, needs and choices and developing a therapeutic relationship built on trust (Hewlett-Taylor, 2015). It is about involving significant people in the person's social network including friends and family (Ewart et al. 2014). Current evidence supports this approach to nursing care and has shown positive health outcomes for people where health services embody person-centred care (Luxford et al. 2011; McCormack et al. 2010).

Furthermore, nurses are being encouraged to be more reflective. According to Sommerville et al. (2004, p42), 'reflection is the examination of personal thoughts and actions. It is a process where practitioners can better understand themselves in order to build on existing strengths and take appropriate future action.' Critical reflection is part of the process of reflective practice and involves developing self-awareness of 'our assumptions about ourselves, other people, and the workplace'. In the module, students were encouraged to question their own values and beliefs in response to the films as well as relating the films to their own practice experiences. The discussion threads for the films shown later in the module demonstrated a greater empathy and compassion for the characters and a more nuanced understanding of lay/professional power and the importance of therapeutic relationships.

The students' discussion indicated their awareness of current policy initiatives in mental health. In particular, the national drive for innovative, responsive and holistic services that address inclusivity, human rights, dignity, respect and empowerment. These approaches include a recovery ethos, the importance of family involvement and are increasingly service-user led (Department of Health, 2014; Mental Health Reform, 2015). It was heartening to

note that students' had seen evidence of the implementation of these progressive mental health policies in their limited experience in clinical practice. In the context of this module, the issue for us as educators was whether or not to challenge students' limited practical experience of mental health services by presenting them with the large body of evidence contradicting their analysis. Ultimately, we agreed not to challenge them at this stage on the basis that it was more important for them to continue to construct their own understanding of the health system as they gain more clinical exposure in the final two years of their degree studies.

### Study strengths and limitations

Given that enrolment on the module was limited to 22 students, it is not surprising that the sample size for this study is relatively small (n=16). The authors have therefore attempted to limit their generalisations accordingly. However it should also be noted that the use of a mixed methods approach adds strength to the study results by combining students' self-reported satisfaction with the module and their assessment of the extent of their learning with the authors' analysis of direct evidence of student learning in the form of the *Facebook* discussion threads. The authors propose to conduct a longitudinal study of several student cohorts enrolled in this module over the next two years. Furthermore, in a recent literature review on the use of 'commercial' (popular) films as a teaching resource for health science students, the authors noted that none of the 54 studies reviewed had students as active participants in their learning by 'identifying, recognising or searching theoretical aspects of the disease on the screen in order to build knowledge' (Rebar, Gersch, Macnee & McCabe 2011). The current study addresses this gap in the literature.

## CONCLUSION

The module Madness in the Movies has provided nursing students with creative ways of reflecting on their own personal development and professional practice in relation to mental health theory, policy and services. Nursing and Midwifery curricula are encouraging a more holistic approach within healthcare and it is crucial that psychosocial elements of care are addressed in undergraduate and postgraduate education. As an educational development, the teaching, learning and assessment approaches used in module are potentially applicable not only to mental health education but across the nursing curriculum.

#### Conflict of interest statement

Conflict of interest: none

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