

Abstract

Introduction: Empathy is an important skill for pharmacists and other healthcare professionals. Empathy helps build trust, improve communication, and strengthen the patient–provider relationships. Though important, empathy can be affected by stress and burnout. As a result, it is necessary to intentionally develop this skill during professional training. This paper assesses the use of improvisation-based training to improve empathy, communication, and teamwork among third-year pharmacy (P3) students at the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) School of Pharmacy (SOP).

Methods: During the Spring 2025 semester, 59 P3 students participated in an improvisation workshop developed in collaboration with the SIUE School of Theatre.⁶ Students were randomly assigned to either an intervention group that completed the improvisation workshop before participating in patient simulation scenarios or a control group that completed the simulations before the workshop. In teams, students worked through simulated community pharmacy situations with standardized patients and completed pre- and post-surveys measuring collaborative skills and communication using the Self-Assessment Teamwork Tool (SATT).⁷ Standardized patients also evaluated students' empathy using the Consultation and Relational Empathy (CARE) measure.⁸

Results: The results showed that students who completed improvisation training before the simulations reported stronger cooperation and communication skills. Considerable improvements were seen in areas such as communicating treatment plans, seeking help from teammates when facing problems, and overall collaboration.⁶ While standardized patients rated both groups positively for empathy, there was no significant difference between the groups in patient-perceived empathy.

Conclusion: These findings support the proposed integration of improvisation-based empathy training into the SIUE School of Pharmacy curriculum. While standardized patient ratings of empathy were similar between groups, students who completed the training prior to simulation demonstrated improved teamwork, communication, and collaborative critical-thinking skills. These results suggest that early implementation, particularly in the first professional year, may enhance students' ability to engage empathetically within healthcare teams. Ongoing collaboration between the School of Pharmacy and the theater program offers a feasible and sustainable model, while providing a foundation for future evaluation of long-term educational and clinical outcomes.