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Giving Voice to Values: An undergraduate nursing curriculum project



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Received 28 July 2013; accepted 17 September 2013

KEYWORDS

Values;
Nursing ethics;
Values education;
Values curriculum

Summary Among the competency standards stipulated by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council for graduating students are competencies in moral and ethical decision making and ethics education within professions such as nursing has traditionally focussed on these competencies, on raising ethical awareness and developing skills of analysis and reasoning. However, ethics education in tertiary settings places less emphasis on developing students' capacities to act on their values.

This paper explains and explores the adoption of Dr. Mary Gentile's curriculum (the Giving Voice to Values curriculum) which specifically focuses on developing students' capacities to act on their values. The curriculum (Gentile, 2010) assists students and professionals to explore, script and rehearse responses which build upon their capacity to respond in accordance with their own values in complex workplace settings in which they face conflicts of value and belief.

The paper firstly examines the theoretical underpinnings of the Giving Voice to Values (GVV) curriculum. It then presents the integration and evaluation phase of a Project inspired by the GVV methodology, using a case study approach within two areas of an undergraduate nursing curriculum. As a pilot project, this initiative has provided signposts to further curriculum development and to research pathways within the UNDA School of Nursing, by highlighting students' uncertainties regarding their own professional values, and their intense struggles to voice their values within health care contexts.

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Introduction

Giving Voice to Values: an overview

The Giving Voice to Values curriculum designed by Gentile (2010) offers an innovative approach to the teaching of ethics in tertiary institutions. It takes as its premise the proposition that practitioners within professional fields are

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often able to recognize a conflict of values in the workplace, but are less able to articulate their own position and to decipher a course of action which enables them to act on their values in an effective way; that is, in a way which addresses and helps resolve the ethical conflict they have encountered and ensures that they avoid or minimize any systematic disadvantage which might accrue to them as a consequence of their decision to act.

Gentile argues that both experience and research demonstrate that many professionals will encounter values conflicts in their professional practice, e.g. when what they wish to accomplish conflicts with the expectations of their clients, customers, patients, students, peers or bosses. The GVV curriculum is designed to help individuals learn to recognize, clarify, speak and act on their values when those conflicts arise. Thus the focus of this curriculum is on the way in which professionals raise an issue of concern in an effective manner; it addresses what professionals need to take into consideration, what they need to do and say in order to be heard when facing ethical conflicts in complex workplace contexts.

The distinctive features of the GVV curriculum are that it focuses on positive examples of ways in which practitioners have been able to act on their values in the workplace; it emphasizes the importance for practitioners of finding alignment between an individual sense of purpose and the purpose of the organization in which they work via a process of self-assessment and reflection. The curriculum is also distinctive for the opportunity it provides to construct and practise responses to frequently heard reasons and rationalizations for not acting on one's values; as well as for building commitment and enhancing effectiveness by repeated practice in delivering responses and providing peer feedback and coaching.

The methodology acknowledges that there are different strategies that can be used to enable us to act on our values. They can involve looking for a "win/win" solution for those involved in conflict; alternatively, a practitioner might attempt to change a manager's mind on an issue through persuasion and logic; approach a higher authority within the organization in an attempt to address an issue; or build coalitions of like-minded employees who might work together to address an issue of concern. These are not unlike the kinds of strategies suggested by other theorists. For example, Rigolosi (2005) approaches conflict resolution by identifying various potential strategies (including "win/win") and describing the process by which conflict can be managed. Rigolosi recognizes phases in conflict resolution from problem recognition, to routine attempts to resolve the problem (e.g. via confrontation, compromise or accommodation), to attempts to redefine the problem and finally to attempts to resolve the redefined problem. The role of assertive communication in resolving conflict is recognized, as is the fact that "[c]onstructive conflict resolution is characterized by solutions that respond to the needs of all participants in the conflict" (p. 212). But Rigolosi's focus appears to be on comprehensively clarifying the concept of conflict resolution by describing what it is that causes conflict, listing problem-solving moves and then offering, in the form of a prescription, guidelines for the negotiation of conflict in particular situations (2005, p. 206–9). However, her approach does not adequately address the question of *how* one can

communicate assertively or *how* one might go about taking account of the needs of others within complex workplace contexts.

By comparison, Gentile's approach by-passes the kind of analysis Rigolosi undertakes to focus on personal and professional motivation to act, and on the development of practitioners' skill, confidence and competence to act in accordance with their values. Gentile's methodology facilitates a process of exploring and producing appropriate responses to practical scenarios which illustrate ethical conflict by pre-scripting, practicing, rehearsing and coaching with regard to those responses. In this sense it is Aristotelian in flavor since this process can be seen as analogous to the development of habits or dispositions to behave in particular ways. Aristotle took the habits we develop to be crucial, arguing that we become temperate and good-tempered or self-indulgent and irascible:

by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

Aristotle (1984) *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1, 103b25

Gentile also bypasses another feature of contemporary moral debate: debate about the genesis of moral values. Discussions of moral agency in the literature have long recognized the tension between social constructionist views of the moral voice and the fact that moral language is unique in its claims to certainty. For example, Tronto (1999) makes this point in discussing the work of Hekman and Susan (1995) and Bowden (1997). Gentile appears to deal with claims to certainty by asserting that, as members of civilised communities, we share a commitment to some central values, such as honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness and compassion. Martha Nussbaum makes a similar point about shared values, as do Grace and Cohen (2005), when she argues for three normative criteria (compassion, reciprocity and individuality) which "can be endorsed by a wide plurality of reasonable ethical conceptions" (2001, p. 48). In the context of a book on love, Nussbaum (1990) is arguing that emotions such as compassion are important in ethics since they make us alive to value and their assessment "is part and parcel of the overall assessment of a person's value judgements and cognitive attitudes" (2001, p. 460, 478); although we must be wary of the vicissitudes of personal emotion and partiality, "compassion is the eye through which people see the good and ill of others" (2001, p. 392).

For Gentile, this convergence on values such as compassion provides the basis for an ethics education that is focussed on action, rather than on raising awareness or developing skills of analysis, in relation to the ethical issues which nurses and other healthcare professionals face. There are a many useful texts available which deal well with these latter two aspects of ethics education in the context of healthcare; e.g. Campbell, Gillett, and Gareth (2005), Thompson, Melia, Boyd, and Horsburgh (2006), Kerridge, Lowe, and Stewart (2009) and Butts and Rich (2005). The

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