



## Issues for debate

## Reflections on the use of poetry in nurse education: Speaking a credible language of care

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## ABSTRACT

Based on the experience of using the poem 'The Nurse's Pockets' by Courtney Davis in reflective practice teaching sessions this paper considers the centrality of language as conveyed in poetry as a way of communicating nursing knowledge and experience. Using this poem facilitated a mutual position between the educator and the students that enhanced the reflective practice environment. An argument for using creative arts based approaches in nurse education is presented as a means of overcoming the threats to the unique nature of nursing knowledge evidenced in healthcare and higher education reform.

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## Introduction

Castledine (2011 p. 705) states that "significant and emotional events that happen in one's life often stir powerful feelings which motivate a response which generates poetry" and he argues that "poetry is not the reserve of the intellectual or the eminent writer, it can stir the emotions in all of us". Poetry is an artistic expression of emotion and it postures towards a qualitative epistemology. In its inception a reflective inductive approach is applied and poetry written by nurses attends to an interpretation of the lived experience of patients or describes the work of nurses and their distinct worldview.

In nurse education it is often challenging to speak about nursing practice with students in a credible and meaningful manner and in an attempt to reclaim an interpretation of credibility as a nurse, poetry was used as a means of communicating with the students. Maintaining clinical credibility as a nurse educator has generated a varied and substantial debate since nurse education moved to the higher education environment (Andrew and Robb, 2011; Barrett, 2007; Griscti et al., 2005; Meskell et al., 2009; Williams and Taylor, 2008). Most recently Ousey and Gallagher (2010 p. 665) have called for an end to the debate suggesting that nurse lecturers may not have to be clinically credible to facilitate learning and that as a community the focus on the development of strong partnerships with the clinical

areas that ensure the student is prepared for clinical practice should take precedence.

One aspect of maintaining clinical credibility in nurse education could be situated in addressing the need to genuinely connect with the world of the student and our common ground is negotiating the realities of clinical practice. Albeit that the personal reality of clinical practice for most nurse educators may be based on retrospection nonetheless we have witnessed and practised nursing care. Any nurse who has attended to patient care in its most natural and intimate form does not readily forget those interactions and most nurses can articulate what nursing means to them based on those memories.

The post-modern context of nursing has become increasingly complex and nuanced however the fundamental principles remain the same, that nursing practice is predicated on care and that as educators one of the essential aims of nurse education is to foster a caring and attentive attitude in the student nurse. However, credibly discussing care as the context for nursing practice in educational settings is a challenge given that the majority of nurse educators are not involved in direct patient interaction and are more often engaged in academic practice that further distances them from the everyday world of nursing. The dissonance in this relationship is most noticeable in the debates surrounding the clinical credibility of nurse educators. As a means of overcoming this challenge it is argued that language is central to our attempt at knowing and moreover the poetry of nursing as one example of using the arts in nurse education, can offer a form of communication that creates a universal position from which educators can meaningfully speak about nursing care in the purist sense.

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## Using the arts in nurse education

In the collective wave of higher education and healthcare reform which is characterised by an obsessive managerial rhetoric that favours commercialism, empirics and quality control the de-valuing of certain types of knowledge is insidious, (Barnett, 2000; Darbyshire and Mc Kenna, 2013; Lynch, 2010; Rolfe, 2012; Taylor et al., 2010; Timmins, 2014). In this environment nurse educators should strongly advocate for insistence on preserving the central principles of nursing knowledge and consider teaching strategies that incorporate the arts as a means to overcome threats to the core philosophy of nursing. Arts based pedagogies emphasise the centrality of language in providing a means of communication, (Barleben, 1993; McKoy, 1984; Raingruber, 2004; Oiler, 1983). Cody (1994) and Hodnicki et al. (1993) used poetry to explain concepts of Parse's nursing theory. Fulton (1987) adapted the narrative nursing theory developed by Virginia Henderson into prose and poetry to assist interpretation of the complexities of nursing discourse. More recent evidence suggests that nurse educators are adopting a variety of creative arts based pedagogical approaches. Chan (2014) reported on the use of composing songs (Chan, 2006), drawing (Chan, 2013b) and writing poems (Chan, 2013c) to improve critical thinking. Mc Cabe et al. (2013) used an interdisciplinary art module to augment the student learning experience. Meditative thinking and collage were used by Jack (2012) to enhance emotional awareness while McKie et al. (2008) used art, film, literature and photography.

The most pertinent outcomes in these studies emphasise the over arching benefits of using the arts in nurse education from the student perspective. The advantage of doing so is conveyed in recurring themes in the literature such as 'learning about holism' (Mc Cabe et al., 2013) 'using different tools can assist you to think outside the norm' (McKie et al., 2008), to developing 'creative thinking' (Chan, 2013) all of which are relatively predictable but positive additions to student learning.

However broader pedagogical issues need to be considered when choosing arts based approaches to ensure that their adoption is not superficial. McKie et al. (2008) discuss the importance of choosing the 'art' form to ensure an appropriate emotional response is elicited to help students understand the range of human experience. This may be possible in situations where there is latitude to incorporate dedicated arts based modules as a continuum in curricula and where the teaching team is large enough to facilitate exposure to a range of artistic media but this may not be practical in many nurse education settings due to a lack of resources. Chan's (2014 p.927) observation that "artistic learning is a fluid practice and its outcomes depend on the competence and flexibility of the facilitator" is also important. Using the arts in nurse education requires a certain degree of teaching competence and an aptitude to select the material and manage the student responses that it may invoke (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2010; Harrison, 2006). Choosing poetry for example should be done carefully and it is as time consuming as other options, (Harrison, 2006 p.105). There is a paucity of teaching templates or protocols available for arts based nurse education to guide its pedagogical development (Chan, 2014) and choosing arts based pedagogy should be based on the nurse educators' philosophy and not on predetermined pedagogical frameworks that suggest a standardisation toward the approach. Lazenby (2013 p.10) argues that a return to the human aspects of nursing philosophy should be more apparent in nursing research and education and cautions against the adoption of the humanities as a 'kind of adjunct' (p.9) to curricula arguing that "this being and doing—the lived experience of nurses and those whom they care for—the humanities of nursing". An art based approach to nurse education will help to re- focus on the human aspects of nursing and specifically attunes the affective domain (Bloom, 1956).

## Poetry and 'The art of attention'

Carper's (1978) 'ways of knowing' highlights the relevance and importance of different modes of knowledge to further the understanding of nursing activity. To enhance awareness she suggested that the aesthetic pattern can enhance nurses' ability to know their own unique perceptive experiences. However these 'aesthetics' increasingly get lost in everyday clinical and academic work or become informal conversations that are undocumented, but are often rich in expression, understanding and value. With an over arching aim to attune the students' awareness of the aesthetics of nursing care in reflective practice a poem 'The Nurse's Pockets' written by the nurse poet Cortney Davis was chosen as suitable. This poem facilitates a common ground between the nurse educator and the student nurse from which both parties can share clinical experience. This encouraged a reflective learning environment that was based on reciprocity. Choosing a poem that openly narrates and reflects on nursing care helps to confirm to the student that nurse educators understand clinical nursing and the challenging emotions that can be associated with everyday practice.

Cortney Davis (2006 p.23) is a prolific nurse poet and she offers a layered definition of what poetry is and how it is related to nursing care, "a poem becomes the place in which the act of caring becomes a way of keeping, and the mysteries of our world are revealed in the sensual reality of physical detail. For me, nursing is intimate, tactile, spiritual and utterly unlike any other way we humans have of caring for one another". In the poem *The Nurse's Pockets*, Davis draws our attention to the transition of life to death in four stanzas.

### **The Nurse's Pockets by Cortney Davis**

When patients are told they're dying  
they say something simple:

*I've had a good life or Who will feed my cats?*

It seems harder on the doctor-  
He waits outside the door, stalling,  
until the patient confronts him,

*So, Doc, they say. What's the verdict?*

Soon, a nurse comes to bathe the patient.

There is only the sound of water

Wrung from the warm washcloth,

The smell of yellow soap,

And the way she spends time praising

The valley of his clavicle, his hollow mouth.

Then, a morning when the patient leaves,

taking his body. The nurse finds nothing

but the bed with its depression,

its map of sheets she strips.

In the drawer, gumdrops. A comb

Woven with light hair, and a book

With certain pages marked.

She takes all these into her pockets.

She has trunks in every room of her home,

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