



# Creative teaching method as a learning strategy for student midwives: A qualitative study



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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Traditional ways of teaching in Higher Education are enhanced with adult-based approaches to learning within the curriculum. Adult-based learning enables students to take ownership of their own learning, working in independence using a holistic approach. Introducing creative activities promotes students to think in alternative ways to the traditional learning models. The study aimed to explore student midwives perceptions of a creative teaching method as a learning strategy.

**Research design:** A qualitative design was used adopting a phenomenological approach to gain the lived experience of students within this learning culture.

**Participants:** Purposive sampling was used to recruit student midwives ( $n = 30$ ).

**Methods:** Individual interviews were conducted using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gain subjective information. Data were transcribed and analyzed into useful and meaningful themes and emerging themes using Colaizzi's framework for analyzing qualitative data in a logical and systematic way. Over 500 meaningful statements were identified from the transcripts.

**Findings:** Three key themes strongly emerged from the transcriptions. These included 'meaningful learning', 'inspired to learn and achieve', and 'being connected'. A deep meaningful learning experience was found to be authentic in the context of theory and practice. Students were inspired to learn and achieve and positively highlighted the safe learning environment. The abilities of the facilitators were viewed positively in supporting student learning. This approach strengthened the relationships and social engagement with others in the peer group and the facilitators. On a less positive note, tensions and conflict were noted in group work and indirect negative comments about the approach from the teaching team.

**Conclusions:** Incorporating creative teaching activities is a positive addition to the healthcare curriculum. Creativity is clearly an asset to the range of contemporary learning strategies. In doing so, higher education will continue to keep abreast of the needs of graduating students in a complex and rapidly changing professional environment.

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## Introduction

The ultimate challenge facing higher education in the 21st century is staying relevant in a competitive market (Higher Education Academy 2012; Bamford 2006). Globalization, cultural diversity, and the increasing economic and social pressures faced by new graduates contribute to this situation (Barber et al. 2013; Ryan and Tilbury 2013a). Incorporating a range of learning, teaching, and assessment strategies in educational programs provides students with a secure environment to reflect their diversity and distinctiveness (Barnett 2013; Ryan and Cotton 2013; Bell et al. 2009). Traditional ways of teaching are enhanced with adult-based approaches such as transformative learning (Mezirow 2000). In this approach, participants are fully informed, are free from

coercion, and have equal opportunities to assume various roles. This type of learning encourages critical reflection and empathetic and good listeners who are willing to search for common ground or different points of view. This type of pedagogy leads individuals to a place where they can learn for themselves in a personal and meaningful way (Ryan 2012). One of the purposes of higher education is to foster dynamic approaches to teaching and learning through creativity, innovation, and continuous development (Higher Education Academy 2011).

Learning to learn is a key factor in personal learning for both students and teachers. Brookfield (1995, 2015) has developed the concept of the critical reflective teacher. In this context, the teacher continues to review their practice to improve skills. In doing so, they gain increased awareness of their own skills and are willing to embrace other ways of engaging and teaching students. They also develop positive traits associated with critical reflection, including self-assuredness, and achievement of teaching goals. This learning style promotes creativity and enriches the learning process for students, thus encouraging them to become critically reflective (Clark 2009a).

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A positive learning environment promotes deeper learning and achievement of learning outcomes (Lizzio et al. 2002), improves generic academic and workplace skills (Meeuwisse et al. 2010), and fosters peer, teacher, and social interaction (Johnson et al. 2006; Prince 2004). In turn, this can improve student engagement (Umbach and Wawrzynski 2005) and promote learner centeredness (Zepke et al. 2006; Yorke and Thomas 2003). Over time, these positive interactions can also promote a sense of belonging in diverse groups (Meeuwisse et al. 2010).

Educational programs are designed to promote a positive learning environment to keep them relevant and responsive to meet the needs of students in a complex and rapidly changing social environment (Ryan and Tilbury 2013b; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2012; Nursing and Midwifery Council 2009; Ramsden 2008). The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a qualitative study to explore student midwives' perceptions of using a creative teaching method as a learning strategy.

### **Creativity: Overview of Literature**

The term creativity, although often misunderstood, is recognized as being a central component of active learning. This makes a valuable and essential contribution to the learning process when facilitated in a supportive environment (Clark 2009b; Sternberg 2006). Creativity is a cognitive skill involving breaking out of established patterns, looking at familiar things in a different way, with a fresh eye and open mind to create new and original thought (Clark 2009a; De Bono 2009). Original thought flourishes in a creative environment characterized by an open-minded and diverse culture (De Bono 2009; Florida 2002). Divergent and convergent thinking work in harmony and students need to understand how they complement each other. This form of learning encourages metacognitive learning so that students better understand their own thinking and creative abilities. Problem-based learning can promote both divergent and convergent thinking. In the case of divergent thinking, the student is encouraged to create and work through a problem, while convergent thinking involves the facilitator posing the problem and expecting a specific response (Goodman 2015).

The ability for humans to be creative is often debated within the context of nature versus nurture. It is now understood that creativity is innate, with individuals losing this ability when brain processes are not stimulated and used (Pérez Alonso-Geta 2009). Education at all levels plays a crucial role in stimulating and nurturing creativity to meet the demands of society, the individual, flexible working, and lifelong learning (Robinson 2011; Villalba 2009). If fostered in higher education, creativity can be exercised and improved, thus making academic life an easier and more interesting challenge (Harding 2010).

Creativity, within an integrated pedagogy, motivates individuals to apply prior knowledge more productively, analyze, and synthesize information purposefully (Lazzari 2009), build confidence in personal ability, and have fun while learning (De Bono 2009). Group work and confidence may play significant roles in helping nursing students to express themselves and think creatively (Chan 2013). When creative, students have more energy, enthusiasm, and more understanding of the diverse needs of users and their families (Swallow and Coates 2004) and engage more with the emotional aspects of midwifery practice (Noble and Pearce 2014; Davies 2007).

### **Creative Teaching Method**

To stimulate and harvest creative abilities and professional imaginations in student midwives, a workshop using creative teaching methods was incorporated into the program. Fig. 1 relates to key aspects and provides the purpose, structure, and content over the 8 days of the workshop.

Originality is the main characteristic of transformational learning and thus creativity (Cropley 1999). The purpose of this creative teaching method was to provide effective and stimulating opportunities by

utilizing independent learning approaches. The initial 2-day sessions introduced students to the idea of creative thinking and the skills required. This approach aimed to enhance creative thinking, to empower the students, and to promote the integration of theory and practice. These are all deeper thinking skills within transformational learning. The students were encouraged to recognize their own innate abilities and to utilize these in a meaningful manner by creating a presentation relating to an aspect of midwifery practice.

A further 6 days was allocated for students to plan, prepare, and share their creative activities/presentations with peers, lecturers, and midwives. The students were encouraged and supported to utilize a range of creative skills that included cognitive, social, and affective skills. Examples of cognitive skills include critical thinking decision making, problem solving, and reflection. Social skills include language, collaboration, and cooperation. Empathy, attitudes, and emotions are examples of affective skills.

Students were encouraged to use various types of learning activities to enhance their holistic understanding regarding midwifery practice. A key factor in this process was to promote transformational learning and facilitate them to move away from traditional didactic thinking to a more holistic view of midwifery. To promote this form of learning, students utilized an adult-centered approach to produce a relevant creative activity. They expressed their ideas, for example, through the use of pictures and images to stimulate affective skills such as empathy and to promote discussion from peers. Other examples included the use of drama, role-play, and scenarios focusing on social aspects of midwifery care. Fig. 2 provides fuller examples of their creative activities/presentations.

On occasion, clinical staff attended the presentations, and where relevant, presentations were displayed in the clinical areas (for example, art work, photographs, stories, and poems). Positive evaluations of the content and format of the creative teaching workshops were obtained over six consecutive cohorts ( $n = 218$ ). The fact that positive evaluations were consistently provided now warranted more in-depth exploration, which was the key focus of this present research study.

### **Conducting the Study**

A qualitative research design using Husserl's descriptive phenomenological approach was adopted. Phenomenology aims to provide an insight into reality by gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday lived experience of individuals (Husserl 2012; Silverman 2011).

Ethics approval was gained through the higher education institution. Designing the research proposal included careful consideration to protect the key ethical principles. This included providing a detailed and succinct participant information leaflet, consent form, and the protection of personal data and identity of participants.

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit the participants over four consecutive cohorts. By using this method, the researchers focused on prospective participants with the necessary knowledge and experience (Cohen et al. 2011). In total, 30 students gave permission to be interviewed.

Individual interviews were conducted to collect data. The interview schedule of open-ended questions took account of the findings highlighted from other related studies and students' previous evaluations of these workshops. The design of the semi-structured interviews enabled further exploration of specific issues in a more qualitative and meaningful way (Silverman 2011). Following good practice, interviews were held at a time and venue convenient for participants and were between 40 and 55 min in duration (Silverman 2011).

Data obtained from the taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis focused on understanding the meaning of the descriptive information obtained and eliciting the essential meaning of the experience to participants (Streubert and Carpenter 2010). This was conducted using Colaizzi's framework to systematically analyze the qualitative

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