



The use of poetry writing in nurse education: An evaluation



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SUMMARY

Background: Arts based approaches have been used in health education in various ways e.g. to develop emotional awareness, reduce anxiety and stress and assess communication skills.

Objectives: This evaluation aimed to explore the use of poetry writing as a way for undergraduate nursing students to consider their feelings about important practice issues.

Methods: 42 first year undergraduate nursing students were asked to write a poem which focussed on an important nursing issue e.g. compassion, communication or the therapeutic role of the nurse. They were then asked to read the poem aloud to a small group and discuss its meaning.

Results: 60% (n = 24) of students reported that the exercise had increased understanding of their chosen subject, 75% (n = 30) stated that they had learned something about themselves and 65% (n = 26) of students stated that they had enjoyed the poetry writing exercise. Qualitative comments suggested that the use of poetry enabled greater understanding of others' experiences, promoted open and honest reflection on feelings and supported the development of confidence.

Conclusion: There is a need for teaching methods which engage and develop students' imagination, if they are going to be adequately prepared for the demands of nursing practice. Poetry writing and discussion supports the development of confidence, therapeutic communication skills and the ability to think creatively.

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Introduction

Becoming a nurse requires more than just learning facts and theories. The seminal work of Carper (1978) is a reminder that there are four fundamental patterns of knowing in nursing, empiric, aesthetic, ethical and personal, which are of equal importance. Emotional awareness, sensitivity towards others and relational caring lie at the core of nursing practice and ways in which these patterns can be developed are required. Some of the criticisms relating to nursing practice have been targeted at the educational preparation nurses receive, and more specifically the move to an all-degree profession at the point of registration. However, Rolfe (2014: 1459) suggests that even now nursing students are in fact 'under-educated' and although well trained and able to think critically, they are lacking in imagination. He suggests the need for a more rounded education, one which incorporates issues and subjects which at first seem to have no relevance to nurse education, for example, the arts, humanities and philosophy. Theoretical and factual knowledge has clear value in nurse education but there is a requirement for approaches which encourage recognition of the uniqueness of another; an education which has empathy and understanding of the human condition at its heart.

The purpose of this article is to explore one such approach. The work reports on an evaluation of the use of poetry writing and performance as

a means of helping students identify and understand their feelings about important nursing issues such as communication, compassion and the therapeutic practice of nursing.

Background

There has been some interest in arts based approaches within nurse education. Creative art and collage has been used in the education of student nurses and midwives (Hall and Mitchell, 2008; Jack, 2012). Lillyman et al. (2011), used storyboarding with student nurses to explore thoughts and feelings about nursing practice. The use of published material has been used to good effect for example, the consideration of children's stories to explore the meaning of ageing (Jack, 2013) and the reading of published poetry as a way to reduce anxiety and stress (Mohammadian et al., 2011). Crawley et al. (2012: 45) describe books as a 'rich resource' for educators when encouraging the development of emotional awareness, for example when exploring issues such as death and dying, and story extracts can be used to explore understanding of what it is to be human (Gallagher and McKie, 2010). Emmanuel et al. (2010) used mask design as a form of assessment of therapeutic communication skills and found it an effective way to promote deeper levels of learning.

Poetry has been described as a debatable term (Andrews, 1991) and various forms of poetry have been used across education, including social work, teacher education, medicine and nursing. For the purposes of this intervention, the importance is placed on the process of poetry

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writing and subsequent discussion, rather than the actual structure of the poem itself.

Biley and Champney-Smith (2003) facilitated haiku writing workshops as part of a course on the use of arts in health care. Modern haiku is a form of Japanese poetry which is none rhyming and consists of patterns of five, seven and five syllables in the first second and third lines. Student nurses were asked to write haiku about an aspect of their clinical work or their nurse education. Findings revealed that the exercise had been an effective way to reflect on clinical practice, develop writing skills and expression of ideas.

Threlfall (2013) explored the use of poems to reflect on prior learning with students enrolled on a Foundation Degree in Sports Coaching. This method replaced the formulation of a study skill action plan which explored their personal and professional development. Sixteen students were given 48 h to produce poems which represented their action plans in a different way. The poems were collected and following a four week period, the students were interviewed and attended a focus group. The findings support the use of poetry as a way to reflect and the process was enjoyable, if at times frustrating for the students. Students felt empowered by the process as it helped them feel in control of their learning and some requested more creative learning methods in future lessons and assessments.

Speare and Henshall (2014) used six published poems as a basis for discussion with seven further education student teachers enrolled on a Post Graduate Certificate in Education Programme. The discussion sessions were audio recorded and each participant was individually interviewed after the group session. The authors suggest that reading poetry can support reflection particularly on the motivation to teach and the reasons why student teachers choose the profession. The participants found the exercise therapeutic and encouraged a 'stepping back' from practice in order to reflect on it critically.

Foster and Freeman (2008) explored the use of published poetry with thirteen general practice registrars. The participants experienced two sessions; in the first, the facilitator chose the poems and in the second, the registrars made the choices. Six of the group then engaged in an individual semi structured interview which was analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Findings revealed that the sessions had supported development of emotional awareness and encouraged them to consider alternative viewpoints thus increasing their understanding of others.

Methods

Students

A cohort of 42 first year nursing students enrolled on the BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing programme at a UK university were asked to participate in this exercise as part of the teaching for the module 'Nursing in a Contemporary Society'. Part of the module focus is on the development of emotional sensitivity, self-awareness and self-monitoring. Students explore theoretical concepts such as emotional intelligence and are encouraged to consider how to identify and understand their emotions and ways to manage their feelings effectively (Salovey and Mayer, 1990).

Ethical approval was gained through the Faculty Ethics Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Approach

This session had previously been taught using a lecture style approach in which models of emotional intelligence such as those written by Goleman (1999) and Salovey and Mayer (1990) were examined and discussed within a large group. There was a focus on the need for students to identify and manage their feelings although little in the way of how this might be achieved. Critical reflection was identified as a way to explore feelings although this was considered

from a theoretical rather than practical focus. Mindful of the shortcomings of this method a different approach was used which required the students to write a poem about their feelings. This decision was based on the success of other art based approaches adopted within the Department of Nursing in previous years. Input was sought from a creative writing lecturer from another department and interested nursing academics. Following this process the lesson was restructured and given a more student centred focus. The initial lesson was replaced by a one hour workshop where poetry was discussed as a method of exploring practice. Emphasis was given to the need to focus on the process of poetry writing rather than concentrate on the quality of the product, the poem itself. However input from the creative writing colleague gave examples of poetry styles which the students could utilise if they chose. The cohort was given directed study time to create their poem and then in small groups of ten–twelve they were required to read out their poem and listen to their colleagues reading theirs. Each group was facilitated by one lecturer with an interest in arts based approaches to teaching.

The following direction was given to the students:

Write a poem of any length and style, with a focus on an important nursing issue e.g. compassion, communication or your therapeutic role as a nurse.

Read the poem aloud to the small group and be able to discuss its meaning and how this relates to you as a nurse and to your practice.

Due to the nature of the module it is important to promote a safe and supportive environment where students feel able to state their views and explore their feelings in front of their colleagues. This need is further emphasised when using arts as students can feel vulnerable and exposed particularly if they feel that their end product, in this case a poem, is substandard. Students need to feel safe enough to explore issues without too much educator prescription, which only serves to stifle individual creativity (Casey, 2009). To further encourage the students, they were informed that the lecturers involved would be writing their own poems, thereby exposing something of themselves to the small group. By doing this, the educator is a 'co-discoverer' in the process rather than an information giver thereby encouraging a supportive and inquiry based approach (Koithan, 1996).

Students using art based educational methods will need to get used to a different style of learning, one which is not as structured as they might have become used to. Using arts based approaches such as poetry teaches us that there is more than one solution to a particular problem (Eisner, 2002) and 'diversity and variability are made central' (p. 197). Much of the teaching in Year One of the undergraduate nursing programme is anatomy based and students have been used to a didactic lecture style approach by the time they reach this module. Therefore the concept of using poetry to think about practice was discussed at the introductory session and referred to throughout the module. In doing this it was hoped that the students would already feel familiar with the concept when they were asked to produce creative work.

During the follow up session, when the students were required to read their poems aloud, the chairs were arranged in a circle to promote an informal atmosphere. The educators provided chocolates to be shared during the session to further promote a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

Analysis

The following three areas were analysed to provide an understanding of the students learning experiences:

1. Student written evaluations: students were asked three qualitative questions about their experience and the perceived benefit of poetry writing to explore their practice.
2. Qualitative follow up interviews: a purposive sample of three students were invited to an unstructured interview where they

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