



## Clinical education

## Learning from clinical placement experience: Analysing nursing students' final reflections in a digital storytelling activity



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the learning potential of a reflective activity undertaken by final year nursing students, in which they were asked to recount two meaningful events that occurred during their clinical placements over the duration of their 3-year nursing degree program and reflect on how these events contributed to their learning to become beginning level Registered Nurses (RNs). This descriptive qualitative study gathered narratives from 92 students as individual postings in an online forum created within the University's learning management system. An analysis of the students' reflections are the focus of this paper particularly in relation to the value of reflecting on the identified events. Four themes emerged that clearly highlight the way in which these students interpreted and learned from both positive and negative clinical experiences, their strong desire to fit into their new role and their ability to re-imagine how they might respond to clinical events when they become Registered Nurses. The findings of this study may contribute to developing nursing curricula that better prepares final year students for the realities of practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Storytelling is a powerful education tool widely recognised in the literature (Kearney, 2011; Stacey and Hardy, 2011). Brown (2015) suggests that 'If you want someone to remember something important, tell them a story about it' According to Kirk and Pitches (2013) storytelling can promote deep learning by prompting reflection on practice. As Dewey (1997) explained humans learn best by reflecting on their experiences. Nurses engage with stories from patients and colleagues on a daily basis and use these to reflect on how they relate to practice issues (Christiansen, 2011; Stacey and Hardy, 2011). Digital storytelling (DS) is a new variant of this reflective process, in which technology can be harnessed to create a safe and engaging space for storytellers to share and reflect on their experiences (Hlalele and Brexa, 2015). DS is a relatively new storytelling mode but its pedagogical value has been demonstrated (Eisenhauer, 2012), particularly its capacity to promote reflection and deep learning (Mimirinis and Bhattacharya, 2007). The aim of the study discussed in this paper was to use an online learning platform to gather final year nursing students' stories from

clinical practice to better understand what was meaningful for them and whether reflecting on their chosen events contributed to learning for future practice situations. This article reports the results of an analysis of the students' reflections as they anticipated their transition to beginning level registered nurse (RN) practice.

## 2. Background

Storytelling has been used as a powerful educational medium in many professions (Kirk et al., 2013). Its value in nursing education has been clearly recognised (Crookes et al., 2013; Diekelmann, 2001; Haigh and Hardy, 2011; Ironside, 2006; Moon and Fowler, 2008; Stacey and Hardy, 2011; Wood, 2014; Young, 2007) as both an educational tool and as means of supporting students to reflect on and re-imagine practice (Paliadelis et al., 2015; Wood, 2014). Reflection is a significant aspect of understanding and developing practice (Mann et al., 2009; Moon, 2004; Schön, 1987) and personal narratives of reflection on previous events can deepen emotional awareness (Arielli, 2013; Edwards, 2014; Hunter and Hunter, 2006) and help with making informed choices that build on previous experiences (Dewey, 1997). In the 1980s, Melia (1984) made the point that nurses' ability to socialise into the profession required a compromise between their educational and service (clinical) experiences, in this paper we suggest that reflecting on clinical events

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can assist in this process. Schwind et al. (2014) state that 'by telling, reflecting and reconstructing events we gain the potential to transform our lives, and consequently the lives of those in our care'. Denzin (2014:53) also suggests that reflecting on events as stories can lead to illuminative or 're-lived epiphanies', which may be turning points in people's lives and provide the opportunity to better understand our interpretations. The notion that reflection assists in reconstructing events was of significance when considering nursing students reflections of clinical experiences and what such reflections might contribute to their learning for future practice. The challenge for educators is to understand how best to use reflection to prompt learning and improve practice (Gidman, 2013). Callens and Elan (2015) explain that effective reflective learning is evident when the reflective narrative includes emotional, technical, moral and political elements.

Stacey and Hardy (2011:164) found the use of digital stories to prompt reflection is particularly relevant for novice nurses and these authors encourage the use of storytelling to 'enable student to be better prepared for the real world of clinical practice'. Jokelainen et al. (2011) and Levett-Jones et al. (2007) add that clinical learning environments must be supportive if they are to assist novice nurses to 'fit in' to a new work environment. Walker et al. (2013) also stress the importance of providing support for novice nurses to enable them to become work ready and develop the level of resilience and flexibility needed to cope with the complexities of the modern health workplace.

Without positive role-modelling and a supportive learning environment novice nurses are at risk of experiencing anxiety and negativity in the workplace, which may even result in them leaving the profession prematurely (Jackson et al., 2011; Li et al., 2013; Stacey and Hardy, 2011). The aim of the study discussed in this paper was to explore whether reflecting on previous clinical events could better support students to make the transition into practice and so final year students were the target population. Students were given a structured format in which to recount two events from their previous clinical placement experiences. In a final posting, the students were asked to reflect on both of these events and identify the elements that they felt would shape their future practice as beginning RNs. It is these reflections that are the focus of this paper.

### 3. Research design

This study used a qualitative descriptive methodology to analyse the students' stories and reflections. Sandelowski (2000:336) explained that this is a valuable methodology when researchers want to 'stay closer to their data and to the surface of words and events. Surface readings should not be considered superficial, or trivial and worthless'. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the university. Following completion and grading of the students' work, all students were given an information sheet and consent form, and invited to allow their data to be used for this study; 92 of the 123 students consented to their de-identified stories and reflections being used for this study.

The Human Research Ethics Committee embargoed use of the data for one year following data collection, to reduce any potential risk that data could be linked to any specific student, clinical setting or situation. After 1 year the archived data was downloaded from the learning management system and analysed thematically.

The students' reflections were analysed by each researcher separately, to identify major themes in the reflective narratives. The analyses were then discussed as a group, and where any differences occurred, the best representation of the themes in the reflections was agreed.

The quality and depth of the reflections meant that a significant amount of data was analysed. Students reflected on a number of aspects of the events they described, identifying a range of ethical, professional, technical, political and clinical issues they encountered on clinical placement. The depth of the reflections were consistent with Callens and Elen's (2015) understanding of what constitutes a critical reflection. While an analysis of the content of the two clinical events on which the student reflections were based is beyond the scope of this paper, focusing on the reflective narratives highlights the core issues the students focused on in their stories.

## 4. Results

This section describes the four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the students' reflections: 1) recognising the impact of experience, 2) understanding workplace complexity, 3) confirming career choices, and 4) transitioning to RN practice.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Recognising the impact of experience

This theme captures the participants' reflections on the significance of the events they described, and what these may mean for their future practice. The students clearly learned from a range of difficult situations and often re-imagined the events, based on what they learned from them. The participants also wrote about how they developed an awareness of the value of reflecting on their experiences to inform future practice.

Many of the students' reflections made it clear that the events they chose to describe left a 'lasting impression'. These were predominantly stories of difficult situations or events. Students used powerful descriptors in relating them, such as 'confronting', 'extraordinary', 'alarming' and 'intimidating'. Students wrote that they experienced 'shock, puzzlement and confusion', or felt 'really scared' or 'astounded', as part of their reflections on the significance of the chosen events.

Students frequently remarked that difficult events were ultimately positive for learning. One believed that it was because it caused a 'strong emotional reaction'. The following comments show a consistent thread in students' recognition of what they learned from negative experiences:

*The clinical event was a negative experience but has influenced my nursing practice in a positive way.*

*These experiences highlighted not only the type of nurse I want to be, but more importantly the type of nurse "I do not want to be", therefore I have chosen to extract the positives about what I have gained, rather than stew or dwell on what had taken place.*

*Even if the professional practice I encounter is not professional and does not adhere to any applicable policies or processes, it will still inform my future practice because I am learning what not to do.*

*The two incidents influenced and informed my view not only on how nurses in general should deliver care but how I personally want to deliver care, how I would manage such situations, and the kind of nurse I would like to be.*

*From these two unacceptable cases I have learnt such fundamental concepts of nursing, especially involving patient advocacy. I have learnt to have a voice and an opinion, to speak when I do not think something is acceptable.*

A number of positive incidents were also captured. As one student commented:

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