



Issues for debate

Narrative pedagogy with evolving case study – A transformative approach to gerontic nursing practice for undergraduate nursing students

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ABSTRACT

Engaging nursing students in the complexities of care across community, acute, rehabilitation and residential aged care settings is challenging. Equally challenging is conceptualising and promoting diverse and comprehensive health assessments across care settings that reflect clinical reality, inform clinical decision making, traverse theory and practice, and transform clinical practice knowledge. This article describes the use of narrative and evolving case study as a teaching-learning tool utilised by the authors in a third year undergraduate gerontic nursing subject in a pre-service nursing degree at a rural university. Principles of transformative learning and strengths based nursing were drawn upon in the development of the case study.

The aim of the approach was to draw on embedded knowledge and the experiences of students and academics from assorted practice settings to facilitate understanding of the lived experiences of an older community dwelling couple. Using social learning strategies students were encouraged to analyse and think critically and creatively about the situations they were presented with. They identified possible solutions that would be acceptable to the couple. Building on the older couple's strengths, achievements and personal social capital, the aim was to develop a positive paradigm for health and the way older people are viewed by nursing students.

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Introduction

Bachelor of Nursing students in Australia graduate as comprehensively prepared Registered Nurses. Programs of study introduce concepts of health and wellbeing across the lifespan and are inclusive of foundational knowledge that enables informed clinical decision making that leads to optimal health outcomes for people. The ageing of population is a global phenomenon which is impacting on nurses' practice and undergraduate nursing curricula.

The Bachelor of Nursing, three (3) year degree at a rural university is underpinned by a primary health care philosophy and is lifespan inclusive. Ageing as a life event is recognised within the curriculum, however its significance is not always appreciated by students. Therefore, the challenge for nurse academics is to promote positive ageing to nursing students and familiarise them with

the complexities of care across community, acute, rehabilitation and residential aged care settings. Equally challenging within clinical practice is encouraging comprehensive assessments across care settings to inform clinical decision making. For students, making connections to older people as people, beyond diagnoses, medications and health and social 'problems', can be difficult when their clinical experiences with older people is limited to long term residential care (Fussell et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2008).

Challenging assumptions, perceptions and stereotypes of older people were inherent elements in the development of the evolving case study discussed in this article. The case study sought to develop recognition that older people remain vital, active participants in family and community life rather than needy passive recipients of a stretched service system. The nurses' role in enabling health, wellbeing and life adaptation was promoted through the use of social learning that encouraged critical thinking and analysis, questioning, meaning making, application of knowledge and experience and holistic solution seeking (Lunney, 2008). Hill et al. (2009), assert that social learning involves the building of information while

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students are engaged in activities, getting feedback, and taking part in interactions in a social context. What students learn and know is formed by these interactions.

Background

Older people are a vital resource, both socially and economically to communities and families. However, the World Health Report (WHO, 2008) identifies 'the growing reality' of increasing numbers of people with chronic conditions, multiple co-morbidities and complex symptomatology requiring health services. The report challenges service delivery systems to be more integrated and comprehensive, socially relevant and responsive to individual and environmental influences that impact on health and wellness.

Older Australians are living longer and healthier lives than previous generations. They are mainly living in private dwellings, as members of family, group or lone person households in our community (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2012). Just over 6% of older Australians are living in guest houses, hotels, motels, retirement villages, independent living units or residential aged care accommodation (AIHW, 2012). The reality of the living situations of older Australians is the reverse of the popularly held view of ageing and older Australians living in aged care facilities, dementing, incontinent, incapable and incoherent, or retired, ill and dependent (World Health Organisation, 2002).

In seeking a new paradigm for health and in the way ageing and older people are viewed, nurse education needs to be transformative in its approach (Brown et al., 2008) – transforming what is taught and how, what students learn from educators, and, indeed what educators learn from students. The WHO (2002, p. 43) challenged nurses to seek a 'new paradigm' in the way older people are viewed, advocating for their rights and valuing their contribution across generations, in 'a society for all ages'. The National Health & Hospitals Reform Commission (2009) articulates Australia's health system's lack of recognition of personal capacity to manage individual health and illness, supported by family and the wider community. The Report's 123 recommendations, like the WHO, challenge Australians to reshape the health system and seek a new paradigm for health. The gerontic nursing subject in which the case study discussed in this article was used has a primary health focus with emphasis on empowerment of the older person and maintaining high levels of wellness and independence to remain in their own homes.

Older Australians access the services and facilities of the health system more than their younger counterparts. This phenomenon is associated with the physiological changes of ageing, the development or exacerbation of chronic illnesses and, for some, the psychosocial implications of grief, loss and isolation (Nay and Garratt, 2009). With a focus on the reality that the majority of older Australians live in the general community, the challenge academic staff faced was to provide a comprehensive and rounded subject to five cross campus multi mode delivery cohorts at a rural university.

As gerontic nursing is generally seen as unchallenging and not a positive career choice for nursing students (Brown et al., 2008; Xiao et al., 2012) the subject needed to be engaging and contemporary with a wellness and health maintenance view of ageing, rather than an illness or aged care facility approach. The case study aimed to overcome attitudes such as, wanting an exemption from the subject based on current employment in aged care, and not wanting to work with old people. At the same time, it was essential to acknowledge the learning, practice, knowledge (formal & tacit), skills, meanings, interpretations, attitudes and experiences that all participants in the teaching-learning process carry with them.

Case studies, as argued by Foster and Carboni (2008), support the belief that using real-world cases allows students to establish a

link between 'course content' and practice. Ironside (2006) and McAllister et al. (2009) described the use and outcomes of narrative case studies in an array of subjects and curricula. They included student descriptions of being helped to think about or understand things differently, participation and inclusion, development of learning communities and broader understandings of the roles of nurses. McGarry (2009) found that pre-registration nurses chose to care for older people was when they were able to see the person behind the 'oldness'.

Case study

A primary health care approach was used in developing the case study. This approach fitted the curriculum philosophy and reflected current Australian policy and program developments related to health and older people. Health policies and program reforms have heralded a change in service delivery models that have moved the focus of care from high-end acute and residential services to community based care (Department Health, 2012).

Drawing on the clinical experiences of the teaching team of an undergraduate gerontic nursing subject across four rural university campuses and an off campus cohort, totalling 250 students, a case study was developed that took students on a journey with an older couple throughout the semester. The lecturer's experiences included residential aged care, community based care, pain management and acute care of older persons with medical and surgical conditions. Their research backgrounds included standards of care in residential care settings and the detection and prevention of delirium in acute care. The lecturers had taught into the subject previously and two had post graduate qualifications specific to gerontic nursing. Consistent delivery of the subject content and case study was enabled through the use of a common online learning space for lecturers and students to provide and access learning material, share ideas and add resources.

Ironside (2006) illustrates how using narrative as a teaching-learning strategy assists students to confront their assumptions and evaluate and understand situations from a variety of perspectives. The older couple was 'introduced' to the students using a descriptive narrative to create a sense of 'knowing' the couple, rather than their various diagnoses, health concerns, medications and 'social problems'. Each week health and social issues encountered by the couple aimed to integrate experience and theoretical content with practice based situations. The aim of this approach was to transform knowledge through translating what students know (theory) into what they do (practice) using a person-centred approach.

Students were provided with weekly scenarios relating to social construction of ageing, theories of ageing, person-centred care, ageing changes, health promotion, health assessment, models of care, delirium, depression and dementia, medication management and polypharmacy, health risks such as falls, legislation and advance care planning, power of attorney, wills and the role of the nurse in care of the older person. They were encouraged to imagine the realities of practice by engaging emotionally in the case study. Starting in the community, where the majority of older Australians live, the introduction and initial assessment begins (Refer Box 1). The case study narrative is rich with description.

Students were asked to assume the role of a community nurse and work through the assessment process from the point of making an initial appointment for admission to the service. They were asked to identify and interpret, for example, possible responses during an initial telephone discussion, initial impressions of the home, what they might hear, see or smell in the environment,

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