



Midwifery education in practice

The art of midwifery: Can creative images of birth enhance holistic care?

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ABSTRACT

Art related to birth stimulates debate, particularly if it is perceived to be taboo and challenging popular images of mother and child. Birth traditionally has been in a woman's sphere of experience, thus it has been left unexplored on a wider level. The Birth Rites Collection was originally developed to enable partnerships with artists and childbirth professionals. The other important reason for the Birth Rites project was to begin to make contemporary cutting edge art around childbirth because there has been a real lack of work which explores this subject. Student midwives have been able to engage with these and other artworks related to childbirth and now produce their own original art which is attracting acclaim. The Art of Midwifery student midwife project aims to promote more aesthetic and creative ways of learning to enhance midwifery students' self-awareness and thus promote holistic, woman-centred and sensitive care. Students have visited art exhibitions to interact with artworks related to curriculum themes and explore models and philosophies of birth. This paper reports some of their activities, summarises their responses and evaluates the collaboration.

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Background

The Art of Midwifery project commenced in November 2008 with a visit to the Birth Rites Collection Exhibition at the Manchester Art Gallery, following its success at the International Confederation of Midwives Congress in Glasgow. Student midwives were able to interact with the artworks in relation to exploration of birth philosophies and models of care; part of the Birth Rites Collection is now housed within Salford University's Midwifery Directorate and the Royal College of Obstetrician and Gynaecologists headquarters in London and can be viewed online at: www.birthritescollection.org.uk. Students have since visited the Mary Kelly Retrospective at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, to explore *Postpartum Document* (Kelly, 1999) in relation to the mother and infant's postnatal journey. Subsequently the students won £1500 of university funding for further activities and equipment to develop their own projects, facilitated by a lecturer from the university's School of Art and Design.

Students have also produced their own outstanding artwork in their leisure time which is now displayed with the Birth Rites Collection at the University; this has contributed to an Images of Nursing and Midwifery Higher Education Innovation funded project exhibited at the Lowry Centre in Salford, facilitating public engagement with a range of visitors including mothers with young children, teenagers and older people. Their work is attracting acclaim and they have started to produce associated merchandise to fund ongoing work. The project has been reported at the Royal College of Midwives Conference in Manchester and Brighton (Uppal et al., 2012, 2010) and International Confederation of Midwives Triennial Congress in Durban (Uppal et al., 2011). Links with NHS Trusts where students are placed for practice placements have been developed and interest has been expressed in commissioning the students work for display on birth centres and delivery units: these will continue to inspire midwives, women and visitors during labour.

Art in midwifery education

Education has a key role to play in preparing the midwives of the future to celebrate the magic of birth (Anderson, 2006) and to harness the power and energy of the arts to develop the skills

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that women value in midwives (Anderson and Davies, 2004). Bass (2007) suggests the midwife needs to nurture students, role modelling the qualities we wish them to develop in a respectful relationship that values the spiritual awareness of woman, midwife and student. The dissonance between the holistic and technocratic paradigms evident in practice needs to be negotiated with sensitivity, mindful of perceived theory practice gaps. She outlines a study of the creative approaches to teaching and learning used by midwife educators (Bass, 2003). Barriers identified included motivation, time and freedom; yet some midwifery teachers managed to integrate creative approaches to learning and teaching in order to develop individuals and groups; but also to introduce freedom to push back some boundaries or constraints. Certainly in our experience there was a perception amongst many students that the theoretical, scientific and skill based education was more important than creative, aesthetic or even philosophical learning. Bass (2007) suggests that midwife educators who use creative teaching approaches appear to have values and beliefs that fit in with a holistic model; thus its importance needs to be justified within education.

Davies and Wickham (2007) consider how best to integrate art into midwifery education, suggesting that this does not necessarily have to be on a practical level, but that creative thinking can be encouraged through creativity. Whilst it is not always overtly popular, it does facilitate differentiation of learning and numerous examples of ice-breakers, events, problem-based learning triggers are suggested. An example of how to integrate creative arts within a midwifery curriculum is provided by Jackson and Sullivan (1999), outlining a project in New South Wales, Australia where student midwives were encouraged to develop sensitivity and caring skills through exposure to art and literature surrounding birth. Assessments submitted by the students included poetry, prose, collage, sketches, photographic essays, needlework and quilting; with a written commentary supporting the piece produced. The study evaluated well, allowing students to appreciate the wider issues of midwifery and explore their own ideas and feelings in a creative way.

However there appears to be a dearth of research exploring arts based activities within midwifery education, the search for literature is compounded by the acronym ART being associated with assisted reproductive technologies and producing over 500 results. 'Art' and 'education' produced 128 results in MIDIRS database of which 27 constituted original research, however many of these also related to fertility treatment. Hassall et al. (2012) reported similar work developing the art of midwifery within the curriculum. There are also accounts of the impact of this type of work on philosophy of care (Whitman and Rose, 2003; Coursey, 2012).

Evaluation

Due to the innovative nature of the project it was important to capture student views to determine the value of integrating arts based activities within the curriculum. Worksheets and questionnaires were compiled for each activity and responses coded anonymously.

Student responses to Birth Rites exhibition

Students commented on the negativity evident in some of the art, arguably women who have negative experiences of birth will undoubtedly be able to channel this experience into art in some way, this could even be therapeutic. The question we could ask ourselves as midwives is perhaps why there are not more positive portrayals of birth and how art can be utilised positively to promote normality and celebrate birth.

The opportunity to explore the reflections of student midwives was fascinating—

How would they see the work?

Did they think it was successful?

What frameworks were they using to interpret art on their subject?

Would it be useful for them and then of course how does this investigation feed back into the work of the Birth Rites organisation?

Collaboration is a very reflexive process, it is about learning and expanding knowledge. Not just about what each participant can take from the process but how you can work together to stimulate new ideas. Elaine and Sarah have always been of the view that to teach midwifery one needs to holistically balance the clinical with the intuitive knowledge and this is where working with the Birth Rites exhibition and Collection has been fantastic. Art is visceral and experiential and so is giving birth.

Sometimes in clinical settings it is difficult to perceive the unfolding landscape. Students who are attuned to looking at the events from different levels, from the woman's perspective, from an emotional perspective will be able to make quicker decisions about the correct way to react and proceed. Some of the comments, compiled from the students reactions to the exhibition, illustrated this; for instance when asked how they might relate the work to their studies they responded: 'Seeing perspectives from a woman's point of view about her birth (Studies 1)'; 'To understand how a woman's view of childbirth can affect her life and how midwifery practice can influence this' (Studies 2); 'Different concepts of woman's body' (Studies 5); 'Able to see other people's perspectives i.e. Distance between woman and midwife at end of bed' (Studies 15, see Fig. 1).

But interestingly they also saw 'subjectiveness' (Difficulties 5, 12) and the fact that 'one person's idea of birth may be completely different to another' (Difficulties 22) as a hindrance.

For Helen as the curator it was particularly fascinating to see the responses, positive or negative, to each work; knowing from working for two years with each partnership which of the 6 collaborations had worked in a deep and truly collaborative way and feeling this was reflected in the resulting artwork. Therefore to have this almost validated by the students who enjoyed in particular the film 'Born' (Fig. 2), Suzanne Holtom's painting (Fig. 3), and Hermione Wiltshire's image (Fig. 4). The collaborations which had not been so thorough such as Jaygo Blooms work with Jim Dornan, which in some sense were more superficial works, did not get such good responses: 'Disturbing, not sure, bit confusing, do not understand what it is trying to get across' (Bloom 1).

What are your thoughts about the film Born? 'Really, really good. Insight into midwife and woman's perspective' (Born 2); 'Nice film. Captures feelings of the parents very well' (Born 6); 'Very good and moving. Really got me thinking and moved me which I didn't expect' (Born 8); 'It showed a good comparison between a medicalised and a natural birth' (Born 18); 'Interesting to see childbirth from both the medical model and also from the holistic midwifery model of care' (Born 22).

What are your thoughts about 'Contact'? 'A moment of quiet & calm amidst the chaos' (Contact 9); 'Shows mum and baby as one...like the image' (Contact 11); 'Nice to see woman and baby as one, with the equipment in the background' (Contact 12); 'Very medicalised & harsh. However, you can see the strong bond/attachment between the mother & baby – which is instinctive & unaffected' (Contact 18).

Whilst the works have stimulated discussion and debate, there have been some negative responses to the display of the Ina May Gaskin image (Fig. 4) and the Ping Qui ceramics (Fig. 5) pictured

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