



Contemporary Issues

Poetry as hybrid pedagogy in mental health nurse education



1. Introduction

Poetry has emerged as a significant resource in nurse education in recent times. Over the last four years for example, this journal has hosted a number research and theoretical-conceptual papers that discuss and evaluate the use of poetry in undergraduate nurse curricula. In these papers, their authors express the explicit aim of advancing nurse education through helping students to explore their feelings about practise issues over a range of contexts. Included among these are reflective writing (Coleman and Willis, 2015), compassionate practise (Curtis, 2013), the development of emotional intelligence (Jack, 2015), the promotion of liberal nurse education (McKie, 2012) and clinical practise artistry (Chan, 2014), and the use of poetry to remove barriers to perception (Rolfe, 2012).

From a related but qualitatively different emerging contemporary perspective, our aim in this paper is to promote poetry as *hybrid pedagogy* in mental health nurse education. We do so in order to challenge longstanding epistemological assumptions guiding aspects of the conventional range, content and delivery of the mental health nursing curriculum. We wish to highlight the value of adding the poetic work in context, of academics who have hybrid, 'hyphenated' identities to this curriculum. In our case, this is reflected in the fact that we explicitly teach and write from the standpoint position of mental health/nurse lecturers-ex-mental health professionals-survivors of the UK psychiatric system (Grant et al., 2015a).

We will explore this topic area further and in a more nuanced way in this current paper. In specifically focusing on poetry as hybrid pedagogy, one of our own co-written and previously unpublished poems will be used in a theoretical and analytical context to advance our argument for the use of this approach in mental health nurse education. In the final section of our paper, our attention will turn to some of the benefits and one possible drawback for this approach, emerging from our discussion.

2. Poetry as Hybrid Pedagogy

As scholars with a background in healthcare, and nurse and mental health nurse education, we believe that poetry has great potential for developing pedagogic practise in undergraduate teaching. Like most of the colleagues we have worked with, we have throughout our academic careers generally conformed to an implicitly accepted norm of presenting new knowledge in prose narrative form. However, we are mindful of an argument that has been prescient for over two decades. This is that prose writing as an epistemological convention for conveying knowledge conceals an unexamined code regarding its sufficiency for how knowledge in general should or could be presented (Richardson, 1993).

This assumed sufficiency has not gone unchallenged. As a way of seeing through and beyond the knowledge conveyed in prose form, Richardson (1993, p4) asserted that poetry touches readers in embodied rather than propositional or cognitive ways, implicitly inviting them to '... vicariously experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation...' Moreover, the poetic form of 'settling words together in new configurations lets us see, and *feel* the world in new dimensions.' (Richardson, 2000, p933). In this context, Richardson (2000) contends that in challenging conventional academic representational forms, poetic writing stimulates different kinds of analyses. Unpacking the potential meanings of poems, and the myriad allusions and references contained within them, can result in an expansion of knowledge about the people who wrote them and the circumstances and events described in them.

3. Poetry in the Health Humanities Paradigm

In ways that complement Richardson's overall position, poetry, including that appearing in our previously published work (Grant, 2013; Short, 2011), has been acknowledged as having great significance as a pedagogic narrative resource in the context of the emerging Health Humanities paradigm (Crawford et al., 2015). In this context, reinforcing the benefits stated above and in the previous work mentioned at the outset of this paper, poetry can provide nursing students with powerful insights, increased levels of empathy, and wider frames of conceptual and experiential understanding.

In using poetry as a hybrid pedagogic tool, the emphasis moves away from the search for 'facts' and 'truth' to an activity geared more towards co-creating and co-constructing knowledge on the basis of either the presence of the hybrid teacher or, if this is not possible, their poetic work. As we will discuss in more detail below, as hybrid academics involved largely in prose writing for publication, we have found that creatively exploring the same issues through writing poetry helps us balance and develop our scholarship through casting new light on these issues. By extension, this in turn can only advance the already acknowledged valuable practise of reflection and reflexivity among nursing students. As a pedagogic approach, poetry therefore creates a space for writers and readers to explore events and ways of experiencing the world which are often silenced by conventional knowledge and curricular content.

The use of poetry as hybrid pedagogy also provides opportunities to develop a healthy scepticism towards the sufficiency of longstanding, dominant professional and institutional narratives for conceptualising and understanding mental health service users and their experiences. These narratives are always already predicated on a normatively accepted divide between professional nurse and service user. They often present as benign and helpful practises and assumptions which are frequently experienced by service users as oppressive (Grant et al., 2015a).

The development of such scepticism can therefore enable nurse educators, hybrid or otherwise, and their students to use poetry to more readily acknowledge the legitimacy and relevance of lived experience as a focus for critical inquiry.

By providing space for aspects of hitherto unfamiliar worlds to become known, traditional knowledge practises can thus be challenged and qualified. After Bakhtin (1984), the 'carnavalesque' possibilities of poetry can temporarily suspend often slavish adherence to hierarchal, traditional and dominant ways of knowing, in playful, interesting and imaginative ways. This has implications for personal development and future nursing practise in the context of recent radical shifts in understanding mental health difficulties and related professional practise. For example, poetry as hybrid pedagogy can help trouble students' often exclusive reliance on biomedical, binaried ways of conceptualising service users' problems in terms of rigid 'well-ill' categories (Grant, 2015). In turn, this can facilitate the emergence of a plurality of more fluid ways of understanding the identities of users of healthcare in terms of *difference* rather than *pathology*. This is discussed and reflected in both recent Queer paradigm work (Grant et al., 2015b), and in principles, practises and understandings emerging from the Psychosocial paradigm (Grant, 2015; Smith and Grant, 2016).

4. Introduction to the Poem

We have argued above for the importance of poetry as hybrid pedagogy in challenging longstanding epistemological assumptions informing conventional practises in mental health nurse education. We have contextualised this argument in the emerging Health Humanities, Queer and Psychosocial paradigms. Our discussion will now turn to providing necessary preliminary information by way of introduction to our poem.

As established autoethnographic scholars (Short et al., 2013), we are well-attuned to the power of poetic representations for conveying lived experiences in rich and deep ways. Moreover, we both share an interest in contemporary and classical poetry, in the range of main poetic structures, and in the power of poetry in its autobiographical narrative form to positively contribute to the formation of human identity (Cobley, 2014). We hold to the idea that reflexive identity development can be best achieved by using narrative practises to work towards increasing health and wellbeing in broad existential, rather than solely in narrow, biomedical terms (Crawford et al., 2015). We have also previously used our own poetry in our sustained narrative inquiry work in mental health survival and recovery (Grant, 2010; Short, 2007, 2011, 2013), feeding this back into undergraduate and postgraduate mental health nurse educational curricula.

The poem immediately below is constructed as four sets of three verses, written in free verse form. Each set is followed by a haiku placed contained within two lines of asterisks. These conform to the 5, 7, 5 syllable structure characteristic of this poetic genre and function to punctuate the poem with summaries of its developing themes. In co-developing and constructing the poem, Nigel wrote the twelve free verses and Alec the haikus. The poem overall is based on Nigel's experiences as an in-patient in an acute mental health unit in London over 15 years ago. These were originally described by him in autoethnographic narrative form (Short, 2011), and by both of us later in dialogical narrative and autoethnographic research contexts (Grant, 2013; Grant et al., 2015a).

In presenting the poem, we make no claims to be masters of the art of poetry. However, we do claim sufficient levels of knowledge about poetry and its construction principles, and more advanced expertise and authority in all the topics and their contexts alluded to in the poem.

Mind yourself

There is a bin man working in this town.
In the darkness, he plays with people's minds.
My awareness grabbed, I must attend to
his thoughts. They drop in unannounced and sparks fly.

His dialogues, percolate through to me.
He penetrates my mind. Like a canyon,
deep and wide, he sets about his cruel task.
My tinder is crisp and vulnerable.

I play Arab songs to distract me. But his
dark scary intrusions defeat me again.
His rough barnacles scrape my soft underbelly.
I must find the escape button and press.

They live on both sides
of an imaginary wall,
with nowhere to climb.

Where is he now? The rude one? The sad one?
Does this petulant man care about us?
The lot he left behind?
I abhor his bitter, twisted, mischievous and unwanted.
exhaustive moaning.

Peace and quiet give me the comfort I need.
I can hear Big Ben chiming over the Thames.
Life was innocent then. Hand knitted jumpers,
second hand books, with curled up yellow pages.
Towards the river: London Eye in view.
Standing with silent anticipation.
Standing with silent expectation.
I wandered, amused, now and again moved.

The time of London
is the space of London,
etched in our madness.

There, on the stage, the King of Africa, screaming.
His unflinching persistent war stories, with
plenty of mud and blood in his oblong cell.
His black legs and ribs are smashed and broken.

There they stand, upright, proud and keen above town.
London dirt dripping down their faces, just like me.
I am invited to tour battlefields.
I've been tunnelling for days. I'm tired.

The sad Galia melons changes shape.
Bananas begin to spread and shed their
skins. Innocent Spanish oranges, turning mouldy,
neglected in their burial bowl.

Leaves dry and fruit rot
in a certain London where
we strayed, brittle-sweet.

Staring across the river, with silent
anticipation. With silent expectation,

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