



# Storytelling and professional learning: A phenomenographic study of students' experience of patient digital stories in nurse education

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## SUMMARY

This paper reports the findings of a phenomenographic study which sought to identify the different ways in which patient digital stories influence students' professional learning. Patient digital stories are short multimedia presentations that combine personal narratives, images and music to create a unique and often emotional story of a patients' experience of health care. While these are increasingly used in professional education little is known about how and what students learn through engagement with patient digital stories. Drawing upon interviews with 20 students within a pre-registration nursing programme in the UK, the study identifies four qualitatively different ways in which students approach and make sense of patient digital stories with implications for learning and professional identity development. Through an identification of the critical aspects of this variation valuable insights are generated into the pedagogic principles likely to engender transformational learning and patient centred practice.

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## Introduction

Storytelling is a uniquely human experience through which people make sense of past experience, convey emotions and ultimately connect with other people (McDrury and Alterio, 2003). Enabling patients to tell and share their stories is seen as a potent way to expose students to the human experience of being a patient and encourage the development of sensitive, individualised and compassionate practice (Wood and Wilson-Barnett, 1999; Costello and Horne, 2001; Repper and Breeze, 2004). The introduction of digital media has enabled new ways to tell and share stories. The accessibility of these new technologies and the use of digital storytelling workshops have supported the development of large web-based digital storytelling archives which are increasingly used within professional education to support student learning.

However while patient digital stories are a welcome addition to the learning resources available to health professions little is known about how and what students learn when engaging with them and limited understanding of the teaching and learning strategies that are likely to enhance or hinder the potential of patient digital stories to effect reflective, meaningful learning.

This study uses a phenomenographic approach considered appropriate for investigating the different ways in which students experience a learning task and for understanding these in terms of the varied outcomes of student learning (Marton, 1994; Marton and Booth, 1997; Trigwell, 2006). Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with 20 students

within a pre-registration nursing programme the study identifies the different ways in which students approach and make sense of patient digital stories. While the study indicates the potential of digital stories to engender critical reflection and impact upon students developing professional identity, it also suggests variation in how students conceptualise the patient story with implications teaching and learning.

## Background

A key challenge facing contemporary health care is the provision of high quality care that is safe, effective and personal (D.H., 2009). This requires not only a professional culture in which the personal knowledge of service users is acknowledged and valued but also practitioners who can build therapeutic relationships based on respect, sensitivity and compassion (Flanagan, 1999; Repper and Breeze, 2004). Facilitating service users to tell their stories and share their personal knowledge is seen as a powerful way to help students gain empathetic understanding, develop more effective interpersonal skills and promote practices that place patients at the centre of care (Wood and Wilson-Barnett, 1999; Costello and Horne, 2001).

Rush (2008) uses Mezirow (2000) transformative learning theory to consider the process through which learners' personal frame of reference can change following service user involvement in the classroom. Factors that appear to impact on learning include; hearing the lived experience; the emotional impact of service user stories; the reversal of roles for students and patients and the prompting of reflection on practice. It is suggested that service user involvement in the classroom can act as a catalyst for transformative learning and constructive actions in practice. However, while studies suggest that

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service users value the opportunity to help students develop into effective practitioners, the direct involvement in education can come at a personal cost to the service user. It has been associated with increased anxiety caused by revisiting a distressful event and in the long term professionalization of the service user role (Flanagan, 1999; Costello and Horne, 2001).

Patient digital stories may overcome these difficulties to some extent and can be considered a contemporary take on traditional storytelling traditions, as despite the use of new technologies, “the story” remains central as a way of giving meaning to experience (Jenkins and Lonsdale, 2007). Digital stories are short, personal narratives that use still images and music captured through the use of digital media. Their creation requires patients to actively engage in making sense of their experiences but it also enables them to present a point of view to be communicated. Digital stories, therefore, merge the richness inherent within traditional patient narratives with an ability to focus, edit and reflect, to produce a story that is engaging, powerful and directly accessible to others.

Greenhalgh et al. (2005) suggest that stories are about purposeful action unfolding in the face of trouble and as such have much to offer health service improvement efforts. In addition stories are increasingly recognised as central to learning, facilitating a shared framework for understanding and enabling people to learn from one another. Stories also serve a purpose within organisations as people tell stories to make diverse information coherent, to give meaning and convey understanding and to situate concepts in practice (Lave and Wenger, 1990; Snowden, 1999). Within higher education where stories are increasingly accepted as a powerful learning tool, Moon and Fowler (2007) offer a framework to organise and recognise the role of story and how it can be used for greater effect. Pedagogic practices that can be regarded as storytelling include critical incident analysis, scenarios or case studies constructed from real experiences and reflective learning journals, all of which present different opportunities for learning, reflection and critical thinking (Moon and Fowler, 2007).

While theories are emerging that attempt to explain how students learn with stories (McDrury and Alterio, 2003) research aimed at improving student learning in higher education suggests that students may not learn in the way that their teachers think they do. Such studies informed by a social constructivist view of learning have explored what learners do when they learn; how they conceptualise learning and how they approach learning tasks (Entwistle, 1997; Marton and Booth, 1997). Such studies suggest that students are capable of taking different approaches to their learning which results in different outcomes of learning.

Students can adopt a surface approach to learning characterised by an intention to reduce what is learnt to the status of unconnected facts to be memorised and reproduced at a different time or in a different context. Alternatively students may assume a deep approach by trying to make sense of what is to be learnt in terms of ideas and concepts that involve seeking connections, relevance and meaning and developing as a person (Entwistle, 1997; Marton and Booth, 1997). The central proposition is that how learning opportunities are constructed and supported significantly influences students' conceptions, intentions and actions with varied outcomes of learning (Marton and Booth, 1997). This study contributes to this developing field of enquiry through an exploration of variation of students' conceptions of patient digital stories. The critical aspects of variation evident can be regarded as educationally significant and will be considered in relation to teaching and learning practices to identify how learning with patient digital stories can be enhanced.

## Methodology

### The research design

The study uses a phenomenographic approach to identify and understand the different ways in which students experience and

make sense of patient digital stories. While phenomenography is a relatively new approach in educational research it is particularly suited to exploring variation in student learning experiences. Marton (1994) defines phenomenography as the;

“empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended” (p.424).

A central premise is that a phenomenon, if explored from the perspective of many individuals, will vary in a limited number of qualitatively different ways critical to the quality learning (Marton and Booth, 1997; Richardson, 1999; Svenson, 1997). With a focus on how people may interpret the same event differently phenomenography is concerned with variation in understanding across a population rather than variation within an individual experience (Åkerlind, 2005b).

### Sample

Sample selection in phenomenography is driven by the need to ensure that the full variation in the ways a phenomenon is experienced is captured (Åkerlind, 2005a). To achieve this a purposive sample of twenty pre-registration nursing students was recruited from a university in the UK following a call for volunteers. Students were drawn from the adult, child, mental health and learning disability branches with ages ranging from 22 to 41 years. All students were in the third year of an undergraduate programme and had experienced patient digital stories as part of service improvement learning. Ethical approval was granted from the University Research Ethics Committee and all participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their individual contribution.

### Data collection

Data were collected using phenomenographic interviews suggested by Åkerlind (2005b) to “elicit underlying meanings and intentional attitudes towards the phenomenon being studied” (p65). At commencement of the interview a digital patient story taken from [www.patientvoices.org.uk](http://www.patientvoices.org.uk) was played to participants to stimulate and focus discussion. Within the subsequent semi-structured interviews students were asked a number of open questions followed by sub-questions to further interrogate responses and clarify meanings (Trigwell, 2006). The interviews ranged from 40 to 60 min and were digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

### Data analysis

The purpose of data analysis within phenomenography is twofold. Firstly it attempts to develop categories of description to represent the different ways a phenomenon is experienced. Secondly, it seeks to provide an explanation of the way in which the categories are logically related to one another, typically through a hierarchical relationship or typology (Bowden and Green, 2005; Trigwell, 2006).

Analysis therefore started with a search for different ways in which students described the patient story but alongside this was a concern to search for the way in which these experiences differed. In early readings of the transcripts were characterised by an openness to interpretation. Significant statements were scrutinised to identify the meanings embedded within them and similar statements were brought together into categories through a constant iterative process. When examining the developing categories the focus was upon the different ways in which students understood their learning. This involved refining the features of a category by constantly comparing it to other emerging categories (Åkerlind, 2005b).

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