



Clinical education

Bringing a novel to practice: An interpretive study of reading a novel in an undergraduate nursing practicum course



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ABSTRACT

Novels are one humanities resource available to educators in health disciplines to support student reflection on their own professional practice and therapeutic relationships with patients. An interdisciplinary team, including nurses, a physician, and an English instructor, carried out an interpretive study of the use of a novel by clinical nursing instructors in an undergraduate practicum course. Students placed in assisted living or long term care facilities for the elderly were expected to read a contemporary work, *Exit Lines*, by Joan Barfoot, which is set in a comparable facility. The objective was to increase understanding of the meanings that participants ascribed to the novel reading exercise in relation to their development as student nurses. By using a hermeneutic approach, we used dialogue throughout the study to elicit perspectives among participants and the interdisciplinary research team. Major themes that emerged included the students' tacit awareness of epistemological plurality in nursing, and the consequent importance of cultivating a capacity to move thoughtfully between different points of view and ways of knowing.

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1. Introduction

Imaginative literature has a place in nursing education but like any pedagogic strategy, it needs to be used carefully and purposefully if it is going to result in a learning experience for students with discernible positive effects on practice. We conducted a qualitative, interpretive study of the use of a novel in an undergraduate nursing practice course at a Canadian University in order to create a deeper understanding of how students made sense of reading a novel in relation to their practice experiences. We used a hermeneutic framework to guide the study since hermeneutics as a philosophical tradition is closely bound up with language and literature (Palmer, 1969; Gadamer, 2007), and has evolved into a significant approach to researching relational topics in practice disciplines (Moules et al., 2015).

2. Background

There has been a steady interest in using imaginative literature in nursing education (Bartol, 1986; Lafferty, 1997; McKie and Gass, 2001; Moyle et al., 1995) in parallel with the medical humanities in medical curricula (Ousager and Johannessen, 2010). The most recent development has been the move towards integration of humanities in nursing into the wider interdisciplinary field of health humanities (Crawford et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2014).

Shapiro et al. (2009) outlined three broad purposes for medical humanities. First, the use of methods and materials from humanities disciplines to explore patient experiences and therapeutic relationships; second, that the medical humanities teach students in health profession to reflect on their own professions "with the intention of becoming more self-aware and humane practitioners" (p. 192); and third, that medical humanities are interdisciplinary.

Within this broader framework, claims of the value of reading novels in nursing education are based on two linked assumptions; first that narrative form has a vital function in conveying personal experience, enabling more individualized and therapeutic

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interactions between providers and patients, and second that the ability to access others' experience via narrative fosters self-reflection in providers in the light of the other.

Two core pedagogic functions can be seen in using literature in clinical education. Literature – particularly first person accounts of illness, but also fiction, poetry, prose and reflective pieces from others – promotes the consideration of the individual's *experience* ... A second core function is the enablement and promotion of reflection through narratives on a student's own values, life experience, expectations, assumptions and knowledge basis. (Crawford et al., 2015, pp. 50–51)

It follows that the novel, as a major narrative form, is one available source for exposing students to narratives, and helping them to consider the experiences of fictional others as well as reflecting on their own experiences in the light of the novel.

3. Research design

We studied the practice of using a novel as part of a clinical practicum course for second year nursing students placed in assisted living and long term care centres for older adults with varying degrees of care needs. Two of the instructors in the course (JDP and JL) had previously assigned their students the novel *Exit Lines* by a Canadian author, Joan Barfoot (2008) to read during the 13 weeks of their placement. The novel describes the lives of four people in a small town who go to live in a newly opened residential home for the elderly. Much of the novel is written through interior monologue, thereby taking the reader into the minds, memories, and impressions of the characters. The plot revolves around the wish of one of the characters to commit suicide, and her attempts to enlist the aid of her friends to do so. The authors felt that the book was an excellent fit for the course, reflecting the care setting, offering an imaginative gateway to the inner lives of older people, and raising prickly ethical questions about the end of life. The students were encouraged to read the novel over the course of a 13-week semester, ready for a discussion in small groups at the end of the semester, each group facilitated by a faculty member. Two of the authors, GM and LV volunteered to facilitate a group in 2014 and following that experience, GM proposed to conduct a small qualitative study of the exercise.

The research team was multidisciplinary, including nurses (GM, LV, JDP and JL), a physician (RJ) and a faculty member from the Department of English (TR) at a Canadian university. RJ and TR had considerable experience working in the field of medical humanities and medical narrative (Charon, 2008). For the study, we did not change the novel reading exercise as planned by the instructors, since we were interested in exploring the experiences of students in the light of existing literature about nursing and humanities, and potentially identifying ways to develop the exercise for the future. Ethical approval for the study was granted through the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

We chose to use a hermeneutic approach, based primarily on Gadamer's "hermeneutics as practical philosophy" (2007, p. 227) adapted for use by health researchers (Moules et al., 2015). The research process can be understood as a series of interlocking conversations, each questioning and adding to understanding of the topic at hand. The novel-reading exercise included all 32 students in the clinical groups of two nursing instructors (JDP and JL). Starting with the teacher-student conversation, the students were introduced to the novel-reading exercise as part of their course prior to the beginning of their practicum; students reading the novel became another form of conversation as each reader progressively formed an understanding of the novel as well as his or

her own sense of its meaning and value in relation to the course objectives; there were conversations between students informally as well as organized conversation, facilitated by faculty members, at the end of the course. From the 32 students, nine volunteered to take part in the research study, seven women and two men. Data gathering and analysis entailed a further set of conversations. Seven of the students took part in a focus group facilitated by two members of the research team (GM and LV), and one member of the team (GM) conducted two individual interviews with students who were unable to attend the focus group. Once the interviews were transcribed from audio recordings, each member of the research team read the transcriptions and we met together to share and develop ideas about the data. Both the research interviews and discussion of data were semi-structured – that is, they focused on the topic of the study but did not follow a prescriptive set of questions. We received ethical approval for the study from the university ethics board.

4. Findings and discussion

In this section, we have organized material from the focus group and individual interviews under a series of thematic headings. In the discussion section that follows, we define explore four major themes in greater depth, based upon the data analysis team discussion.

4.1. The novel as work

At the beginning of the interviews, both as a group and individually, the students were preoccupied with the demands of reading a novel as part of their academic work, knowing it was "extra" compared to their colleagues in other clinical groups. They worked out various ways of accommodating the time required to read the book, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. One treated it as a pleasant break between more intense forms of academic work, while still doing schoolwork. "*I'm tired of writing my paper, this still counts as schoolwork, I'll go read it. Which I liked but I can see why other people wouldn't like it, different students learn differently.*" Another enjoyed the book and so did not seem to find it a particularly difficult demand to have to read it. One read most of the book during the brief mid-term break while others caught up at the end before the final discussion. "*I read the whole thing on reading break, because I wanted to have it done.*" There was quite a lot of discussion that they did not have "down times" during their actual placements when they could have read the book, which they had anticipated based on the experience of previous groups in the same course. For this reason, the reading was considered as burdensome, though the research participant groups pointed out that they were all basically well disposed towards the exercise in contrast to some of their colleagues who had never completed the book at all. "*I think it's fair for us to be reading it if no one else was reading it outside of class.*"

4.2. Narrative

The students in the study were receptive to the idea of narrative being used in a practicum course. They discovered different ways of treating narratives through interpreting the fictional text and seeing narrative being employed in clinical texts and practices. One student appreciated the contrast with the textbooks she otherwise had to read, "*It was interesting that it was a narrative instead of a text book because I know that I personally find text books really dry to read.*" Leaving aside the question of whether textbooks are themselves a form of narrative, for this student there was significance to the opportunity to read a work in a different genre. Some of the

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