



Review

Exploring nursing educators' use of theory and methods in search for evidence based credibility in nursing education

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Nursing education
Theory
Research

ABSTRACT

Objectives: In this paper, a review of nursing education literature is employed to ascertain the extent to which nursing educators apply theory to their research, as well as the types of theory they employ. In addition, the use of research methodologies in the nursing education literature is explored.

Design: An integrative review.

Methods: A systematic search was conducted for English-language, peer reviewed publications of any research design via Academic Search Complete, Science Direct, CINAHL, and Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition databases from 2001 to 2016, of which 140 were reviewed.

Findings: The findings suggest that within current nursing education literature the scholarship of discovery, and the exploration of epistemologies other than nursing, in particular as they relate to teaching and learning, shows significant potential for expansion and diversification.

Conclusions: The analysis highlights opportunities for nursing educators to incorporate broader theoretical, pedagogical, methodological and philosophical perspectives within teaching and the scholarship of teaching.

1. Introduction

Ensuring future nurses' responsiveness to current and anticipated needs of health care environments, keeping abreast of emerging health needs and research, can be challenging for nursing educators teaching in universities. Maintaining contemporary discipline knowledge, combined with remaining clinically active and trying to meet teaching and research standards, requires a set of complex skills. In a higher education context, nursing educators are sometimes caught in a teaching-research nexus, which often privileges teaching or practice over research (Carr, 2007; Logan et al., 2015). This is in contrast to many other disciplines where research is privileged over teaching (Nunn and Pillay, 2014).

Moreover, in the Australian context the pursuit of scholarship by academic staff is also a regulatory requirement. The Australian Higher Education Standards Framework 2015 states that for providers to be eligible for the 'University' category they must demonstrate "sustained scholarship that informs teaching and learning in all fields in which courses of study are offered" (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015, p. 17).

1.1. Challenges for Nursing Educators

The more frequent use of online educational technology and competitiveness for student places mean that nurse educators must be engaged in innovation in order to ensure that educational approaches meet industry needs, while achieving teaching and learning excellence with diverse cohorts of students (Bradley et al., 2008; Damewood, 2016).

Teaching excellence requires not only solid foundational knowledge of the theories and practice unique to the nursing discipline but also the incorporation of substantive knowledge and theories from other disciplines such as education, and learning and teaching in higher education. Therefore, the ability to inform and structure curricula and learning experiences based upon sound pedagogical knowledge is necessary to achieve better learning outcomes and student engagement and performance (Booth et al., 2016; Leibowitz et al., 2017).

Tailoring learning experiences for undergraduate nurses is operationalised within cognitive, affective and psychomotor knowledge domains. A multitude of approaches is needed to enhance the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills that are required for students to become safe and competent practitioners as well as critical thinkers who are reflective, socially aware and responsive (Hayes, 2016;

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Mgbekem et al., 2016; McKie and Naysmith, 2014). Furthermore, such approaches are needed to facilitate learning as a way-of-being that allows students to become productive citizens who do not fear uncertainties upon graduation (Kek and Huijser, 2017). Approaches should be underpinned by the most influential theories of learning such as behaviourist theories, cognitive psychology, social constructivism, experiential learning, and situated learning theory, among others (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).

Positioned at the nexus of teaching and research, the scholarship of learning and teaching is considered to be integral to providing quality higher education (Leibowitz et al., 2017). With teaching as a core function, nursing educators are often required to engage in the process of scholarship. Thus, they are encouraged to reflect on clinical and teaching practices to examine the effectiveness of approaches to student learning, and to communicate their findings with other nursing educators. This advances the body of nursing education using systematic rigorous inquiry (Oermann, 2014; World Health Organization, 2016). Such scholarship should be based upon evidence-based practices incorporating adult learning theories and principles (Kalb et al., 2015; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).

Globally there is an acknowledged need for consistent standards in higher education to advance the science of nursing education. Recently, the World Health Organisation (2016) developed a set of nursing education competencies, which identify a need for the application of educational theories to curriculum development, evaluation, research and teaching. Domain 1 (*Theories and Principles of Adult Learning*) in particular relates to the importance of applying this knowledge to guide curriculum development (World Health Organization, 2016).

1.2. Evidence-based and Theory-driven Nursing Education

Just as it is important for nurses to utilise evidence-based practices to improve patient outcomes, so too should nursing educators use evidence-based teaching approaches to improve student learning outcomes. However, gaps exist between the theory and the practice of nursing, which is often referred to as the ‘theory-practice gap’, and also in the utilisation of nursing evidence in clinical practice (International Council of Nurses, 2012; Saunders and Vahviläinen-Julkunen, 2016).

Concerns about rigour in nursing education have been raised that refers to a lack of theory-driven scholarship (Mgbekem et al., 2016; Oermann, 2015) and in literature in which the methodological quality of nursing education research is questioned (Carter et al., 2016; Kanta, 2014). The identified problems of quality relate to three main areas: firstly small-scale projects contextualised to one content area, secondly the use of largely self-report and/or non-validated measures (Patterson and Klein, 2012; Schneider et al., 2013; Yucha et al., 2011), and thirdly reliance on author-generated questionnaires (Yonge et al., 2005).

The most recent systematic review of nursing education research addressed the period between 1991 and 2000. It extensively evaluated the quality and nature of nursing education research, research methods used, and whether the research had attracted funding (Yonge et al., 2005). It found that 61% of the research conducted was quantitative in nature, and that 80% was unfunded and used relatively small samples (Yonge et al., 2005). The top five focus areas related to continuing education, patient education, preceptorship, community health nursing, and teaching and learning. Although useful, the review did not provide any insight into whether research was driven by adult learning theories and principles.

Questions that are addressed in this paper include (1) Is the type of scholarship in nursing education concentrated within particular theories and/or method(s)? If so, (2) what are they, (3) how effective are they, and (4) what are the implications for nursing teaching practices, quality of nursing education, and student outcomes?

2. Conceptual Framework

Boyer's (1990) conceptualisation of scholarship was used as the guiding framework in this paper as his original motivation for re-conceptualising academic work was the perceived divide between teaching and research. Furthermore, it helps to break down an often-perceived wall between teaching and research. Underlying his four types of scholarships (discovery, integration, application, and teaching) is knowledge that must flow seamlessly between and within those four types of scholarship. None of them can do without the others nor without the essential ingredient ‘knowledge’. Therefore, it is a coherent and holistic framework for thinking about the different types of scholarship in contemporary academic work, in this case with a specific focus on academic nursing educators.

As noted, Boyer (1990) conceptualised academic work as being made up of four kinds of scholarship – the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching respectively. Scholarship of discovery and integration reflect investigative and synthesising academic traditions. Scholarship of application is about engaging with knowledge in the community, for example by using it to solve problems. Lastly, the scholarship of teaching is the scholarly act of educating.

The scholarship of discovery (or ‘research’) is perhaps the most familiar to academics and includes original and fundamental research resulting in the advancement of knowledge. The scholarship of integration is about making serious attempts at connecting across disciplines. It requires academics “to seek to interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear on original research” (Boyer, 1990, p. 19). Research must be done first at the boundaries where different fields converge. Then the academic connects the intellectual data or findings situated at those boundaries through interpretation, synthesising one's own research and others'.

The scholarship of application involves assembling knowledge to address significant problems. For Boyer, the intention is not to suggest that knowledge must come first before being applied, rather in enacting application “theory and practice would interact, and one renew the other” (Boyer, 1990, p. 23).

Finally, the scholarship of teaching refers to both teaching students and educating teachers themselves. Teaching is framed as a scholarly enterprise, therefore, those who teach must be well informed and have good knowledge of their own field (as well as other fields that interplay and intersect), enabling them to engage, extend and build on existing knowledge.

In the review of nursing education papers in this study, Boyer's four kinds of scholarship were used to analyse the use of theories and methods in the papers in the sample. Application of adult learning theories and principles were subsequently interpreted according to those four kinds of scholarship. This then shed light on the key question of whether the type of scholarship in nursing education is concentrated within particular theories and/or method(s) and consequently what the implications are.

3. Methodology

As noted, an integrative literature review was deployed to examine the research questions. Published journal articles covering a 15-year period from 2001 until 2016 were compared and analysed according to Boyer's four kinds of scholarship. A two-by-two design was developed to initially cluster and categorise the final papers. Published articles that focused on undergraduate nursing education were reviewed first. Next, articles were grouped according to the extent to which theory had been applied to nursing education. The four quadrants were broadly categorised as follows: Theory/Research, Theory/No Research, No Theory/Research, No Theory/No Research. While not all papers fit perfectly into each quadrant, this categorisation was useful as a broad measure of the extent to which theory underpinned nursing education literature in terms of scholarship and research.

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