Transformative Learning Through a Research Practicum for Undergraduate Nursing Students
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ABSTRACT
In their final year of a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) program, students are required to take a research practicum related to clinical practice in a new or ongoing research project, supervised by nursing faculty. This course is designed to enhance students’ understanding of the research process. The student’s potential role as a research collaborator is emphasized. Involvement in an interdisciplinary narrative study with formerly homeless individuals challenged by severe alcohol dependence, in general poor health and living in a harm reduction environment, transformed students’ values, assumptions, and beliefs. Not only did students gain confidence in their beginning skills as potential research collaborators, but they also felt that their future practice would be enhanced by new perspectives gained by studying a marginalized and stigmatized group, thus enabling them to appreciate cultural diversity and improve their competence.

New nursing graduates will face a complex, diverse, and changing work world, with multiple employer expectations. Educators can help students accomplish what Say- er (2005) described as a developing sense of self, to know what is of value, how to live, what is worth striving for. In other words, to develop a moral imagination to know “what matters” (p. 6). Although such learning opportunities are beginning to be studied related to clinical courses (Hunt & Swiggum, 2007; Upvall & Bost, 2007), research practicums with vulnerable populations also provide opportunities for this moral awakening. The ability to acquire and articulate what matters is essential because new graduates increasingly work in settings of enormous complexity and are expected to be proficient in working in interdisciplinary health care teams. This article describes multiple levels of learning experienced by nursing students who participated in a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) research practicum course.

In the BScN research practicum course at McMaster University, students have the opportunity to participate in a collaborative way in a beginning or an ongoing research project supervised by McMaster University nursing faculty. Designed to enhance understanding of the investigative process, emphasis is placed on the student’s potential role as a research collaborator. This article reflects 4 years of faculty–student collaboration during the life of a faculty research project in which a total of 16 students participated (2 students per term) during their final year. Some students chose to work on this qualitative narrative study because they had previous experience with one or more of the faculty authors, whereas other students were selected through a random lottery process. With each student, the educators were charged with preparing the graduating student with skills, knowledge, and positive attitude toward research (Kim, Brown, Fields, & Stichler, 2009) to enable them to evaluate and use research findings in their practice settings (Raines, 2008).

Research Project: The Context
Narrative inquiry was the research method used in the faculty research project led by an interprofessional research team, Clandinin’s and Connelly’s (2000) metaphorical narrative inquiry space was used to explore, over time, the experiences of homeless individuals living with alcohol dependence as they move from the streets to a managed alcohol harm reduction environment. This three-dimensional inquiry space addresses the following three dimensions: place or a series of places, temporality (past, present, future), and personal and social (interaction). Ex-
periences occur in specific places or a sequence of places; these places provide opportunities or create barriers. Harm reduction is any program or policy designed to reduce drug-related harm without requiring the cessation of drug use (Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2002). Because harm reduction environments focus on minimizing the adverse consequences among those who will not or cannot stop using drugs or alcohol, the approach is controversial and confronts our values as nurses. The research protocol included a series of interviews that asked questions designed to elicit life stories, stories about personal experiences of homelessness, and stories about living in the harm reduction program. For most study participants, the initial interview was conducted while they were still living on the streets. Research team members had backgrounds in nursing, medicine, psychiatry, and anthropology, and two doctoral students had backgrounds in geography and English Literature. Ethics approval was received from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board.

**Student Experience**

The project made a commitment to provide nursing students with a rich interprofessional research experience. Student participation and learning opportunities reflected the stage of the study at any given time. Over time, students were involved with research tutors in participant interviews and focus groups; narrative content analysis; research team meetings; and knowledge transfer of findings with study participants, their fellow students, and with nursing faculty in the department. Multiple levels of learning included acquiring knowledge and practice in narrative inquiry study methodology; reflective learning; discipline-specific perspectives with exposure to other ways of knowing by the interprofessional research team; and exchanging and sharing learning. All students participated in all levels of learning discussed below.

**Multiple Levels of Learning**

**Level 1: Getting Ready—Learning Preparation**

Level 1 provided the basis for participation in the research experience. Prior to beginning the practicum, students read about narrative research and the research proposal and then completed an online tutorial regarding ethical conduct for research involving humans (Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics, 2009). Therefore, students began with knowledge and questions about research with vulnerable populations, both broadly and about this research in particular. Students thus began the experience with questions at a theoretical level.

**Level 2: Reflective Learning and Co-Creation of Students’ Narratives**

Students can be expected to encounter homeless, mentally ill, and addicted patients in many clinical practice settings. The nature of this research study enabled students to spend time to understand the individual’s story, lifestyle, and background. Transformative learning is a process of exploring, assessing, and working to change limiting frames of reference and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000). Reflecting on and critiquing existing assumptions becomes transformative learning when it leads learners to restructure their meaning perspective. Students need support to become more comfortable with uncertainty and to look for deeper answers (Ruland & Ahern, 2007).

Through the process of active listening, student researchers can value and validate the lives of vulnerable people, whose emotions are often invisible and whose stories have the potential to make them visible (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). Narrative research creates an opportunity to understand vulnerability in its diversity and complexity and permits “nurses to engage with their own vulnerability, person to person and human to human” (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007, p. 710). This creates the foundation for exploring the concept of other and the self.

Professional bodies have spoken of the importance of self-reflection. The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario’s (RNAO) *Policy Statement on Homelessness* (2004) advocates that nurses be aware of homelessness and basic housing needs in every facet of their practice, necessitating a reflective review of their own relevant beliefs and practices. The College of Nurses of Ontario’s (2004) *Practice Guideline: Culturally Sensitive Care* advocates self-reflection to identify one’s values and biases and that recognizing differences enables the nurse to know not only the other, but also the self. A culturally sensitive focus on other requires a process—for others, rather than about others. Thus learning-through-connecting reinforces that other is different for all of us. According to Canales and Bowers (2001), “Who we are as self and whom we see as Other, varies for each person” (p. 110).

A unique feature of participating in this narrative study was the expectation that students write reflections throughout the practicum. Reflections can include interpreting, critical thinking, analysis, and self-expression, but must be done within a trusting teacher–student relationship to achieve its potential (Brown, Kirkpatrick, Mangum, & Avery, 2008). Tutors reflected on the students’ reflections so that it was a recursive dialogue. All students gave their consent to share their reflections; written permission was received for detailed quotes. From early reflections, there emerged beginning evidence of transformative learning. One student noted that along with lack of experience with homelessness and alcohol addiction, she thought her religious background might affect her views. Having been raised in a Christian home, the student believed that alcohol was not acceptable, even in moderation.

Reading the participants’ emotionally moving and thought-provoking stories gave students a glimpse into a previously unknown world. They came face to face with the complex issues involved in the experience of being homeless, being addicted, and having physical and mental illnesses, and they came to appreciate the interdependent social determinants of health. The stories offered a face and voice to this particularly vulnerable group, who can often be stigmatized for both their addiction and their homelessness. Coming to “know what matters,” students reflected on the circumstances that induced homelessness and the ensuing challenges and outcomes that rendered the climb out extremely difficult. They spoke of the discrimination, stigma, powerlessness, and social disaffiliation that shaped these individuals’ lives and examined how involvement in the study altered their perspectives. One student noted that the issue of alcohol did not make her as uncomfortable as she thought it might, but rather that the interview participants had nowhere to stay and owned only what they had with them.
Level 3: Interprofessional Team and Interviewers’ Experience

Hearing and valuing multiple perspectives from different disciplines broadened and deepened understanding of the participant experiences. For example, using a Foucaultian framework, both doctoral students examined issues of will and power. From the English Literature student came the interpretation of the stories as classic epic tales, with the hero’s journey full of challenges, romance, and tragedy. Extracts from interviews provided rich examples—participants as fictional heroes who survived extraordinarily dangerous circumstances. This research team member described a remarkable epiphany—she had trouble locating the force of evil, the nemesis for the hero archetype that is ever present in such tales. After much deliberation, she concluded that the heroes in these stories played two characters, the hero and the villain. The classic struggle between good and evil was thus interpreted as being conducted on the battlefield of their own hearts. Given this interpretation, it became easier for the whole team to understand that such a constitutional ambivalence was an important link to appreciating the difficulty participants experienced in transiting to a structured program of harm reduction. This sparked discussion about the ethical issues of harm reduction and its value as a therapeutic intervention. This example demonstrates that the diverse and atypical composition of the research team provided both students and team members the opportunity to hear multiple perspectives from varying theoretical orientations and to recognize that there is not only one lens to a story. Both participants and researchers bring their own lens to the patient–professional interface.

The experience team members had in gathering the stories themselves was significant. Exploring painful experiences through qualitative methods can have an emotional effect on members of a research team (Lalor, Begley, & Devane, 2006). Faculty shared with students the effects of conducting interviews and discussed how emotionally difficult it was. Students had the opportunity to dialogue with tutors and to participate in the research meetings, whereas members explored these issues and the impact it had on them. Discussions were also held about the powerful role of the researcher in the telling and retelling of participant stories. Between the telling by the original narrator and the participant, and the retelling by the researcher, the question becomes: Whose story is it? This led to questions of taking back to participants the interpretation of their stories, circling back, or member checking (Kidd, Kirkpatrick, & George, 2011).

In research with vulnerable populations, participant stories legitimize the story tellers’ experiences. From participation in this project, students had the opportunity to understand that health professionals, researchers, and students themselves come from an elite subculture. As such, their stories tend to be dominant, rooted in the ideology of privileged groups. By understanding their own narratives, students came to hear alternative explanations that help them develop a new understanding of participants (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). One student identified that she had developed a genuine positive regard for the participants, even though society might look down on them. She noted that their willingness and openness to share their stories had the potential to change lives.

Level 4: Sharing Their Learning

Students had the opportunity to demonstrate their learning experience with classmates and faculty at the required research poster presentation. Students presented their newly acquired knowledge of the research process and project, as well as insights gained from their self-reflections. One semester, two eager yet fearful students took a chance to express their learning in an artistic format. Mounting an old sleeping bag on the poster board, they portrayed information about the study in a colorful, provocative, artistic three-dimensional format. This creative and uncommon act set the stage to transform the learning for those in attendance, peers and faculty, and they found validation for their risk taking. Following the poster presentation, one of the students reflected in her journal:

The poster component was fantastic and probably the best part of the whole project for me because we now had an opportunity to go outside of the traditional box and do something really creative. Importantly, we were able to apply the knowledge we gained of the research design. By designing a poster that told a story instead of following the typical format, we were set apart from the others in a positive way. Also, because of our involvement and interest in the project as a whole, we were adequately prepared to explain the ‘story’ of our efforts and participation to others. We drew a crowd and sparked interest in others, which is what I feel a great poster is all about. Sometimes those guidelines need to be tossed and in this case it worked out for the better and is true.

This visual presentation did not go without notice from the faculty who were initially concerned with the alteration in prescribed poster format. Upon reflection and extensive discussion with the students, they too engaged in transformative learning, recognizing that as students’ transformative learning expands so must criteria for student demonstration of the same. The Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Nursing Education wrote to the tutor that although the students did not follow the strict poster guidelines, they captured the essence of what was required and moved well beyond the criteria:

This poster was truly outstanding for its creativity in using an alternative approach to transmitting the results of a narrative qualitative study…. The students eloquently told the story of their participation in the research…they captured the essence of what was required in a research poster, and moved well beyond the criteria. I believe that they should receive a special award for their creativity in disseminating research findings in a method that was consistent with the methodology used to conduct this study.

Finally, these students took the research sleeping bag back to the study participants at the managed alcohol program as a gift and a way of validating what they had read in the transcripts. Face to face, the students learned that what they had portrayed was affirmed by participants as reflective of the stories told. The poster hangs in the front lobby of the managed alcohol program. The student reflected:

The participants were so interested and had so many questions that our 10 minutes turned into 45 minutes. The responses we received were both touching and informative, as the participants felt that we had ‘really captured their story with the poster.’ One participant stated he felt ‘as if we had followed
him for a year and were telling his story." Furthermore, interacting with and hearing this feedback from the participants affirmed that what we had done was reflective of their stories. We felt honored for the opportunity to meet the participants and are leaving the project both proud of our accomplishment and pleased that our work is now in a place where it should be.

Conclusion

The many levels of learning experienced by students in this project demonstrate the capacity of narrative inquiry and a diverse, multiprofessional research team to transform learning. In and of itself, harm reduction is controversial and challenged the students' values and beliefs honed by the dominant culture's perspective on homeless individuals who struggle with alcohol. This disorienting dilemma was further enhanced by the plight of the study participants as the students read the interview transcripts and engaged in critical self-reflection of their own assumptions. In the end, hearing and reading stories of people who are the other, listening to perspectives from disciplines that are not their own, and engaging with tutors in a reflective discourse culminated in students' gaining a greater sense of self. A new world view was gained from those who live on the margins.

References


