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Title

'Saying it without saying it': using poetry as a way to talk about important issues in nursing practice

Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which student nurses use self - authored poems to think about important aspects of nursing practice. Being a nurse can be rewarding in that it affords opportunities to care for and communicate with others. However, it can also yield challenges, and nurses are often faced with practice filled with uncertainty, grief and loss.

Our findings suggest that students can use poetry writing to meaningfully explore nursing practice, engage with critical thinking, and consider the feelings of others. Of particular note was the ways in which students use metaphor to explore emotional and relational aspects of practice and the technique of self-distancing when describing difficult and angering events.

The work has implications for nurse education and practice. Proactively encouraging students to adopt particular ways of expressive writing might be beneficial for student health and wellbeing. Such an approach has the potential to improve quality care provision and support the emotional health of student nurses, which might lead to a reduction in compassion fatigue, stress and attrition.

Key words

Introduction

Nurse education has previously been criticized for focusing on the empirical side of nursing at the loss of the more personal and emotional aspects, which can lead to a task-orientated approach to care delivery in the practice setting (Williams, 2013) and the depersonalization of care. This is something which has been discussed at some length in the media over recent years most notably during the investigation into the failings of the United Kingdom Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust from January 2005 until March 2009. The Francis Report (2013) made 290 recommendations making particular reference to the culture and practice of nursing. Observations were made about how the organisational focus was on corporate goals above safe and effective care provision. From a student's perspective, undergraduate nurse education can be challenging and emotionally stressful, and a focus on task-completion can lead students to consider leaving their programme (Banks et al, 2012, Jack & Wibberley, 2013). Therefore, finding ways to enhance the aesthetic and personal ways of knowing in nursing is required, and seems particularly relevant whilst nurses are undertaking their pre-registration education and considering the type of nurse they would like to become. What is needed, therefore, is a medium that allows student nurses to explore the personal aspects of their nursing practice in a safe and secure environment; one in which they will not be judged, but that will allow them to express themselves in an honest and cathartic manner.

Engagement with the arts offers multiple benefits when thinking about nursing practice and has been used in nurse education in different ways, for example; painting as a way of developing emotional self-awareness (McAndrew & Warne 2010) the creation of masks to assess therapeutic communication competencies

(Emmanuel et al, 2010) and the consideration of published stories to explore the meaning of ageing (Jack, 2013). Poetry is another art form that has been used effectively across many disciplines as a means of supporting student learning, for example in Sports Science (Threlfall, 2013), Teacher Education (Speare & Henshall, 2014), Social Work (Furman et al, 2008), and Medical Education (McBain et al, 2015). The act of writing poems affords advantages over reading and discussing published poems in that it enables a deeper exploration of personal feelings (Jack & Tetley, 2016). As educators, it supports our exploration of the students' lifeworld and helps us to connect with them in meaningful ways. Writing poems affords a freedom of expression not found in traditional reflective writing and is an empowering and student-centered approach (Coleman & Willis, 2015). Reflective writing using traditional reflective templates might also be viewed as a way of restricting, rather than enabling, experiential learning (Coward, 2011), with students attempting to fit their feelings into boxes rather than expressing themselves freely. Therefore, we suggest that poetry writing could present a solution in terms of providing a safe framework for the exploration of nursing practice at a personal level.

There are many examples of how student-authored poetry has been shown to be beneficial in nurse education; for example, in providing an effective way to express ideas and reflect on clinical practice among student nurses (Biley & Champney-Smith, 2003). Poetry has also been shown to be helpful in supporting an exploration of compassionate practice (Jack & Tetley, 2016), encouraging the development of empathy (Davis, 1997), and as a means of support during difficult times (Osmond et al, 2012). It is well known that poetry writing exhorts a beneficial effect on student nurses; however, what is lesser known is how the creation of poetry might have

implications for aesthetic learning, and how it might positively affect the ability of student nurses to cope with personal aspects of practice.

This study aims to explore the ways in which student nurses craft poems to record and reflect on important aspects of nursing practice. Using student-authored poems as data, we explore how these poems were used as a proxy to articulate and discuss personal nursing practice.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to consider the ways in which student-authored poems supported the exploration of personal nursing practice. Through our experiences of facilitating poetry writing with students, we had discovered that some students choose to remain 'hidden' behind their poems in one or more ways: by speaking indirectly through their work, leaving the reader to decide for themselves what the poem is about; using the voice of, or writing as if, they were the service user; or through the use of metaphor. We were keen to explore these thoughts and experiences and utilised interpretive phenomenology to support our understanding. Interpretive phenomenology has been described as an effective research approach when attempting to understand others' experiences (Cohen, 2000), and we considered this approach particularly helpful when reaching understandings about poems as it supports an exploration of the meanings often hidden behind the words. Such an approach can lead to a different understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Annells, 1996) which is important when attempting to uncover the lifeworld of our student nurses. Furthermore, given the subjective nature of analysing the poetry of others, having the ability to make meaning of these words ourselves seemed an effective way to consider and analyse the data. As Dahlberg (2006) suggests, interpretive phenomenology is not a fixed method, but more of an approach to research, which seems fitting when analysing the unique and individual nature of students' poems. Just as using traditional reflective frameworks can restrict students, using a fixed method might restrict rather than encourage a creative analysis of their work.

A crucial part of our interpretation is grounded in our own experiences as we use these to reach different understandings of the data, in this case, the student-

authored poems. As researchers, we differ in terms of our professional backgrounds and exposure we have had to health care practices. The first researcher (KJ) has been a nurse for 28 years and has a special interest in the use of poetry as way to support exploration of nursing practice (see e.g. Jack and Tetley, 2016). Conversely, the second researcher (SI) is an expert in the relationship between science and poetry (see e.g. Illingworth, 2016), and has an understanding of the use of poetry for developing student engagement in higher education.

We are similar in that we have a love of poetry and a desire to encourage students to engage with this way of writing, as a means of learning, development and enjoyment. However, we also bring different experiences to our interpretation and believe this enriches the process to provide a wider interpretation of the ideas within the poems. Discussing our experiences adds to the credibility of the interpretation and is in line with the qualitative validity framework suggested by Cho & Trent (2006). However, there remains a need to engage in a process of distanciation, whereby we distance ourselves from our pre-understanding (Wiklund et al, 2002). By doing this we are more receptive to new perspectives found in the poems.

As part of a first-year undergraduate module, student nurses at Manchester Metropolitan University are asked to write a poem about a meaningful nursing issue, relating to, for example: communication, caring, or the act of 'being a nurse'. The poem is then shared in a small group activity where students are asked to discuss their poem and the meaning and significance of it. The students are then requested to upload their work onto the online resource 'Caring Words' (www.caringwords.mmu.ac.uk), a website designed to engage students in a poetry community where they can share their work and read the poems written by their

peers. This site (which has been live for five years) was designed to reduce the feelings of isolation often expressed by student nurses when experiencing difficult aspects of practice; for example, the feelings of distress following a death. The content of the website is driven by our students. Whatever they feel is important, drives their poetry writing and, in turn, decides the direction of the community. To encourage thinking, as educators, we suggest topics and this is especially helpful for those students who might not know where to 'start'.

We independently performed a review of the poems on the Caring Words website, which at that time was host to over 300 poems from 10 nursing cohorts, with a view to analysing those poems which students had used as a proxy to discuss important nursing issues. We individually chose poems that we thought made most clear the use of poetry as an exploratory and reflective tool in relation to personal nursing practice. There was some overlap in our choices and we discussed the poems until mutual consensus was reached about the final six to be included in the interpretive stage. We then discussed the poems chosen until interpretation was agreed in line with the hermeneutic circle articulated by Heidegger (1926/1962). Lines of each poem were discussed in the context of the whole piece, and vice versa. According to Heidegger (1926/62), this cycle of whole-parts-new-whole leads to a different understanding of the observed phenomenon, meaning understanding is only truly reached when we view the parts against the backdrop of the whole. This process supports our rationale to present the poems as whole pieces rather than thematically. Many poems include lines of powerful imagery which, if used as data in isolation might convey meanings not imagined by the writers or those reading unless read within the context of the whole poem. Reading lines in isolation can lead us to misunderstand, as we are exposed to the headline-grabbing lines without getting a

feel for the whole piece of work. In addition, we suggest that including whole poems adds to the credibility of the research, as readers are left to decide the meanings of the poems for themselves. Furthermore, we agree with Shapiro (2004: 176) who describes the breaking up of poems into themes as "aesthetic murder." We consider each poem not only as data, but as a piece of art, and in this sense, they need to remain complete.

It is important to note that the epistemology that was adapted for this study is one of constructivism, not constructionism, i.e. we are concerned with the learning and exploration taking place through poetry writing, not the quality of the finished poem. This is because we were keen to support student's development in innovative and helpful ways without them feeling under pressure to complete a perfect work of art. Our students are not necessarily creative writers or poets and they should not feel under pressure to develop these skills whilst on their Nursing programme. Our role is not to judge poems but accept all contributions as being valuable. Ethical approval for this study was gained from the University Ethics Committee, and students gave permission for us to use their poems as data for this study, during submission of their work to the Caring Words website.

Results

The chosen poems explored a range of intra and interpersonal experiences, with most of them describing the difficult nature of communication, and the implications of when the important dialogue between patient and nurse breaks down. Some of the chosen poems were written from the perspective of the student nurse and others were written using the patients' voice. Presented below is our interpretation of each

poem, which is based on the whole-parts-new whole approach outlined in the Methodology.

The first poem utilised metaphor to tell the reader (the patient) that the nurse can identify with them and act as an advocate helping them do the things that they are unable to do. This is suggested by the metaphors of 'all ears' and 'I will be your voice'. Writing in this way enables the student to explore advocacy, a concept that might be easier to communicate through expressive writing in this way. This poem is written by one person although it speaks on behalf of two unified voices. However, the reality of nursing practice is often somewhat different to the ideal described in this poem. Having the time to listen to patients at all times of day might be unrealistic and perhaps this is explained by the fact that the poem has been written by a student in their first year of the programme, with little experience of practice. The lines of the poem, when considered against the backdrop of the English National Health Service, reveal an incongruence between the ideal and the reality, and this might only be discovered by the student as they progress through their nursing programme.

Trust

I want to be kind,

Offer you peace of mind,

You can tell me your fears,

I promise I am all ears,

I will be your voice,

Ensuring you have a choice,

I will listen to what you have to say,

No matter the time of day,

Please know I am always here for you,

And you can trust me too.

In contrast to 'Trust' the following poem uses metaphor as a way of alienating the nurse from the patient and might be more representative of the daily lives of some student nurses during placement experiences. In this poem, the student seems to be working alone and unsupervised even though students are meant to be supernumerary during placement hours. The poem explains a single incident between two people although the background context is one of short staffing, lack of mentors and students getting through their placements rather than experiencing meaningful learning. There is a sense of anger and desperation on both sides of the relationship, and the title 'The Nameless Bed' hints at depersonalizing practice. Both nurse and patient are writers in this poem and metaphor is used to demonstrate the disparate relationship that has arisen between them, with the phrases 'I'll be a wreck' and the depersonalizing description, 'bed four'.

The Nameless Bed

'Nurse, Nurse'

Moaned a voice from a nameless bed

'Nurse, Nurse'

Leave me alone I think in my head

'Nurse, Nurse'

Can't that patient see I'm working alone?

'Nurse, Nurse'

Oh, I must go to answer that phone

'Nurse, Nurse'

'Yes, I'll be there in a sec'

'Nurse, Nurse'

By the end of this day I'll be a wreck

'Nurse, Nurse'

'Yes bed four, what is it?'

'Oh Nurse, I just want to say your caring has been shhh……'

In the next poem, the nurse used a variety of idioms to convey the importance of communication. An idiom is a commonly used expression whose meaning does not usually relate to the literal meaning of its words. In this poem, phrases such as 'say what's on your mind,' 'lending an ear' and 'put yourself in their shoes' helps the nurse to identify with the patient. In addition to the literal advice that is given: 'Communication must always be kind', 'it must be perfect and patient', these idioms support the poem as an 'aide memoir' to nurture effective relational practice.

Being there for a Patient

Communication takes place in many hospitals

It must be perfect and patient

Communication must always be kind

You have to say what's on your mind

Lending an ear is always important

To listen not just hear

Communication is hard sometimes you see

But it is always key

Sometimes patients need a good chat

To try and get their worries off their back

Being there for a patient whenever they need you

And sometimes trying to put yourself in their shoes

The following two poems are presented in contrast to 'Being there for a Patient' in that they demonstrate the alienation which can be felt when communication breaks down. The first described the alienation felt when communication is ineffective. The potent phrase 'like I'm cattle' described the depersonalization felt as the medical team discusses the patient's case. This then lead on to the use of a powerful metaphor to describe the patient's feelings, with their dignity being described as 'in tatters.' The second, 'Pete', was written from a distance and involves a conversation between 'Pete' and 'Nurse Kerry', with the narrator describing the outcome of each conversational exchange. This poem is an effective example of how expressive writing can be used as a proxy to discuss an important issue, as whilst the writer does not at any point overtly discuss 'communication', they manage to articulate an ineffective exchange between patient and nurse very effectively. Bolster & Manias (2010) describe discrepancies between the perceived and real behaviour of nurses when providing person-centred care, with nurses overestimating the effectiveness of their approach. Further, for student nurses, task completion might take priority over effective communication for reasons such as lack of confidence and an inadequate knowledge base (Tuohy, 2003). However, if student nurses are exposed to negative role modelling practice, such as those described in these poems, they too might emulate these styles. Instead, students value exposure to positive role models who are integral to the their professional development (Donaldson & Carter, 2005).

Around my Bed

Five of you stand around my bed

You talk about me like I'm cattle

Five of you stand around my bed

Knowing nothing of my battle

Five of you stand around my bed

Pondering my illness like a game

Five of you stand around my bed

Not one knows my name

Five of you stand around my bed

No time for smiles or chatters

Five of you stand around my bed

My dignity in tatters

Now nobody stands around my bed

Hospital life is full of sorrow

Nobody stands around my bed

Until it starts again tomorrow

Pete

'Having a wash this morning Pete?'

'I think I am too exhausted'.

Out comes the flannel and the tepid water.

'What do you want to wear today Pete?'

'I am in the mood for something blue.'

'That pink shirt looks good on you.

'Having a shave Pete?'

'My wife is coming today'

'You can be stubbly as it is Sunday.'

'Comfy in your chair Pete?'

'It feels like my arms and legs are on fire.'

'Good, moving you again would make me perspire.'

'What do you want to watch Pete?'

'Same as every other day, BBC.'

'ITV is the best day time tele.'

'You got everything you need Pete?'

'I am sat on my call bell.'

'If you remember something I've missed, give us a yell.'

Off goes Nurse Kerry.

Jeremy Kyle comes on the tele.

PETE BLOODY HATES JEREMY KYLE.

The following poem is an observation of a conversation between nurses about the behaviour of a male patient who will not comply with the routine of the clinical area. The writer seems angry and the poem is infused with sadness and frustration about the way this patient is being treated. Care is described as an 'industry' and there is a sense of impersonal and humiliating practice. Phrases such as "the life we have provided" reinforce the sense that the patient has little say in his care which is imposed on him by others. Writing in this way is a powerful means to articulate ineffective care and in doing this, examine the associated feelings when events like this are witnessed. Being able to articulate feelings about poor care which might be witnessed by student nurses is an important issue. This is because often, student nurses do not feel able to discuss or raise concerns about care, which might be witnessed during their education. Indeed, many students feel compelled to keep a 'low profile' and worry about the impact on their assessment or the conflict which might occur should they report their worries (Ion et al, 2015: 904). The section of the poem where one of the nurses describes the patient as 'bouncing round the room like a crazy raver,' before correcting themselves and making an 'official' comment as to the patient's behaviour is perhaps reflective of the frustration that some nurses feel in terms of the limitations imposed on them by the bureaucracy of their profession.

And these are my Golden Years?

Here, there are some hard and fast rules, or like, coping tools? Did you say 1 sugar or 2?

Yeah, smacking and thrashing, he even tried to bite me! He has had a rough time but we do have to be firm, see

It was time to get up after all.

Showers cannot wait till later in the morn'

We will have to write this up, fill in the blanks, dot the I's, cross the T's, but it's all just part and parcel of this industry.

Be factual, 'challenging behaviour?' What about 'bouncing round the room like a crazy raver' Ha ha! No, 'refusing reasonable requests' sounds better

I think he is getting worse, he seems aggressive, depressed and refusing medication, we need to have a meeting about his best interests.

This man will not comply with the life we have provided. It is our opinion, wholly and undivided that his mind has faulted and slowed, halted, grinded, it is dulled and blinded. To the life we have provided.

Discussion

From the student-authored poems and interpretations that were presented above, it can be seen that poetry has the potential to help student nurses in the articulation of difficult issues in personal nursing practice. Furthermore, these poems expose authentic nursing practice which on the one hand is shown to be a caring endeavour, whilst on the other suggesting a more strained and difficult role. Whatever the focus, the creation of these poems enables educators to respond to student concerns, as they support a sharing of feeling and act as a reminder of the reality of practice. Analysis of the poems revealed two techniques that were used regularly by the students. First is the use of metaphor, and second is the use of writing from a distance. Each of these aspects, and how they can potentially enhance nurse education, will now be discussed.

Furman (2004: 163) describes metaphor as an "essential element" in the process of poetry writing, and as having a greater impact than describing an experience or relationship precisely as it happened. Metaphors evoke images which can be more powerfully held in the mind, for example, in the poem 'Around my Bed', the words 'cattle' and 'battle' bring a sense of helplessness and futility to the situation being experienced. In addition, metaphors enable a more economical use of words, enabling the insights to be more easily remembered (Furman, 2004) and to be written in a more succinct manner (Bolton, 2001). It could be suggested that the use of metaphor enables the writer to place some distance between themselves and the event, meaning they can discuss difficult situations more easily. However, Hawkes (1972: 61) suggests metaphor brings a harsher reality to the situations being discussed:

"…metaphor is hardly an amusing embellishment or diversion, an 'escape' from the harsh realities of life or of language. It is made out of, *and it makes those realities.*"

Metaphors might not always make literal sense, but some of the poetry that is presented here serves as a powerful reminder of care that is depersonalised, enabling a connection between what is seen and what is felt. Fox (1997: 65) suggests that the use of metaphor helps the development of intuitive knowing, going beyond the rational mind and enabling a "broader meaning" to life. Similarly, nursing intuition is a valid and important form of knowledge and just as necessary for care provision as empirical ways of knowing (Green, 2012). It is suggested that the student nurses in this study are reflecting that intuitive knowing in their use of metaphor.

In addition to the use of metaphor, some of the poems, for example, 'And these are my golden years' and 'Pete' were written from a distance, as if the student was an observer, listening in on a conversation. Assuming this perspective when experiencing angering events has been shown to lead to better health outcomes than when writing in the first person (Kross et al, 2005). Distancing oneself from an emotionally disturbing event might seem like a natural response and in some instances writing in first person, something that is normally encouraged in reflective writing, might lead to more negative outcomes such as depression (Rude et al, 2004). Writing about events from a distance assists in processing what has happened in an abstract way and places focus on the reason *why* the writer is feeling distress rather than *what* they are actually feeling (Kross et al, 2005). This has implications for nurse educators in the sense that poetry writing offers an

accessible way to write from a distance, as shown in this study, and could thereby reduce the risk of adverse health outcomes, helping to encourage coping in student nurses. This has the potential to reduce compassion fatigue, a term first used by Joinson (1992) to describe how nurses turn off their feelings or experience feelings of helplessness or anger, when watching patients endure severe illness or trauma.

In this study, we have examined different ways of expressive writing in student-authored poems and have limited the analysis to the wider literature on this topic. Interpretive phenomenology was chosen as a suitable methodology for this study, and whilst it offers insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon, other persons might offer different, and perhaps contrasting, insights. However, we accounted for some of these limitations by drawing on our different experiences in relation to student nursing practices and the use of poetry as data. Despite the findings of this study, there is a need for future research to explore further the effect of metaphor and distance writing on student nurse learning and development, for example by returning to the authors of the poems to explore the ways in which writing in specific ways supported their exploration of important practice issues.

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this study was to explore the ways in which student nurses create poems to think about important aspects of nursing practice. We focussed on the ways in which the poems were written; first the use of metaphor and second, the use of writing from a distance. We did not suggest the use of either of these ways of writing and as educationalists our aim was solely to provide students with a way of thinking and writing freely about practice, using poetry as a medium. However,

considering the reported evidence we have some recommendations about how the work might be carried forward. For example, students might be actively encouraged to think about a practice-related metaphor. They could then be encouraged to discuss this and share their thoughts with others to explore nursing practice. Further, based on the findings in this study, students might be directed to write in a particular style, for example, when describing an angering situation. Further research might fruitfully explore whether writing as an outsider has a beneficial effect on the students' ability to cope with situations they have encountered, and whether this in turn can result in a reduction in compassion fatigue.

Key points

Through poetry student nurses could explore emotional aspects of interpersonal care in powerful ways

Writing from a distance was utilised to articulate and explore perceived inadequacies in nursing care provision

Utilising different ways of expression has implications for emotional exploration and coping for student nurses

Future research is required to explore how different ways of writing can be encouraged in the classroom as an active way to explore students' experiences

Further research is required to explore the effect that different writing techniques has on student nurses' ability to explore and cope with practice issues

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