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It is important that undergraduate nurse education programmes support students to develop the knowledge and competence required to practice as qualified nurses. In the United Kingdom (UK) the competencies required to become a qualified nurse are outlined by the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC, 2010), and students are exposed to clinical and university-based learning which is split equally across the two settings. Central to nurse education in the UK is the concept of reflective practice, and there is an expectation that nursing students will reflect on and learn from their experiences (NMC, 2010). UK nurse education is similar to that found in Europe, the USA and Australia (Saarikoski, Marrow, Abreu, Riklikiene, & Ozbicakci, 2007), and the ability to reflect on practice is viewed as essential for professional competence in many health professions (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009). The need to reflect on practice is not restricted to the health professions and is encouraged in areas such as law (Evans, Cody, Copeland, Giddings, Joy, P, Noone, & Rice, 2017), teacher education (Belvis, Pineda, Armengol, & Moreno, 2012), dental technology (General Dental Council, 2017) and veterinary practice (RCVS, 2018), making exploration of the concept important in a wide range of disciplines. Indeed, reflective practice supports the development of knowledge that is based in practice and helps to close the theory/practice gap (Schon, 1983; Argyris & Schon, 1974). Schon (1983) noted that not all required knowledge can be gained through formal learning, but that some questions can only be answered through our own experiences, for example, the ways in which we can become more empathic. However, nursing students can find reflective activity difficult to complete (Kennison, 2012). Coward (2012) suggests that nursing students are suffering from reflection fatigue, viewing it as just another 'tick box' exercise. Such negative feelings can be due to the use of traditional reflective models, which have been shown to be an unpopular means to reflect on practice (Timmins & Dunne, 2009; Timmins, Murphy, Howe, & Dennehy, 2013).

Therefore, considering ways in which reflective practice can be enhanced is timely and important.

BACKGROUND

Learning from experiences is an important aspect of professional development. This process, described as reflective learning, not only leads to the development of practical skills and knowledge, but can support intra- and inter-personal competence, important across a range of disciplines. Through reflection, modifications and improvements to practice can be made, thus, it is an important process for professional development (Jasper, 1999). However, undergraduate nursing students can find reflective writing challenging, especially in the earlier years of their education (McMullan, 2006). Students are more likely to engage in reflection if they have support from educators, whilst a lack of knowledge about the reflective process has a negative impact on their practice (O'Donovan, 2006). Educators can support the development of students' reflective capacity and in doing so, create a close and more equitable relationship, centred on listening to the learner (Bagnato, Dimonte, & Garrido, 2013). They can also support practice discussions by making their own reflective activity more explicit to the student. By modelling effective reflective practice, students can see the benefits for themselves and this could encourage them to reflect throughout their careers. The role-modelling of positive behaviours can be an effective teaching method and educators should not underestimate the effect their behaviour has on others (Jack, Hamshire & Chambers, 2017).

Poetry

Writing poetry has been used across many professional disciplines such as medical, social work, and sports coaching as an innovative way to critically reflect on practice (Shapiro & Stein, 2005; Furman, Coyne, & Negi, 2008; Threlfall, 2013). In nursing education, poetry,

both published and student-authored, has been successfully used in different ways to support students to reflect on their experiences (Jack & Illingworth, 2017; Kidd & Tusaie, 2004). Further, Mohammadian, Shahidi, Mahaki, Mahammadi, Baghban, & Zayeri, (2011) suggest that reading and discussing poetry have a positive effect on self-esteem and self-exploration. Poetry writing has been used effectively to help nursing students think about important concepts such as compassion, compassion fatigue, and empathy (Davis 1997; Jack & Tetley 2016; Jack 2017), as a means to talk about difficult issues (Jack & Illingworth, 2017), and as an outlet to relieve tension (Bolton, 1999). Writing poems affords a freedom of expression not found in traditional reflective writing and is an empowering and student-centred approach (Coleman & Willis 2015). This approach can be helpful when trying to reduce negative feelings associated with reflective writing and has been shown to support practitioner growth.

There were two aims in this study. First, we wanted to explore nursing students' perceptions about the innovative use of poetry writing and subsequent group discussion to reflect on practice. The second aim was to understand the perspectives of the educators tasked with facilitating such reflective practice. Gaining the perspectives from both groups would provide a more rounded view of the issues in order to inform future learning and teaching approaches. There is a lack of literature that specifically explores the educator perspective on the facilitation of poetry writing and subsequent discussion with nursing students. What is known is that careful facilitation is required when using creative approaches generally, and that the educator might need to blur the boundaries between their personal and academic roles (Chan, 2014). This article reports on selected findings from a qualitative study which explored both nurse educators and students' views and experiences of using poetry writing to support reflective learning.

Method

Design

The students in this study were from the BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing programme at a university in the North West of England, UK. As part of a first-year undergraduate module, nursing students on this programme are invited to write poems about their clinical practice. This is a formative exercise and does not contribute towards their assessment or their progression. Students are subsequently asked to share their poems in small groups with their peers and one facilitator (a member of the teaching team). If students do not write a poem, they are not penalised in any way and can still join in with the discussion group. Students are supported in writing poetry by using guidance on a specially designed website developed by one of the writers of this manuscript www.caringwords.mmu.ac.uk. The educators who took part in this study were supported to facilitate the sessions through preparatory discussions. All the educators in this study were skilled in facilitating small groups and were experienced educators. Opportunities were given for de-briefing following the poetry sessions for both students and educators.

Usually, all students write something to share with the group and it is unusual for them to opt out. The poems form a basis for discussion of the knowledge and skills gained during their practice placement and further, their feelings relating to the events described within the poems. Cranton (2016) describes the importance of the educator participating in the learning activities proposed for the students, in this case, writing their own poems, and perhaps lessening the potential anxiety related to their creative abilities. The educators in this study were reluctant to take part in poetry writing as they suggested it left them feeling too exposed in front of the student group. Thus, writing and sharing a poem was not a requirement for educators in this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected using face-to-face, unstructured interviews. Participants were encouraged to describe their learning and teaching experiences using an initial prompt to support them to focus on what they believed to be important when discussing this topic. The prompt was adapted to the student or educator group but was loosely worded as follows: "Please describe your experiences of reflective poetry writing, beginning wherever you want and including whatever you think is important."

Each of the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and were recorded, and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews the educator/researcher known to students used reflexive approach, sharing her own thoughts about the use of poetry with the participants to engage in conversation. Etherington (2004) describes the use of multiple voices as having the ability to provide a broader perspective on the subject being discussed.

Sample

The purposive sample of twelve participants included three currently employed nurse lecturers, eight first year and one second year nursing student who had been involved in reflective poetry workshops as part of the BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing Programme. The lecturers had varying levels of experience in the higher education setting, ranging from eight to fourteen years. They had different clinical backgrounds; one lecturer had acute care experience, setting, while two had community care backgrounds. All but one participant were female and ages ranged from 18 – 59.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Manchester Metropolitan University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were informed about the study via email, which included an information sheet outlining the study aims and gave further information about the research. Involvement in the study was voluntary and all the participants were given six weeks to

consider whether they wanted to be involved. All participants were informed that they could drop out of the study at any time during the data collection and analysis stages and that no preferential treatment would be given to the students who did participate in the research. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to assure anonymity.

Analysis

During the interviews, the educators and students described a range of thoughts and feelings about poetry writing as a reflective educative method. The specific data relating to reflection was extracted from the interview transcripts and analysis was undertaken using a process similar to framework analysis (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormson, O'Connor, & Barnard, 2013). Phases of familiarization and indexing led to the development of a thematic framework. The data were read and re-read, and emerging themes were noted using a constant comparative approach. The themes were then interpreted and agreed by the authors, one of whom was an experienced nurse and educator while the other had background in science communication. These skills enabled different perspectives on the data to be revealed and added to the richness of the data interpretation. Notes of discussions were documented along with a clear audit trail in order to promote trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, & White, 2017).

Findings

The analysis identified positive experiences linked to poetry writing as a means of reflecting on and considering clinical practice. Poetry writing was viewed as a less restrictive method of reflecting on practice and enabled greater freedom of expression. Through sharing and discussion of the poems, students were able to explore the diversity of nursing practice, as displayed in the peer groups. However, it was acknowledged by both the educator and student groups that careful facilitation was required, for the students to gain the most benefit. Both groups described poetry writing as affording students more freedom to write about their

feelings, compared to writing to commonly used reflective 'templates' based on models (Gibbs,1988). Likewise, both groups felt that poetry writing could have a positive effect on practice, for example, by supporting the development of empathy and self-awareness, although in order for the sessions to be successful, clear explanations of the poetry writing task were required. These emergent themes are as follows:

Less restrictive than reflective models

Both the student and educator groups commented on the way in which poetry writing afforded a freedom not found in the 'box filling' required to complete reflective templates provided on campus to support portfolio development. In the first excerpt, the importance of poetry as an emotional outlet is highlighted by an educator. In the second, the educator suggests that poetry enables the student to view a more holistic picture of themselves, rather than following a recipe:

> *I think reflective models are great, don't get me wrong, they serve a purpose, but emotions are not neat and tidy and boxed and structured and I think students need to see that there are other avenues to explore their emotions, that don't need to be put in a box, that don't need to look linear, real life emotions aren't linear… and poetry gives you a more innate way of reflecting* (Jane, Educator)

> *I think they can get hung up on following the recipe, a method of what they are supposed to do. So, has Gibbs said this is okay to do? They don't just 'be', they don't think freely; … I think the poetry allows them to tap into all of their thoughts and feelings and once they have got over the need to produce something that rhymes or is worthy of Shakespeare, they are more able to see a more 360 degree picture of everything, rather than just a snapshot.* (Paula, Educator)

Students views paralleled the instructors. They describe the perceived formality of reflective templates and how they inhibit rather than encourage reflection. They shared that writing poetry enabled revelation of their authentic self:

It feels like there shouldn't be a formal way of writing a reflection because that contradicts what it is. It shouldn't be formal because it's not formal to you. It's just your interpretation and how it made you feel. But yeah, I think dry is the best way to describe it. It's like eating a dry cracker. You just think "Oh no!" And I think, in a way, it actually hampers it, because I feel a lot of the time that I'm just filling in boxes and waffling,,, which doesn't really represent me. (Janice, Year 1 Student)

I think [poetry writing] is better because the model is quite structured, saying "Write this. Write that." Things don't interlink... It's quite hard to put feelings onto paper in that way. When it's free and easy you're left to explore the areas that might not be explored in the formula. You can almost become formulaic, going "This is this. This is that. This is that." That's the formula for the reflective piece. But if you ... write a poem, you have to explore the areas that aren't in the formula. (Hannah, Year 1 Student)

The student in the next excerpt perceived poetry writing as encouraging longer term thinking about an event, one which required more thought:

It's not just a five-minute job, like I said earlier, you're actually having to digest it. I wrote it originally, and then I went away and came back in a couple of days and sorted it out and finished it off. It didn't take me hours and hours to do, but there was still a lot of thought that went into it. It's still a piece of work that you want presented nicely .... It's not just a bit of scribble you've written down. (Fran, Year 1 Student)

Freedom of Expression

The following excerpts describe poetry writing as facilitating greater freedom of expression. The educator noted that this might be because students are focussing on the poem, rather than talking directly about themselves**.** The 'space' between the poem and the student enabled a more meaningful critical reflection and this can be helpful for learning:

> *The important thing is that they are doing it. We are not showing a video, it is about them experiencing it, it is very experiential… it can almost camouflage the fear because they are still talking about the subject but they are perhaps able to articulate better because the focus isn't just about them, it's about something in front of them (the poem).* (Paula, Educator)

Reflection using poetry was more likened more to a contemplation on feelings, rather than the need to change behaviour, which might be inherent in traditional reflective models. Any element of judgement was removed from the process and enabled a more emotional piece to emerge:

> *My reflections beforehand had been what I'd seen in practice and how I'd practiced, and I would then change my behaviour. This wasn't really reflective on how I was going to advance, it was more of a contemplation on how I feel, and there wasn't any need for me to improve how I felt, I wasn't being judged on it, or anything like that…*
>
> (Hannah, Year 1 Student)

In the following excerpts the students describe the academic requirement to provide evidence (in the form of journal articles) to support assertions made in reflective writing, describing this process as more of a 'chore' and a 'tick box' task to be completed. Poetry writing was described as being more 'fun' and enabled an authentic voice to emerge:

With the reflective model form it'd be more of a chore because you're then looking for evidence to back it up and saying "Actually, nutrition isn't that great, sometimes, on the ward because we see things as a task instead of seeing it as a really important meal of the day" and that we see it as a task instead of seeing the real picture. Whereas if it's in a poem it's more fun, I think. (Joan, Year 1 Student)

Because of the poem I separated it from any particular experience. I was just reflecting on anything that came into my mind within that topic. I found it did come quite easily to me. Whereas when I'm sat down thinking about a specific event, and again it's that idea of being assessed, I feel like because you've got to have these reflections, and you've got to show evidence, it takes away from it. It makes it detached, and you begin to think that you're just ticking a box, and that it doesn't have anything to do with my care, this is just so someone in an ivory tower can say "Yes, this nurse understands that." (Lisa, Year 1 Student)

Students enjoyed a freedom of expression found in poetry writing. The first viewed this process as a license to be creative within the formal nature of the degree programme:

You've got free artistic license with poetry to put whatever you want down, and you can play around with it. Be creative, because throughout the degree, you're not... What's the word? You're using certain methods, and everything's very strict. The process is strict, and there are certain words you have to use… (Joy, Year 1 Student)

The next student enjoyed the nature of the poetry writing as a way to express feelings in contrast to the more 'task focused' method of writing a reflective journal:

It's so lovely, it's such a good way to express your feelings and feel emotional and let it out… We're told all the time to reflect, maybe do a diary every day, and it can be a

bit laborious, a bit boring, and a bit of a task. Whereas, with the poem, if you wanted to write about somebody it's more from the heart. It's you, talking about your feelings and your emotions and how that person made you feel. (Fran, Year 1 Student)

Development of skills and attitudes

Poetry writing is described as a way to develop the skills and attitudes required to practice effectively as a nurse. One educator described poetry as a way to promote thinking about diversity; sharing of poems supports discussion in the classroom in ways that might not normally happen. This practice subsequently supports students when they attend their clinical placements:

> *I think when they go into practice it helps them to think about people in diverse ways… it helps them to recognise that not everyone is the same or thinks in the same way as its more visible. In a creative session, where everyone has to join in, everyone's ideas are visible, they are hearing the values and opinions of others than they might do normally in a classroom.* (Gary, Educator)

Another educator highlighted the power of poetry writing to support development of student's self-awareness.

> *It deepens the insight they have of themselves… using poetry means you are in for the long haul, and if you are not prepared to do that as a tutor then don't dabble… but if you are willing to go on that journey then use it.* (Jane, Educator)

Students also described poetry writing as enabling self-awareness development and empathy for others. Writing poems from the patient's point of view enables the development of empathy, a value which rehearsed during the reflective sessions can then be transferred to the practice setting:

I think it's quite cathartic. It lets out a lot of that. Even as an adult, if I have to go into hospital I feel very vulnerable, still, and, especially writing that poem, it allowed me more self-awareness. It opened a part of me that I don't think about a lot. It actually allowed me to analyse what it feels like to be put in that position. That IS empathy. That is understanding the other person and seeing it from their point of view. (Janice, Year 1 Student)

Poetry writing also led to deep thinking. Even though the student might not continue with poetry writing as a form of personal reflection, the principles of the creative writing task would remain part of her skill set.

It's given me the means to think about things more deeply. Even if I didn't want to write about it afterwards I've still got the process and the method that I used to write the poem, I've still got that in my head that I can use for myself. I think it definitely has helped, though…it does work. When it gets harder, and I'm qualified, then you still have those foundations that you can utilize. You don't have to, but you can do. We've been provided with that. (Jilly, Year 1 Student)

In contrast to Jilly, the following student continued to write poems as a form of reflection, after the learning task was over. The poem she was working on had enabled her to consider the journey of a patient who had suffered a stroke. Using the metaphor of a broken wing, she had drawn parallels between the loss of speech and the inability to fly:

The one I'm working on at the moment is about a patient who I saw on a stroke ward who had lost their speech, and they were working towards regaining it. A friend of mine told me about a bird with a broken wing that they had found and they started nursing the injured bird back to health, so I'm trying to draw a parallel between those

two things, so the loss of speech and the loss of flight are similar, and they both

require nursing, and both require care to recover. Another point I want to try and

make is that the speech you get at the end of that isn't going to be equal to the

standard of what you lost. But, the fact that you've regained something is going to

make you realise the value of what you had in the first place. (Jackie, Year 2 Student)

The need for careful facilitation

Educators and students described the need for the educator to carefully prepare and facilitate poetry sharing for students to gain the most benefit from the process. One educator highlighted the need to remain non-judgemental during the feedback process and respect all contributions:

If they don't understand the purpose or they think it's a bit childish, and maybe they

don't quite get it, it's about encouraging and facilitating the process…. And if you

don't think it's so great, it's personal to them and we respect that and we ask the

meaning behind it, and then other students will engage too. (Paula, Educator)

Students described how members of the group initially resisted the idea of poetry writing, viewing it as irrelevant or as a task to be completed quickly, potentially providing no advantages over using traditional methods such as the reflective templates:

Initially, a lot of them were put off by the thought of writing a piece of poetry… Really

huffy about it and thought they couldn't do it. Yet they've all gone away and written a

really good piece of work. Some of it's really personal to them and their journey so

far, like getting into the course... (Joan, Year 1 Student)

There may be people who don't see the relevance. Maybe it wasn't explained enough

for people to really get it. That's just based on discussions I've had with other people.

I found it quite enjoyable, which is weird for me. I sat down and enjoyed writing it, whereas I think a lot of people would sit down and think "Right, I've got to write a poem, so I'll just write this.", but that's what you'll find with anything. Some people will love it and some people will hate it. (Carol, Year 1 Student)

The following student described her initial feelings of reluctance when asked to write a poem, underlining the need for the facilitator to encourage and promote the need to try new ways of reflecting on practice:

When asked to do a different form of reflection I was hesitant, because you get so used to doing the boxes, so I was a bit, like "Ugh, do I HAVE to do it?" But, I'm so glad that I did it, and got down on paper how I truly feel. It was definitely a valuable experience, and I would do it again. (Jilly, Year 1 Student)

Another student described how her view was changed from wanting to complete the poetry writing task quickly, to desiring more creativity throughout the curriculum, if only for a short time, on each module:

Well, if I'm honest I was a bit sceptical when we first got told we had to write poetry as I'm more of a Mathematics and Science girl than English… Initially I was just going to do a five-minute job just to present in class…. I don't know if we do go back to the poetry aspect of it all, but to keep… going back to it, even if it's just a ten-minute thing at the beginning of the lecture. It's a good structured way of being emotional and chaotic, if you want to be, because poems can obviously be whatever you want them to be. … Utilizing it more would be a good thing. (Hannah, Year 1 Student)

Discussion

The findings from this study concur with other research, which suggests that nursing students find poetry writing a valuable way to reflect on practice (Coleman & Willis, 2015). Students and educators in the current study described poetry writing as a more beneficial way to reflect on thoughts and experiences than the use of reflective models and templates, which might result in a task-focused approach. The need for educators to explain the poetry writing exercise adequately to students was reinforced. If the students do not know what is required, poetry writing might also become a task to complete quickly, rather than an important activity which can engender meaningful reflection.

The findings from this research suggest that poetry writing afforded the students a way to think carefully about their practice, particularly the emotional nature of their clinical work. However, what was less explicit was whether this style of writing was indeed reflective, or whether it resulted in a contemplation of events. Dewey (1933/2007: 5) describes reflection as involving: "… not simply a sequence of ideas, but a *con*sequence – a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors."

An advantage of poetry writing described by the educators was its ability to enable the students to think more freely. Poetry enables a free exploration of important issues without the need to think about sentence structure or grammar (Bolton, 2014). However, this free writing process might remove the sequential nature of reflection as described by Dewey (1933/2007) and the advantages that this more orderly approach might offer. One student in this study described poetry writing as more of a 'contemplation' rather than a sequential reflective process. Contemplation might be beneficial for students as it encourages creative thinking and removes any perceived need to 'improve' on current practice, as might be expected using formal reflective approaches. Poetry writing in itself can be enjoyable for students, can help them make sense of situations and writing without the need to meet

specific requirements such as assessment criteria, and can lead to their personal and professional development (Whitehead, 2002). Therefore, whilst such exercises might not fit with the formal definition of reflection, the process is beneficial in that it offers students a way to develop their writing style and answer questions they might have about their clinical practice. Further, the use of metaphor in poetry writing, enables students to think differently about their work and express themselves in different ways. When exploring the use of poetry with medical students, Shapiro and Stein (2005) suggested that the use of metaphor enables new insights to be revealed about professional practice.

This findings from this research study suggest that poetry writing leads to deeper empathic understanding of patients, a finding further supported by Jack (2015). It offers opportunities for students to engage in meaningful contemplation of not only the event but to consider their associated thoughts and feelings. Further, these opportunities might not be restricted to students. Creative approaches could be beneficial to qualified staff for example, during the revalidation process, when nurses engage in reflective discussions with others (NMC, 2017). Poetry allows for reflection which can be both shallow and deep, and this flexibility is helpful for professionals across a wide range of disciplines, as it supports their ability to reveal as much or as little emotion as they choose. Traditional reflective approaches can be problematic for some nursing students who are left with feelings of inadequacy and thoughts they are never quite "*good enough*" (Jack, 2012, p. 812). Traditional approaches might be particularly damaging for some students who might feel fragile when discussing their emotions, particularly during the formative years of the programme.

It is important to remember that educators do not need "ready answers" (Warne & McAndrew, 2010, p. 235) to everything and that students need to see that not all questions in healthcare are straightforward to answer. Sharing poems in groups affords educators an opportunity to role-model ways of professional being and an ability to explore alternative

answers to difficult questions. In this way, both educator and learner can engage in mutual development. In this research, none of the educators were willing to write their own poems to share with the group, even though many considered the exercise to be a valuable one. Sharing own poems with students might feel like a daunting and vulnerable experience for some. It is important to appreciate that students may experience the same vulnerabilities. Brookfield (1986) suggests that educators "… challenge learners with alternative ways of interpreting their experience and to present them ideas and behaviours that cause them to examine critically their values, ways of acting, and the assumptions by which they live". (p. 23).

Poetry writing and sharing offers educators opportunities to model this critical reflective approach to students in real time, however, careful facilitation is necessary. Describing the use of creative approaches, Chan (2014) suggests that "artistic learning is a fluid practice and its outcomes depend on the competence and flexibility of the facilitator," (p.927). Poetry writing can raise powerful emotions for both the student and the educator and it is important that neither party feel forced into discussing things that they would rather keep private.

Limitations

The student sample in this research was drawn from the educator's tutorial group and there was an existing participant/researcher relationship between the two. The students may have felt more at ease in speaking about their feelings about the exercise than students with whom there was no existing relationship. Conversely, feeling more at ease might be viewed as enabling for the students, and a way of supporting them to talk more openly about their feelings on the topic. The students were volunteers and self-selected to be part of the study and may not have included those who do not enjoy poetry writing.

Conclusion

Poetry writing offers a helpful approach to promote reflective writing in undergraduate nursing education and these findings may be of interest across other professional disciplines, where students are required to write reflectively. When encouraged to write creatively, learners are better able to access their emotional responses to situations although this requires careful facilitation by the educator. By engaging in poetry writing, there is potential for educators to role-model effective behaviours and strengthen the student/educator bond. This research lends further evidence to the mounting claim that poetry writing supports meaningful reflection in education. Further research is needed to explore the role of the educator in writing and sharing their own creative work to promote meaningful reflection with learners. Further research could also explore the effect of the facilitation styles adopted by educators, when encouraging meaningful reflection.

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