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Introduction

The ability to think critically, to reflect on and in action, to evaluate and act upon evidence are all highly regarded in nurse education. In one form or another they form part of the core of graduate nursing and the foundation upon which skills and competences are built and deployed (Caldwell and Grobbel 2013, Daly 1992, McCartney 2017). In this discussion we consider the value of a related, but distinctly different capacity - Arendt's (1971) notion of thinking, with its emphasis on thought as a moral and ethical endeavour. Moral thinking, that is, thinking carefully about moral issues concerning nursing practice, is important in the promotion of ethical, safe and effective patient care. Where others (Roberts and Ion 2014a, 2014b) have considered this matter in relation to students, our aim is to open a space for discussion concerning the development of this attribute in nurse educators, with a specific focus on the potential for the literary arts and humanities to challenge, initiate and sustain significant change in the self. In doing this, we outline Arendt's ideas on thinking and, by way of example, explore two works which, by challenging us to reconsider and examine positions of personal importance, have profoundly impacted our approach to our work as educators.

Nursing and the humanities.

The use of the arts and humanities as pedagogical interventions in nurse education is now well established. Work to date has largely focused on the potential for the arts to impact student learning and development, particularly in relation to the understanding of others (McKie, 2012; Jack, 2015; Lake et al, 2015; Brodziak et al, 2017; Dickens et al, 2018). It has been argued that literary fiction in particular has considerable potential to support the development of empathy

(<https://www.virtualempathymuseum.com.au/>; Brodziak et al, 2017; Bladon, 2019), and to promote reflection more generally (McCaffrey et al, 2017).

In this paper we examine the potential contribution of literary fiction from a different perspective - that of the nurse educator. Our position is not that the arts may be a valuable mechanism, or tool to use when

educating - others have addressed this - rather, that they also have the power to transform the view of the academic by helping her to think differently about the world, to resist taken for granted commonplaces and to see beyond the everyday ideology and dogma of teaching and learning. For us, the humanities may productively be drawn upon as an antidote to the observation that nurse education may be slouching toward a task-based instrumentalism, which devalues scholarship of the kind that was once a cornerstone of a broad liberal education and which, driven by a culture of technical rationality, has more in common with training than with education (Goodman, 2013, 2016; Grant, 2014, 2019; Darbyshire et al, 2019). We see the humanities as a potential counterbalance to this, which educators might draw upon in order to develop the moral insight required to resist and present an alternate position especially in relation to some of the darker problems facing our profession such as incivility, poor care, intolerance and lapses in professionalism. While there is no end of guidance and advice on these matters, their persistence suggests that there may be a need to draw more widely on sources which were crafted to engage the imagination, shine a light on the darkest, and celebrate the sublime. Drawing on Taylor (2014) we take the view that while official guidance, moral and ethical theory may tell us what we ought to do, in much the way that a manual provides instruction on how and when to act, the arts and humanities can be used to provoke moral thinking and to develop a much richer understanding of the human condition - of what it is like to live and, crucially to act in what is often a messy reality.

We do this by examining two artefacts - a novel, and children's book. We explain their meaning to us and their effect on our practice. We draw on Roberts (2013), insofar as we do not present our understanding of these books as definitive, rather as being one of many possible accounts, but of individual significance to us and which have profoundly impacted our practice as educators. In doing so we hope to stimulate in readers an awareness of how they too might draw on literary fiction and the wider arts as culturally available resources in order to test out assumptions, challenge the taken for granted and perhaps develop new insights.

Arendt on thinking

In a seminal essay published almost fifty years ago, the public intellectual Hannah Arendt (1971) outlined her position on thinking. Arendt struggled to understand some of the most significant events of the twentieth century - namely the rise of totalitarianism and what led otherwise ordinary individuals to participate in the holocaust. Like others, she had sought to make sense of the way in which social, political and economic forces shaped these momentous events (Arendt 2017). In this essay, however, her interest was explicitly in the individual and their capacity to act in the face of moral collapse. She had begun to formulate her ideas when, on behalf of the New Yorker, she reported on the trial of the Nazi, Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem in 1961 (Arendt 2006). Here she had tried to reconcile the overwhelming evidence that Eichmann had played a pivotal role in the holocaust, with his subsequent denial of individual responsibility and his equally stark claim that he had acted in the absence of personal malice, and, in fact, had broken no law. Arendt concluded that Eichmann was able to do this, not because he was without intelligence - he had after all organised the mass murder of millions - instead his denial of wrongdoing was possible because, to her, it seemed he was incapable of thinking. For Arendt, 'thinking' constituted a moral dialogue with the self. Distinct from the everyday internal discussion, in which we make sense of and process information, and from the concept of critical thought in which arguments for and against ideas are weighed and evaluated, Arendt's concept of thinking is focused on moral questions and the nature of what it means to be human. The explicit function of this is the exploration and examination of questions of fundamental ethical importance. In contrast to the highly structured process of reflective practice, which, for some, has been reduced to a tick box activity (Coward, 2011, Rolfe, 2014, de la Croix A, Veen 2018), Arendtian thinking is unstructured and not dependent on a prescribed framework. Arendt described it as something which, 'aims at and ends in contemplation, and contemplation is not an activity but a passivity; it is the point where mental activity comes to rest' (Arendt, 1971: 6). In this description she evokes a deeper sense of self-examination. Thinking of this type might fundamentally challenge the way the individual sees the world, their place within it and their

responsibilities toward others. As such it might complement and enhance reflective thinking, while at the same time being distinctly different.

Arendt's ideas have already been deployed in healthcare by Roberts and Ion (2014a, 2014b) as a way of trying to understand some of the high-profile care failures which have occurred in recent years. In this article we build on that work and argue that literature has the potential to stimulate the depth of thinking, or rigorous and profound dialogue with the self, which Arendt felt was so essential in order to counteract what she termed thoughtlessness, and which we might reframe as the failure to connect with the suffering, or common humanity of another. If, as is the case, students are expected to manage the moral and ethical dilemmas of practice and the accountability that goes with this, and if faculty are to be their guides in doing so, it is surely essential that these educators already have some mastery in this respect. It may be tempting to assume that academic staff come already equipped with the ability to engage in this style of thinking, but, as Goodman (2016) has argued, this is a difficult activity. It requires effort and practice to develop. It may benefit from immersion in ethical guidance and moral philosophy. Here, however, we explain how our own capacity to think in the Arendtian sense has benefited from engagement with literary work. We do this by describing two fictional pieces - an existentialist novel and a book written for children, which we have drawn on to develop our own practice as teachers and scholars.

The Fall by Albert Camus

First published in 1956, *The Fall* by Camus (2006) is a short novel which I read one afternoon in the late 1980s when I was a second-year nursing student. It has stayed with me, troubled me and influenced my practice, teaching and scholarship since then. The story unfolds in a seedy bar in Amsterdam where the narrator, a once successful and well-respected French lawyer, recounts to a stranger, his own story of personal failure - in this case the decision to put his own safety above the needs of a suicidal other. Having considered himself to be a decent person who did good for others, his moment of failure causes

him to reconsider this self-image. Reflecting on his inaction in the face of a suicide attempt, he slowly begins to realise that he has carefully constructed an image of good character through deliberate acts of philanthropy which were designed to help him build a comforting and self-serving reputation of respectability. His previous good works and deeds were not designed primarily for the benefit of others in difficulty, as he had once liked to think, rather they were the means by which he presented himself as a good person and, as a result, drew on the favour of others who were important to him.

By the end of the story the reader begins to understand that they are the stranger in the bar listening to the former lawyer. When the latter asks what they would do if faced with the situation which exposed the moral failure of the story-teller, they are forced to consider both their own motivations and the degree to which they would risk personal safety in order to help another. I find the story to be both deeply unsettling and liberating in its exposure of personal moral failure. On initial reading as a student it chimed with my skepticism about the popular image of nurses as selfless angels - this was not how I felt, it did not reflect the nurses I knew, nor did I think it was a good basis for high quality care. Over the years since then, I have drawn on the work in my teaching and in scholarly work. It has helped me to make sense of my own failures and to better understand those occasions when other ordinary nurses have failed - for example, to whistle-blow in cases of poor care, or to ignore situations in which they witness bullying of colleagues or students. For me, Camus' lawyer in Amsterdam is me and everyone I know - he reminds me that we are constantly challenged to do the right thing when it is often easier not to. Moreover, while there may be monsters among us and they may be responsible for acts of cruelty and neglect, it is perhaps more likely, and certainly much more troubling, to accept that our own individual moral fragility and personal failures have caused suffering or distress to others.

The Velveteen Rabbit or, How Toys Become Real, by Margery Williams

As a child I enjoyed the story of The Velveteen Rabbit and took it at face value. One afternoon, years later, whilst preparing a lesson for undergraduate nursing students on phenomenology, this short book

returned to my consciousness. Considering reality in different ways was central to my teaching and the image of the central character, a small toy rabbit, popped into my mind. I returned to the book, knowing I would find something to support my lesson. Indeed, in the story, the Velveteen Rabbit longs to become 'Real' and is advised one day, by his friend the toy Skin Horse, about how this might occur. I had found what I needed to complete my lesson preparation, an exploration about the ways in which 'reality' can be constructed, based on experiences and past events. Pleased with my efforts, I returned the book to the shelf. However, later that day, I continued to reflect on the words of the wise Skin Horse and couldn't get them out of my mind:

'It doesn't happen all at once... You become. It takes a long time... Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand'

Suddenly, I was unable to think of a better way to consider the beauty of ageing, the security that comes from experience and the need to value inner rather than external attractiveness. In the story, the Velveteen Rabbit is keen to fit in with the other toys in the nursery, some of whom are shiny, more expensive or have mechanical parts. The Skin Horse reminds him that the superficial 'beauty' of youth is not as important as the beauty that comes from being loved and cherished. Through this love will come self-actualisation, confidence and honesty.

I had begun to unearth untold treasure in this book, and I was filled with emotion; not only at a personal level but I could see how I might use these insights to support nursing students to explore ageing, beauty, health and wellbeing. My experience of teaching had taught me so many lessons about the ways in which 'health' was viewed by students, as a perfect state, with no room for imperfections, thereby excluding

anyone with chronic disease from ever being ‘healthy’ in their eyes. This book tells a positive story of ageing and of how, through self-acceptance, we can find happiness, by embracing vulnerability, we can become strong; a lesson for us all.

Discussion

The purpose of sharing our thoughts has been to show how fiction can provoke, elicit, develop and enhance moral thinking in the educator. For us, this has been helpful when considering some of the difficult issues facing nurses and as a way of exploring these with students in the classroom. Unlike more familiar conceptions of thinking, where the thinker sets out with a specific goal in mind, or problem which requires a solution, it was not our aim to set out with a set notion of what we might find in these texts. Moreover, there was no ‘conscious’ thinking about the specific issues, rather as we become immersed in the fiction, insights were gradually developed. Both examples involved a stepping back - it was hours, or even years later when our thinking was influenced by our reading. By losing ourselves in the texts, new meanings were revealed, and we returned, thinking differently than before. Both texts had enabled further self-knowledge, reading had enhanced our self-awareness and in doing so, had better positioned us to model such practice to our students. This was not the time bound, systematic, situation focused action of reflective practice, nor the weighing of argument and evidence, which characterises critical thinking. Nor was it the selection of literary texts to promote understanding of an issue in current practice. Each of these has their place. The practice outlined here is one in which ideas emerged and change took place, over time and in the process of considering sometimes unrelated matters. They were subsequently applied in new contexts, such as the classroom, in research and in scholarly activity.

The interpretations of texts presented here are personal others will gain different insights if they choose to read these book. For example, the interpretation of the Velveteen Rabbit, presented here is one where ageing was considered by the reader to be a positive and fulfilling experience. Others might consider the loss of vitality, beauty and freshness, which comes with the ageing process. In this context, understanding

and meaning is highly individual - what is important here is the power of the writing and the skill of the writer as it is this which evokes depth of thinking.

Reading these books prompted moral thinking in us. It raised questions about how our own past actions might have, albeit unintentionally, caused harm to others. The first example prompts thinking about everyday practice; to what extent can anyone say that they have always 'done the right thing' especially on those occasions when it may have been easier not to – to use Arendt's words – '...when the chips are down'? The second example culminates in a celebration of ageing and also invites the reader to consider the occasions when they might have witnessed negative attitudes to ageing, but, rather than challenge, quietly stood by while it happened. In each case there are superficial similarities to reflective practice, with its emphasis on learning from past action. This approach has been criticised in recent years. For example, Rolfe (2014), and Timmins et al (2013) and Kelsey and Hayes have all suggested that reflection is increasingly becoming a technology, one which involves the rigid application of models, and furthermore is often assessed using unsuitable criteria. Other concerns have been raised by Biden and Usherwood (2013) who noted that reflection can be negotiated and subverted by the artful learner for instrumental purposes, such as to give an impression of deep learning in order to receive a favourable grade in an assessment. While more recent work, for example by McAllister et al (2015), Choperena et al (2019) Chronin and Hawthorse (2019) and Donohoe et al (2019) have variously sought to address some of these concerns, or further develop reflective practice, this approach is still significantly different to the voluntary nature of the Arendtian style. The latter requires an openness of mind where the reader has no external person to hoodwink. There is no one other than the self. To further emphasise the difference between Arendt (1971) position on thinking it is worth considering how she concluded her famous essay, *On Thinking and Moral Considerations* in which she simply states that:

‘The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.’ (Arendt 1971 p.446).

This thinking is explicitly not about the gaining of knowledge, nor is it a way of demonstrating excellence or mastery. Neither is it a tool with which to solve a problem. It is something much more profound and deeply radical – a method by which the person confronts the self and endeavours to discern right from wrong in a complex and troubling world.

It is our contention that engaging with literature and the humanities more widely can help us to do this.

Conclusion

There are multiple influences on practice and sometimes individuals will make errors or choose the easiest, rather than the right action. Where we can, we should rectify our mistakes and make good our errors. When this is not possible, rigorous scrutiny of self and a commitment to learn may be the best that can be done. We believe engagement with fiction can help to develop the ability to think in an Arendtian sense - by becoming immersed in the text we may get lost for a while, but if we are lucky we may find that this immersion has provided with new insights into long standing questions. This is a necessary process if we are to question the big issues facing the nursing profession today.

The role of faculty is not simply to support ~~those~~ students to develop skill and technical competence, but to do this in a way which helps the learner to deploy their learning in a way that foregrounds the unique value of each patient. To do this faculty must also develop their own capacity for moral thinking - to understand what it is to be a person and to act accordingly. In facilitating the development of Arendtian style thinking, literary fiction can be a valuable tool in the journeys, to explore the moral and ethical problems facing nursing.

A note on resources

The books drawn on here were personal favourites and ones which had significant meaning to us. Those educators with an interest in the possibilities we have raised might select texts which hold meaning for them in order to support authentic explorations of issues both with themselves and subsequently their students. For specific aspects of practice, resources such as The Virtual Empathy Museum, (<https://theempathyinitiative.org>) includes a range of fiction, which can enhance empathic imagination. Readers might also find helpful work by McCallister et al (2015) which examines the use of literary fiction in the classroom.

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