

A Descriptive Study of Male Nursing Students' Experiences of Reflective Journaling

Introduction:

This is a descriptive study examining the experiences and perceptions of 3 male nursing students at the University of Alberta regarding reflective writing in their program including considerations about the impact that gender has upon their experiences. A qualitative method using semi-structured interviews was carried out to gather the data, participants were selected based on convenience. The study focuses on male nursing students due to a lack of prior research with such specificity.

Sample:

According to the University of Alberta's summary of statistics, the proportion of male students to female students was 119 to 1144 respectively in 2010. This means that of the total, male students comprise slightly more than 10 percent. Three participants were interviewed for the purposes of the study, with a participant researcher conducting the interviews. Selection was convenient, those who responded to the call and could make themselves available were chosen to be part of the study. There were two interviews carried out, one group of two and a one-on-one interview. Several other students volunteered to validate the results of the study in its near complete status. At the outset three additional students had volunteered to participate but were not interviewed due to time, location and prior commitment issues.

Data Collection Methods:

Data was collected in the fashion of semi-structured cross-sectional focus groups mentioned in the introduction following the style as described in these articles (Kitzinger, 1994; Kitzinger, 1995). However, since a one-on-one interview was also conducted, there was some divergence from that model. The participants were interviewed only once, for periods not exceeding 60 minutes. The interviews were then recorded to a computer with consent from the students. These recordings were transcribed into a word processor to text form with full anonymization of the participants' identities.

Findings:

Three themes emerged from the analysis: communication, marks/grades, and hard/difficult.

Communication:

A theme common to all of the participants in this study is that of communication. Whether it be through their reflections, among peers or tutors it is clear that it is a topic of measurable concern. From what has been gathered in this study, it is clear that there is disconnection between the intention of the assignment and the perceived intention. This "misunderstanding" offers several questions: does the

theory match the application; to what end are the students being asked to write these assignments, for marks or for professional development; and would more tutor direction truly benefit the student's "performance" of the skills needed to write reflectively?

One student stated that he practices reflection in everyday life as a matter of principle. When I asked him whether or not he thought others felt this way, he responded with the following:

"No. I find that a lot of people they don't want to deal with their clinical reflections they just want to write a little paper get it out get it over with and get it handed in. It's not actually used as a reflective practice, I often find it funny that it's called a reflective practice because most students aren't really reflecting in their papers from what I hear." (Lines 135-138)

Another said:

"I think that the emphasis on reflection is not really put on reflection as much as on proving that you've done something" (Lines 281-283)

The question becomes, is the student interpretation of what reflective journaling comprises apart from what the theory entails is the proper application? In Silvia, Valerio and Lorenza (2013) it is said that the true purpose of reflection is for the writer to learn something about themselves. Conversely, the students involved in our study cite that a good deal of their work is judged by their use of resources such as professional journals, saying that it is difficult to relate due to their hypothetical nature, "writing about things you've never experienced before." As was also pointed out in Silvia et al's (2013) study, one of the important and unique principles of reflective journaling is that it is based on the experience of the writer.

One question posed in the study asked students if they utilized collaboration in their reflections, or shared with others what they had written. From their remarks the conclusion reached on that point was that there was very limited activity in that regard. Not one of the students interviewed had formally or informally had the chance to read a reflection done by another student in their classes. One statement sums up the matter quite articulately:

Nobody has ever wanted to share [their reflections]?

"No, actually I find that there is a lot of hesitation with sharing this as well. Like most people, myself included, feel that this is a very personal area of practice and that we're not always in a space where we want to reveal what we're writing about. Even mine, in particular this is one that I've kept in my pocket afterward and it's been mine to hold..." (Lines 104-108)

From that, one can suppose that it is not only male students that feel this way. Indeed, among our participants there were few instances where it was suggested that there were any significant perceptions of differential thinking between males and females. The cases where there were perceptions on that count, it was that the participants felt that males were more “rational” or “direct” in their behaviours in classes. When asked if they felt that this behavior translated into different styles of writing, it was not able to be said with confidence one way or the other. It was approached twice that a certain level of societal expectation was responsible for those behaviours, noting that “feeling” and “being in touch with feelings” were things that were taught more adequately to females. Conversely, it was also said that nursing “attracts a certain type of male” who demonstrates traditionally “soft” characteristics. However, the details of reflective journal assignments do not necessarily demand that students write in full subjective. The students are required to place their reflections in the context of evidence gathered from their textbooks and from scholarly journals. The subjectivity that students cite as a problem, or alternatively, the main point of reflective journaling is an unavoidable outcome of experiential writing. (Silvia et al. 2013)

Marks & Grades:

To what extent can one quantify the experiences a nursing student has, and how does one translate the effect of that quantification to a measure? Among those interviewed this question arose multiply; almost always citing the subjective nature of the reflective journal, these students were unsure of expectations or procedures as to what was quality work. An interesting effect from that subjectivity is a lack of trust, or an expectation of lacking “consistency” when their work is graded. One of the students has said that he started putting “not so much emphasis on grades” as a result of his disillusionment with the consistency calling it “absolutely ridiculous”. This perception of inconsistency is coupled with some doubt on the matter of whether or not their tutors communicate with one another, saying “they always say they do, but I’m not really sure that that happens” One noted that it would be difficult for tutors to mark a subjective piece of writing from an objective standpoint, and another presented this argument:

“I just kind of struggle with the fact of how so much of our marks are off of reflective journals. I know reflective journals are important but I’m not really sure how someone can start to quantify that kind of information. Like how does someone tell me that my experience isn’t good enough right?” (Lines 113-116)

Despite this statement, the participants quite consistently identified reflective journaling as an important and necessary practice, saying that it “teaches you how to critically think” and “figure things out for yourself”. These are highly valued skills in nursing practice, and giving students a platform from which

they can demonstrate those skills in education is indeed an invaluable tool for evaluators. However, this points out that the subjective nature of the assignments using the reflective method are perceived to be a sort of grey area, not fitting into a particular rubric. This being said, the faculty maintains a set rubric for these assignments, and a template that students are encouraged to use to format their responses. This formatting sets direction and tone for the students' reflections, so that they may "quantify" what is written.

What was your best experience with reflective journaling? Was there one that really stuck out at you as something that you really believed in when you wrote it?

"Sure thing, the one that jumps out at me right now is one of our most recent clinical reflections where the tutor rather than pre-assigning, you know, that we will write a topic or a reflection and hand it in on a certain day. Just sat us down after two weeks of clinical practice and said here is a blank sheet of paper, here is a pen you have 20 minutes, half an hour and just write, write a reflection about the last two weeks. None of us thought that it would be either for marks or for anything else but it was just purely a time to sit and reflect on our practice. I thought it was fantastic that we had a chance to reflect and just reflect and not worry about APA or our sources or the way we're referencing what we're doing or how we're backing up our own feelings. Just reflecting on our practice."

What he presents here is an alternative method to the current standard. In Silvia et al. (2013) it is said that reflections are best carried out immediately following the experience, so that as little detail as possible is lost. However, it is often difficult to find the time to do so in the midst of actual practice. In this case, the want for a different way is out of a disdain for the loss of meaning that accompanies the discord between formatting, evidence and content. The suggestion is that if students are given a chance to reflect only on the experience in the subjective then the results will more truly crystallize the self-evident meaning of their experience. Although the experience of the current standard is said to be confusing or difficult for new students, it does put emphasis on meaningful and relevant experiences according to curriculum. Without that emphasis, it is hard to say whether or not each student will obtain the same level of effect out of the assignment regardless of grade assignment.

Hard/Difficult:

When you were first starting out doing these reflective writing assignments, what was the general feeling when you were starting to get how it was supposed to be done?

“ Sure, well starting out first off this is my second entry into the program right now I’m taking a second shot for it. The first time though I’d come straight out of high-school and I had no practice reflecting on my feelings or how I felt about things. I had very much just been taught to write what event had happened, how ... what I felt from it. I mean, never having been trained to write what a feeling is or how a feeling works. The first couple ones were very difficult to write, just the fact that I’d never been asked to write about my feelings before ” (Lines 27-34)

What was most often found to be difficult to students was that they have almost never, in a formal and evaluative sense, been asked to write about their feelings or opinions. This is as opposed to what the participants identified as “objective” writing wherein there are very clear and defined specifications as to what is the desired outcome. The “subjective” writing style demands a degree of self determination of outcome. To be direct, it demands you reveal lessons to yourself, rather than in the typical manner that is receipt of knowledge as in traditional assignments. Another of the participants relayed an experience in which he felt as though the amount of “self-disclosure” involved with sharing personal experience may have affected his relationships with the students, tutor and patients who were in attendance at an AA meeting. His reasoning being that he is a member of AA himself, it was a matter of importance to him that he be mindful of what he revealed. This consideration is clinically useful as it provides some insight for his future dealings in that area of professional discourse. In that way, knowing the feeling behind the experience is important, but not nearly as pertinent as an evaluative contrasting of feelings against best practice guidelines. Without the use of secondary evidence, that which is derived from elsewhere than from the person who had the experience, this would be impossible.

Would you feel it would be advantageous for [assignment requirements] to be more specific in some fashion rather than being so general?

“I think at first you have to be really specific which is I think the problem in first year. It’s not specific enough so students honestly don’t often know what they’re talking about, because they haven’t been given that direction to know what they’re talking about. And then it gets ... I think it should be more subjective as it goes because you get more experience. So if you don’t have any experience in first year and you’re trying to reflect on certain things, certain aspects of nursing care then it’s kind of difficult because you’ve never experienced those kind of things before. So I think it should start specific with like little to no CBL in first year and kind of move its way up to really subjective because that’s when people have things to contribute to discussion.” (Lines 251-261)

“I had to first reflect on a clinical experience in 195 long term care, that one was difficult for me. Didn’t

get the best mark in the world but that's okay. You write one you figure out what you did wrong, you look at what you did wrong and then you fix it and then hopefully you do better next time. And it keeps getting better as you go. Hopefully it gets better as you go, but then again the inconsistency with tutors kind of sucks, so." (Lines 169-173)

Another difficulty, in the same vein as that of not knowing precisely how to qualify a feeling is that of specificity, or "writing to be specific" as one participant said it. To what degree would being more specific in the explanation of these reflective assignments meet the ends of what the theory dictates is the purpose? In most cases, the students described the process of learning the assignment style as progressive; in each successive year improvement is made and understanding moves towards a working strategy. The question there is, is this progression towards true learning, or is it towards coping with tutorial and institutional expectations for mark values? This last excerpt underlines a piece of the student learning strategy, a "trial and error" style which seems to be at least partly based upon tutor preference, as he specifically notes the inconsistency among the tutors he has had.

Participants also reported that they found reflective writing difficult due to lack of prior experience, unclear purpose, inconsistent marking/grading, and unfamiliarity with writing subjectively or being specific about new experiences in nursing. Ironically, participating men expressed that subjectivity and specificity were what made reflective writing valuable in learning to become a nurse.

Benefits (values) of reflective writing

1. The format provides opportunities to talk and think critically, in addition to giving educators insight into what the students' internal experiences are.
2. Develops ethical perspective and evaluative skill sets in a theoretical setting which can then be applied to real world practice.
3. Reinforces lessons taught in clinical, and provides a platform for the showcasing of what one has taken away from those lessons.
4. Guides interaction between feelings, intuition and nursing practice through the use of reasoned analysis and critical thinking skills.
5. Builds confidence in performance and conflict resolution, essentially acting as a repository of precedents that students may later refer to.

Discussion:

In all, it was not found that the participants in this study perceived their experience with reflective writing to be markedly different from that which their female peers have. The primary exception to that

statement is that they believe that their female peers are more societally geared towards what they see the reflective journal as being, that is, an exercise in emotional qualification. Gilligan wrote in 1991 on this perception's effect upon the female psyche, saying that this particular statement of "girls have been raised to" does not carry. Indeed, she goes on to say that more often than not, women will go so far as to veil their true natures to fit this societal expectation. (Gilligan, 1991) This says something about what males in nursing must experience also, being that in so many cases people consider them to be an anomaly in nursing. However, this "feel-teaching" that they talk about is not precisely what the nursing educators strive for them to achieve in nursing. The reflective journal is meant to be a professional reflection. That is to say that it is more a comparison of personal experience and understanding to evidence based best practice and theories that have been brought forward in nursing to encourage the best possible care. In doing this, the educators hope to have the student reveal what could be done differently in their personal context and concept of care.

By appearances, some participants have adopted the opinion and attitudes of those who would place the value of the reflective journal upon the extrinsic motivating factors of what is expected and what will earn rewards in the form of grades. This is in contrast to the intrinsic motivators that would be true interest in the learning aspect of the assignment, such as that of self-revelation that was discussed earlier. In Kohlberg's moral development theory these attitudes point to a stage of 1 or 2, "deference to power [...] consequences determine goodness or badness" and that of "right action consisting of satisfying one's own needs" (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) respectively. These attitudes are closely linked with the values of "consistency" and "objectivity" inherent in many of the arguments that the participants presented. In contrast to that, one participant sees the reflection as almost purely personal saying it is to fulfill his needs and not those of others. He moves for a more a non-evaluative reflection that would use the student himself as the primary source of learning. The question there being exactly how much can a student teach themselves about a given experience? The evaluative part of the process allows the tutors to input their perspective on a given experience and impart their knowledge on the subject matter, giving the student another way to look at what they have experienced.

Another theme present in the results is that of the grading curve, and how it has a hand in discouraging sharing of experience among peers. If thought of in terms of a sport, which is competitive, it is usually regarded as poor form to give points to the other team. Certain changes in the grading scheme of nursing students may encourage more sharing, and in addition it may also give students a greater conception of their own performance against the standard. Some of the participants additionally suggested that a system of introducing reflection to students that was more gradual, so that not everything needs to be learnt at once. In other parts of the interview the participants noted that reflection was a style of writing that they and most people they knew were not used to. As mentioned earlier, the

irony of the fixation on objectivity is that the majority of the named benefits of reflection are of subjective nature. The gradual inclination towards the desired balance of subjectivity versus objectivity that the participants proposed might eliminate the shock factor of inexperience from the experience of learning how to write. It may also allow the educators to give a more comprehensive explanation and understanding of the roots of what is trying to be accomplished with the assignment over time.

Conclusion:

The use of the information from this study does not lead to definite conclusions as to what may be applied in practice or education, it does however, give some insight into what the mindset of the students is in regard to the ways in which they take in and view reflective writing, and their education in general. This disclaimer being as a result of the small sample size, and the fact that saturation was not reached.

The participants of this study see the reflective journal assignment as a necessary piece of their education overall. Their primary concerns revolve around the constellation of other factors that accompany the assignment, those being how the assignments are communicated to them, how their work is quantified into marks so that they may fit a grading scheme, and the general difficulty of the reflective journal itself particularly pertaining to its relatively unique style.

Next steps and suggestions that move towards understanding male nursing students experiences with reflective journaling might be: rhetorical approaches to teaching reflective writing, emphasising purpose and audience; an examination of how the students' attitudes towards the assignment are formed in the early stages; a curriculum specific course that discusses men in nursing; and further integration into everyday practice in real time.

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