

Critical friends: an investigation of shared narrative practice between education and nursing graduates

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This article reports the findings of a pilot research project that investigated the perceived educational value of sharing narrative practice amongst graduate students from the School of Education and the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Tasmania. During a semester the graduate students reflected upon and wrote about a 'critical incident' which had occurred during their recent practical experience. These narratives were exchanged with the graduate students in the other discipline in order for the lecturers to examine the perceived educational value of sharing narrative practice. Analyses of written responses and questionnaire results were framed within a social constructivist perspective and drew on notions of peer feedback, critical reflection and the value of shared stories. The findings revealed that the graduate students appeared to revert to discipline-specific behaviours within this cross-disciplinary context.

Introduction

Within the education and nursing sectors there are connections between the creative, practical and emotional within the context of inquiry and professional learning. A significant component of practical experience must be undertaken before professional accreditation is granted in either of these sectors. However, this journey to professional accreditation is complex and is undertaken with varying degrees of security regarding the future expectations of the course (Beattie 2006). Additionally, students carry a pre-conceived idea of the role of teacher or nurse. It is important therefore to provide opportunities for and encourage continuous critical reflection during this journey in order to foster successful engagement and growth (Grensing-Pophal 2000; Kreber and Cranton 2000; Shulman 1993).

There is extensive literature regarding the value of reflective practice (Boyer 1990; Freire 1972; Ghaye, Gillespie, and Lillyman 2000; Schon 1990). This literature has resulted in a de-emphasis, particularly at the university level, of practice-based pedagogy to an education that recognises the importance of reflective practice within scholarship. There is a clear link between the importance of reflection to improve one's teaching practice and encouraging this sharing of reflection amongst students in order to build their sense of identity and belonging to a community of learners. The sharing of narratives, often originating in problematic situations, enhances empowerment, helps to make connections, and in both teaching and nursing, has been used to enhance not only one's own, but also others' self awareness, and therefore develop a shared knowledge and greater understanding of the culture (Maher 2003; McLellan 2006; Schon 1990).

This article seeks to enhance our understanding of the educational value of exchanging graduate accounts of narrative practice between different disciplines and its potential to contribute to the learning process.

Context

The Bachelor of Teaching degree, with a specialisation in secondary art, is an intensive two-year course which prepares graduates to teach in secondary schools. The students who enrol in the course already possess a fine art or design degree and in most cases are practising artists. During this study there were nine students enrolled in the first year of the course. Seven volunteers from this cohort agreed to take part in the study. They were all female, three were mature aged students (aged >35 years), two of whom had also completed additional qualifications. The other four participants (aged <30 years) were recent graduates.

The School of Nursing and Midwifery currently offers a 12-month Graduate Certificate in Nursing, Critical Care, to Registered Nurses employed in the practice area of Intensive Care. Enrolment in this course is open to Bachelor of Nursing graduates and also applicants who were educated in the pre-1988 'hospital training' (apprenticeship model) system. The participant group of seven nurses recruited for this study was predominantly from the latter group. Six of the group were female; five of them were mature aged students (> 35 years), who had been practising in the Intensive Care Unit for an average of 10 years, and who had not undertaken any previous tertiary education. The other two participants had both completed the Bachelor of Nursing and were relatively inexperienced in critical care nursing, a female student (aged < 25 years old) and a male student (> 35 years old). This research project began in the second semester of the course for both cohorts.

Theoretical background

The value of sharing outside discrete disciplines has become increasingly more common as researchers move beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to find patterns of connection. The importance of communication in improving practice is supported by Trigwell et al. (2000) who state that improving student learning requires 'reflective and collaborative processes' (165). Graduate students within professions such as education and nursing which have significant time spent on practicums, are learning 'on their feet' and as such have limited time for reflection. Therefore, finding additional ways to support students, such as through the sharing of narratives, is essential.

Maher (2003) states that sharing one's practice through narrative, particularly in ever-changing social, cultural and political circumstances, is recognised as a key ingredient of professional development and reflective practice. Redman (2005) claims that narratives, '... give a human component to data in a way that helps us relate to situations with empathy and motivation' (5). Swenson and Sims (2000) contend that narratives allow for greater meaning due to knowledge and understanding coming

together through this process. Carr (1986) notes that narratives are not just stories used to describe or illustrate an event, but actually become part of the event itself. The use of narratives in nursing pedagogy has sought to reveal common practices by interpreting nurses' lived experiences (Andrews et al. 2001; Diekelmann 2005; Ironside 2003). However, although useful in engendering community through shared reflection, these authors also state that this community building is often discipline specific. Our study goes beyond a specific discipline and seeks to discover if '... new conversations and partnerships arise as individuals collectively share, reflect on, and interpret the meanings of their experiences (Kawashima 2005, 169).

The creation of an authentic professional identity is a process that requires a connection of one's central values and beliefs with professional purposes and practices (Beattie 2006). Identities are shaped through conversations and interactions with others and supported by the work of researchers and practitioners. Inquiry, reflection and feedback from others are necessary for practitioners to remain responsive and relevant. In this pilot study, peer feedback was seen to be an effective and mostly non-threatening form of support (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 1999; Oldfield and Macalpine 1995; Williams 1992).

In their large-scale study of tertiary students and academics in Hong Kong, Liu and Carless (2006) suggest that peer feedback can become a central part of the learning process, rather than an 'occasional option' (281). Williams (1992) suggests that students may need to undergo attitudinal changes towards their learning roles and practice 'self evaluative role behaviours' in order to fully benefit from peer feedback (50). Peer learning and peer feedback enable students to learn from and with each other without the intervention of a lecturer thereby disrupting the existing power relationship between lecturer and student (Williams 1992). However, one of the drawbacks to peer feedback is that students may have limited motivation if peer feedback has no bearing on their final results (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 1999; Davies 2006; Pond, Ul-Haq, and Wade 1995).

Due to the perceived power relationship between the researchers and their students it was decided that the written response to the 'critical incident' would be voluntary and non-assessable. Additionally, all participants would remain anonymous throughout the study and publication of the findings. Participants had the option of not responding to any question on the questionnaire and were able to withdraw from participation in the study at any time without fear of repercussions. The drop out rate associated with the written response which inevitably affected the questionnaire response appears to indicate that students did not feel pressured to participate. Factors such as time, work commitments, lack of interest, the nonassessable nature of the task and/or timing appeared to be contributors to the lower response rate evidenced in the questionnaire response: 'This has been a great exercise, but a little difficult to focus on at the end of semester'.

Methods and techniques

In order to examine the complexity of the value of exchanging and reflecting on shared narratives, we utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the

students' experiences. Silverman (2001) notes, qualitative methods can provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative data. The quantitative method is underpinned by precision and control, and is usually based on numerical data; however, the richer connection that can be obtained from human subjects may not be evident (Burns 2000). Therefore, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods to see whether they corroborate one another provides validity to the research (Silverman 2001). Both methods were utilised in this pilot study in order to investigate the perceived educational value of cross-disciplinary sharing of narratives.

In order to proceed with the study the researchers sought and were granted ethics approval from the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.

Critical incident

As part of their course work the graduate students from the School of Education and the School of Nursing had both previously written about a 'critical incident' which had occurred during one of their recent practicums. The critical incident, which could be either positive or negative, was defined as one in which their actions affected or influenced the outcome. The description of the critical incident needed to include the following elements:

- Description/narrative - description of the event and explanation of why the 'critical incident' was meaningful to the participant.
- Evidence of competencies - discussion of the concerns or issues that arose; exploration of attitudes and judgements; evidence of strategies used and articulated within the narrative.
- Critical analysis - demonstration of shifts in knowledge and development of new understandings; evidence of support from literature integrated into the narrative.
- Reflection - identification of strengths/areas for improvement; exploration of issues/assumptions.

Written responses

The critical incidents were de-identified, coded and exchanged with graduate students in the other discipline. Each graduate student who volunteered to be part of the research project was asked to provide a written non-assessable response of approximately 150-250 words to the writer of the 'critical incident' they had received. The instructions given for this particular task asked the reader to provide constructive feedback about any aspect of the narrative that was provided. Participants were also asked to consider the impact the response would have on the recipient. The responses were coded then sent to the original authors of the narrative account by mail.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was also designed as part of this research project to gauge the graduate students' perceptions of the value of sharing narratives and receiving feedback from other graduate students outside their discipline. The questionnaire contained targeted questions and opportunities for open responses in each section. The students were

asked to refer to the written response they had received to their 'critical incident' during the completion of the questionnaire.

Trustworthiness and reliability

The trustworthiness of this research has been achieved by carefully describing the research procedures undertaken to obtain the data. In this way we have ensured that the procedures are coherent and visible (Kvale 1996). The thematic analysis undertaken of the written responses provides further perspectives on the phenomenon of sharing and engaging in a process of cross-disciplinary peer feedback. There is strong reliability within the questionnaire responses as all subjects were presented with a standardised stimulus which eliminates unreliability in the researcher's observations (Baruch 1999).

Analysis

The analysis of the written responses focused on emergent themes and recurrent patterns which were grouped in similar categories. Categories were then identified, coded and analysed to allow for meaningful interpretation and reporting of the data. The analysis was undertaken independently by both authors to determine the themes they identified as emerging from the data. These findings were then shared and corroborated to arrive at a single analysis. A statement in this pilot study is referred to as a sentence from the narrative relevant to the theme. Therefore, two statements refer to two sentences of the data. The statements were analysed numerically to determine the number of times similar thematic statements were made from each cohort. The main focus in analysis of the data from the narratives was to search for the ways in which the participants understood the value of sharing narrative practice and its potential in contributing to their knowledge and ability to reflect, communicate and enhance their overall learning. It is evident that participants bring a range of different perspectives to the research process (Burns 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Lincoln and Guba 2000); therefore, the analysis of the written responses and questionnaire looked beyond immediate disciplinary concerns and sought similarities in the data.

Findings

Seven participants from education and seven participants from nursing agreed to take part in the study. Four education students and seven nursing students provided responses based on the 'critical incident' narrative for each other. Three education participants failed to return their responses leaving a total of 11 written responses which could be used in the research (65%). This resulted in three of the nursing students not receiving feedback on their critical incident thereby voiding their participation in the follow-up questionnaire. Three out of the four education participants and all four of the nursing students who could still participate returned their questionnaires leaving a total of seven questionnaires which could be used in the research (87.5%). The 'critical incidents' were de-identified and coded as 'E' for education students and 'N' for nursing students. The response forms were pre-coded to the original narrative code and sent with the 'critical incident' narrative to the participants. Therefore, in the following sections (N) represents the response to the 'critical incident' from an education student and (E) represents the response to the

'critical incident' from a nursing student. Excerpts from the actual 'critical incidents' have not been used in this study.

The written responses to the 'critical incidents' ranged in length and were interpreted by the participants in a number of different ways. The researchers collaboratively agreed upon the following common themes: Empathy, Agreement, Connection and Qualification/challenge. These are explained as follows:

- Empathy - statements where the writer tried to connect with the author by recalling a similar situation or creating an emotional connection.
- Agreement - the inclusion of supportive statements with actions/thoughts articulated.
- Connection - attempts to connect with the episode/author, on a professional level.
- Qualification/challenge - use of qualifying statements to make sense of, or find meaning in, the 'critical incident'; perhaps also includes challenges or questions to the writer.

A numerical analysis of the written responses against these themes revealed distinct differences in the number of empathetic responses compared to the other three themes which were fairly evenly balanced. The comparative analysis between the two distinct participant groups is shown in Table 1.

A number of questions on the questionnaire also related to the themes of Empathy, Agreement, Connection and Qualification/Challenge and these will be discussed in the following section in context with the thematic analysis.

Empathy

Arnold (2005) defines empathy as 'the ability to understand your own thoughts and feelings, and, by analogy, apply(ing) your self-understanding to the service of others, mindful that their thinking and feeling may not match your own' (23). The following examples of empathetic responses to the critical incidents were identified from participants who sought to reassure or identify with the writer:

I did however appreciate the emphasis you placed on overcoming judgmental feelings. This would have been a huge learning experience that will undoubtedly stay with you. (N16)

I was impressed with the author's moral standing and hope it is one that is maintained through the many years of his/her teaching career. (E22)

Table 1. Numerical responses to themes derived from narratives.

Theme	Theme count	
	Teacher (n = 4)	Nurse (n= 7)
Empathy	2	14
Agreement/Support	7	9
Connection	7	9
Qualification/Challenge	16	15

It was interesting to note that there were two empathetic statements from the education participants and 14 from the nursing participants. There are many factors which could account for such a disparity including: self-image; negative role identification; and lack of awareness/understanding regarding the complex role of teacher or nurse. Targeted questions related to empathy in the questionnaire included: 'I had difficulty in finding a shared meaning in the narrative I was asked to read' resulting in a high proportion of disagreement (86%). This appears to indicate that most of the questionnaire respondents were able to relate to the meaning of the critical incident for the writer, even though they were in another discipline area. Another question asked the participants if they felt closer to the student from the other discipline after reading their narrative. Overall responses revealed that there was slight disagreement (57%) with this statement. Interestingly, three of the participants who disagreed were from nursing which appears to contradict the high proportion of empathetic statements within the written feedback they provided to the education students.

Agreement/Support

Agreement or support with the 'critical incident' was evidenced in statements such as:

This narrative was highly engaging and was an exceptionally good example of an incident that is worth reflecting on in terms of the emotional impact and challenges it would present to any individual. (N16)

I do agree with your comments regarding integrity and being true to your personality when engaging with other people. (E26)

The statements of agreement both confirmed and then qualified what the author of the written response wished to convey. At times this involved an awareness of how the participant was engaged in their learning process and its potential impact on their practice. In this way the participants endeavoured to contextualise their support within the wider scope of their learning. Interestingly, there were seven statements of agreement from the education participants and nine from the nursing participants. This almost balanced finding reveals that discipline-specific awareness does not appear to affect recognition of positive processes and/or behaviours.

The questionnaire sought responses from the participants which would reveal their expectations of the responses they received. When asked whether the participants wanted an honest and considered response there was a high proportion (72%) of agreement. The desire of the large proportion of respondents who sought an honest response was somewhat contradicted by the proportion of participants who made every effort not to upset the recipient when writing their response. When asked whether they had approached the task in this way one participant strongly disagreed (14%), one remained neutral (14%), and five were in agreement (72%). The same percentage of respondents (72%) that wished for an honest and considered response also revealed that they wrote their response in a way that would not upset the recipient.

Connection

The term 'connection' described the ways in which the participants endeavoured to connect with one another through reference to their own experiences. Statements of this nature included:

It's such a shame we humans have this 'survival of the fittest' mentality and that all people aren't treated equally in hospitals because resources are so limited and attitudes can bias the level of care people receive. (N10)

It is encouraging to know as a parent that there are teachers who will reinforce appropriate behaviour that is hopefully taught at home, or teach it if it is lacking from home. (E22)

Some of the writers provided confirmation, and in some cases guidance, to the writers of the narratives. As an apparent anomaly in the study, two of the education participants used a major portion of their response to 'correct' the narratives from the nursing students:

Your opening quote I think does not really introduce your narrative. I think if you started with the second paragraph it is a lot stronger and more informative. (N14)

Regarding the essay, I wrote comments on it that specifically relate to a few editorial things that could be addressed. (N10)

These responses could be as a result of the students' perception of the role of 'teacher' which they felt they needed to convey by using a greater portion of their response to 'assess' the narrative. There were seven statements of connection from the education students and nine from the nursing students.

One of the questionnaire questions asked if the participants had gained an insight into what students were experiencing in other disciplines by reading their critical incident. The response of 72% indicated strong agreement from most participants which appeared to reveal that most of the participants gained new knowledge about the student experience in the other discipline. Asked whether after sharing their narrative and receiving a response the participants felt they had a stronger feeling of belonging to a wider community of learners, the responses ranged from one participant who disagreed (14%), three participants who were neutral (43%) and three participants who agreed (43%). Interestingly, when asked if they would like to take the discourse between themselves and the resposdee, a further five participants disagreed (72%).

Qualification/Challenge

Qualifying and challenging statements were defined as those which were used by the writer of the response to make sense of the critical incident or to carefully challenge the writer to re-examine an aspect of their narrative or to encourage a greater depth of reflection. Qualifying/challenging statements included:

Your reflection was relatively thorough but I would have liked to have heard more about the level of responsibility you felt whilst caring for this patient and how this was obviously something that went above and beyond what you had experienced previously. (N16)

The 'disapproving stare' didn't draw more attention to the situation, but still let the other students know you were there and taking in their behaviours and activity. (E20)

It was evident that each participant had viewed the critical incident through their own discipline lens but could recognise similar elements, such as reflection as being important to the growth of their identity and practice. Both the education and nursing students provided almost an equal number of qualifying/challenging statements, with education totalling 16 and nursing 15. This result appears to indicate that students from both disciplines are critical thinkers and have demonstrated, to some degree, the university's generic attributes,¹ such as promoting critical and reflective thinking, to engage with colleagues in a cross-disciplinary way.

When asked through the questionnaire if they wanted to be challenged by the reader in response to the issues highlighted in the narrative, three participants agreed (43%). All of the participants disagreed with the statement that they deliberately avoided issues raised in the narrative when writing their response (100%). However, when asked whether they appreciated the comments/questions/issues raised in the response they had received, six participants disagreed (86%).

Discussion

In this pilot study we have examined the educational value of sharing episodes of practice. The sample size limits broad generalisations from a study of this nature; however, naturalistic generalisations are achievable. These are described as '... conclusions that are arrived at through personal engagement ... by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves' (Stake 1995, 85). The extracts from the written responses supplied in the section of the findings provide the reader with descriptive data in order to create naturalistic generalisations. The questionnaire results, even in this small sample, present an honest and reliable indication of the recipients' responses, particularly due to their anonymity. The interactions that the researchers observed between the writers of the narrative account and the participants who responded were brief but intense. The writers evidently felt that given the short length of the written task it was necessary to convey their perceptions clearly and strongly. The strategies that we observed the writers using were many and varied, including a strong opening empathetic statement which supported and affirmed the writer; and a concluding sentence which wished them the best for their future careers, such as:

Well done. Good luck with your studies and career ☺ (N14) and

I wish the author the best of luck in his/her chosen profession. (E22)

It also became evident that the nursing participants used empathetic statements more often, attempted to find shared meaning and tried to connect with the narrative's author while not challenging any aspects of the narrative. The education students appeared to maintain their distance, did not wish to share their own experiences in

relation to the stories they had read, but in some cases felt comfortable with 'marking' the narratives as an assessment piece.

Although not implicit in the responses themselves, the 'demographic make-up' of the two participant groups may have had an effect on the content and style of the responses that were provided. Perhaps there is some inherent trait where nurses want to nurture and care, hence the higher return for the theme of empathy and attempts to connect with their counterpart; whereas teachers revert back to what they are more familiar with, and want to teach. In one extreme, a teacher began their response with 'The nurse has written an interesting narrative (N15) and continued to address the nurse in the third person. In the open response section on the questionnaire one of the nursing students wrote 'I didn't expect to have my narrative "remarked" - thought it would be more about commenting on the content - not the grammar or the comments on sentence structure'. This observation is also supported by Nilson (2003) who noted that student peer feedback can focus on trivial problems and errors, such as spelling, organisation, structure and style. Alternatively, the anomalies may have been due more to age groups, life experience, tertiary background, motivation and personal contexts.

A decision not to direct the participants in how to frame or present their response may have contributed to the anomalies shown between the two participant subgroups. Although, both participant groups had been provided with formulaic criteria against which to prepare their respective critical incidents, very little guidance was provided by the researchers in terms of their written response. Participants were encouraged to write freely and reply to the narrative in whatever way they wished. The only input the researchers had to suggest was the 150-250 word limit; to consider the effect that their response may have on the recipient and to remind participants that inappropriate language would exclude their response from the study. Encouragingly, no response was excluded from the study for this, or any other reason.

Three of the four nurses who responded to the questionnaire had previous experience with reading and commenting on reflective narratives. It is common practice for Registered Nurses to read episodes of practice written by undergraduate nurses on practicum, or newly Registered Nurses undertaking Postgraduate Development Programmes, while acting as preceptors in the clinical setting. However, it is usually utilised as verbal feedback only. What is unusual in this study's findings is the nurses' lack of 'challenging' that would be almost mandatory in their verbal review of undergraduate/postgraduate practice. This is an aspect of their response writing that needs to be investigated further in future studies.

The writing of a 'critical incident' was a new addition to the course for the secondary art education students. All three of the participants who responded to the questionnaire revealed that they had not been required to write about a 'critical incident' previously. However, they all indicated that they had been introduced to or had read contemporary literature concerning developing effective practice through narratives. Interestingly, the internalisation of the theories they had been introduced did not appear to be effectively inculcated in practice. The low result for empathetic responses amongst the education students requires further investigation in terms of the perception of the role of 'teacher', which necessarily includes emotional aspects, such as compassion, justice and tolerance, in addition to their motivation for undertaking a teaching degree.

An analysis of the actual presented narratives, as episodes of reflective practice and/or as critical incidents, is not within the scope of this study. However, in general terms, it must be highlighted that the narratives were prepared as assessment items within their respective units/courses and were not originally written with the intention of sharing with students from another discipline. This may have contributed to some misapprehension and misunderstanding in reading, potentially reducing the effective connections that could have been sought or discovered within the shared experience. McCammon and Smigiel (2004) note that authors of narratives need to consider their audience, avoid jargon wherever possible, or at least provide an explanatory footnote where required. They contend that the use of discipline-specific language and terms may '... distance rather than bring the (parties) closer together' (7).

Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) note that it is important when considering peer learning to ensure that assumptions are not made about the subject matter or the learners which are 'differentially perceived by different groups of students' (420). This occurred when some of the education students corrected the work of the nursing students and in one case when a comment was made concerning another participant's age: 'Response - no value, almost patronizing. Inexperienced young person with no (or little) life skills'. This aspect, and consequential effects within the study, was not unforeseen by the researchers, and is considered an area worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

In this study we have examined the concept of peer feedback and the educational value of shared narratives. Analysis of the responses provided by the participants to the narratives' authors identified a number of unprompted themes that were consistently found within the feedback from both disciplinary participant groups. These included the use of empathetic statements, the provision of agreement and supportive comments, opportunities to promote further reflection through challenging and qualifying statements, and lastly, a definite attempt at connectedness between the reader and the author of the narratives. What was not investigated was the students' perceived value of sharing narratives across disciplines. One of the written responses indicated that unfamiliarity with technical jargon may be an important reason not to exchange narratives across disciplines: 'I expect that ultimately narrative exchanges between faculties is of less value than narrative exchange within the field of one's own expertise' (N15). However, when participants were asked whether they would rather have a fellow student in their field of study read and respond to their narrative, there was a slight tendency towards disagreement (57%).

The purpose of this study sought only to investigate the educational value of peer feedback, in the context of graduate students undertaking specialist practicum, between two otherwise distinct discipline student groups. The researchers believe, however, that this study has highlighted a number of facets that may need to be tested further before the potential to enhance learning and build communities of learners across disciplines could be assumed. These include: that the narratives need to be written with the cross-disciplinary reader in mind; that the readers be provided with more guidance in respect to formulating their response; that the motivation for students in undertaking a

graduate degree which includes attitudinal changes towards learning roles be examined, and lastly, that the students' perceived value of sharing narratives across disciplines be investigated in a further study.

Note

1. UTAS has identified given core attributes for its graduate students. These are: knowledge, communication skills, problem solving skills, global perspective and social responsibility.

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