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Reflective thinking in nursing education

Abstract

Idea and purpose of the project

The idea of the project is to develop a method for working with reflection during the 3 year nursing education. We think that reflection is a tool to develop self-knowledge and is necessary for the development of professional skills. The idea is to have one workshop with reflective thinking, in every five-point course, on a theme connected with the theoretical content in the course. The theme could be: life and death, meeting other cultures, body and soul, good and evil encounters. The idea is to work with creative arts (art, photos, poems, and essays) on the chosen theme to start the students' reflection. In dialogue with the rest of the group they will share others' reflections. The tutor will lead the dialogue with critical questions to make the students think more deeply and to open doors to different viewpoints and to internalize theoretical and practical knowledge. At the end of the session time will be given for reflective writing, in a diary, concerning the workshop.

The purpose of this project is to improve students' self-knowledge as well as their professional development. By consciously engaging in their own and others reflection we believe that the level of professional interaction will improve. By using creative arts we hope to strengthen the visual capacity, which is important for the interpretation process. By using reflective questions in dialogue with the students we hope to support their reflective thinking in a critical manner. By using diaries the students can follow their own learning process and also practice writing, which better prepares them for nursing documentation. Another purpose is that the involved teachers improve their self-knowledge and professional skills, as the method demands that the teacher be reflective and introspective about his/her interactions with the students.



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Report from a project 1999-2000

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Introduction

The quality of care is based on the relationship between the nurse and the patient. Care demands that the nurse should acquire knowledge about the patient's life world. The nurse needs insight into the patient's understanding and experience of his/her life situation and illness (Lyngaa, 1998). Through this helping relationship nurses assess patients to promote, prevent and maximize their health and wellbeing. The nurse needs to be supportive and therapeutic, interacting with the patient to explore his/her experiences and problems. The nurse must be able to use theoretical and practical knowledge and the development of the self to facilitate the growth of the helping relationship (Sundeen, Stuart, Rankin & Cohen, 1998).

Nurses interact with patients and their relatives in their everyday work. Sometimes patients have difficulties in expressing themselves, especially if they have suffered a stroke, come from other cultures, have dementia or are unconscious, etc. These situations demand sensitivity in interpreting the patients' needs. Empathy is important for nurse and patient interaction (Gould, 1990). In caring ethically problematic situations can arise that demand understanding and an ability to deal with life values. Every human being has an ethical responsibility, but for caregivers it is important that this responsibility is for the patients' good (Norberg et al., 1992). Experienced nurses have difficulties in knowing what is good and right in ethical situations (Åström, Norberg, Jansson & Hallberg, 1994). The lack of empathetic qualities in caregivers has been highlighted by Holm (1987, 1995).

In our work as nursing educators we meet nursing students who express their need to learn more about understanding and facilitating interpersonal relationships with patients. It was these situations that prompted us to consider and reflect on how to develop pedagogical methods that better prepare the nursing student for this important task in nursing. To be able to give good qualitative care, the student's ability to understand the patients' experiences must be developed.

To understand other people's experiences and to facilitate helping relationships, the students need to reflect upon and understand what they think and feel, and how they act when they meet others. The development of the self is a foundation of becoming a professional (Sundeen, et al., 1998).

Schon (1983) has described reflection as the process which professionals can use to emphasise hidden or tacit knowledge. Reflection as a tool for developing practical knowledge and skills is well documented within the educational field (Bengtsson, 1994). Reflection can be seen as a way to take a step back and think about a situation and one's self to gain a new perspective on a situation (Molander, 1993). With reflective thinking, professionals can construct meaning and knowledge that guide their actions in practice. Francis (1995) argues that too little support is provided for professionals to help them make observations, think situations through and reconstruct thinking and acting.

Reflection is a way of overcoming the divergence between theory and practice (Clarke, 1986) and a way to develop knowledge embedded within practice (Benner et al., 1996). Different kinds of reflective strategies have been used and documented, such as using the critical incident (Smith & Russel, 1991; Bennet & Kingham, 1993) and using diaries (Bennet & Kingham, 1995).

The literature on nursing describes small group reflection on experience from practice, under supervision (Gjems, 1997; Granum, 1993; Skancke Bjercknes & Torunn Björk, 1996). In the database of National agency for higher education for projects in progress, there were two about reflection and nursing. These projects are focused on developing the practical part of nursing education (Johansson 100/95 and Mogensson 175/97).

Using picture analysis for reflection on nursing is described by Lyngaa (1998). In Sweden we are aware of one project where art is used as a pedagogical method in nursing education (Wikström, 1995), as well as a project in a medical school where drawings are used for reflection, but this has not yet been documented. Wikström (1997) highlights the lack of aesthetics in caring education.

The purpose of the present project was to develop and practise a reflective method for the student nurse's personal and professional growth as a foundation for good quality in nursing care.

Method

Preparation of the teachers involved

The project started with the training of the teachers involved. During one year, regular discussions and seminars were held, and different methods of reflection were practised. An expressive art teacher led three seminars.

Reflective thinking sessions for the students

All the nursing students during the first year of their education participated in the reflective thinking project. The 73 students were divided up into eight groups of 8-10 students. During every 5-credit¹ course one reflective thinking session related to the theoretical content was conducted. This meant eight sessions during the first year.

Each teacher followed the same group during the project to ensure the establishment of the trust and openness needed for this type of reflection. The themes in the sessions were based on the theoretical courses that the students were pursuing.

Presentation of the themes and the initiation of the reflective thinking sessions in each course

Theme: Relations - good and bad encounters, in the course Philosophy and Ethics.

Students' drawings were used as a starting point for reflection on good and bad examples of nursing, and their own idea of being a good nurse was focused on.

Theme: Stereotypes, in the course Sociology and Psychology

When initiating the reflection students were asked to write down their inner thoughts about different groups in society (Muslims, homosexuals, etc.).

¹ One credit represents one week's full-time study and 40 credits one full academic year.

Theme: Wellbeing and suffering, in the course Health in Nursing
Value exercise based on statements about different values concerning health and illness and writings on wellbeing.

Theme: Body and soul I. In the course Anatomy and Physiology
The students made paintings focusing on body and soul experiencing wellbeing and suffering.

Theme: Body and soul II. Anatomy and Physiology
Clay was used to create figures expressing a situation where a violation of a patient has taken place in care. The task was to try to let the body of this figures express the emotions inside.

Theme: Being a student in nursing education. This theme was a result of discussions that had appeared during the project and was not related to any theoretical course but to problems that students had expressed earlier in their education. The students made paintings depicting their feelings related with education.

Theme: Aesthetics in the course Nursing Environment
Students were asked to write about a situation in life expressing the experience of beauty.

Method used for reflective thinking sessions

The same steps were followed in each session. Different methods, as described above, were used to initiate the individual student's reflection, which was followed by the students sharing their reflection with others. The tutor provided the students with support through reflective questions. Questions suggested by Francis (1995) were used, such as "What do I feel/think/do? – "What does this mean? – "How did it turn out like this? – "How might I view/do things differently?"

Experience of reflection – the teacher's perspective

The present project, whose aim was to develop and practise reflective methods as a tool for the student nurse's personal and professional growth, also meant a development of the teacher involved in the project. The project initiated vivid didactical discussions amongst those involved in it. One new insight was related with the importance of having time to meet and listen to the students in a relaxing environment. The possibility of being in a situation without the demands of educational evaluation was highlighted. One teacher wrote:

"Very rewarding to be able to take part with the students. Every time I am with them I am reminded of and impressed by their inner capacity, which we ought to make more use of ..."

The ideas of reflective thinking were spread to other study programmes at the department. The teachers also became interested and the method was used on other programmes. The project also resulted in reflection being added to each course curriculum in nursing.

Experience of reflection – the student’s perspective

In this report one reflective session is chosen to demonstrate the process of working with reflective thinking. To exemplify the students’ work during each part of the reflective thinking session, paintings, photographs and the written comments of one student are presented.

Initiating the individual reflection

The first step in this session was to create material that could be used for reflection on body and soul, and to make the students relaxed and encourage them to relinquish all demands concerning achievement. We worked on a group painting listening to music without any demand that we should create something realistic. The students were encouraged to use colour and form playfully, not to talk during the painting and just listen to the music (Illustration 1).

When the group painting was completed, it was used to initiate the students’ reflections. The instructions were to find four parts of the painting that mirrored a body experiencing wellbeing and a body experiencing suffering, as well as a soul experiencing wellbeing and a soul experiencing suffering. Each student worked individually to find his or her picture (Illustration 2). Later each student wrote down his or her reflection on these pictures.



Illustration 1. *Painting while listening to music*



Illustration 2. *Looking for parts depicting body and soul*

Sharing with others

In this part of the process each student had four pictures and written comments that they could show, share and discuss with each other. All the pictures were put up on the wall and each student’s thoughts about the pictures were narrated. The teacher guided the students so that they would listen to each other and not judge or value the others’ way of thinking. The students were told to listen and be open-minded. Later the dialogue with reflective questions started on the basis of the students’ pictures and thoughts. With the help of Illustrations 3-6, one student’s pictures and reflections are presented. The selection demonstrates the value inherent in using creative arts as a method for reflecting thinking.

This student chose the following pictures to demonstrate her own view of a body experiencing

wellbeing (Illustration 3) and a body experiencing suffering (Illustration 4) and gave the following comments:

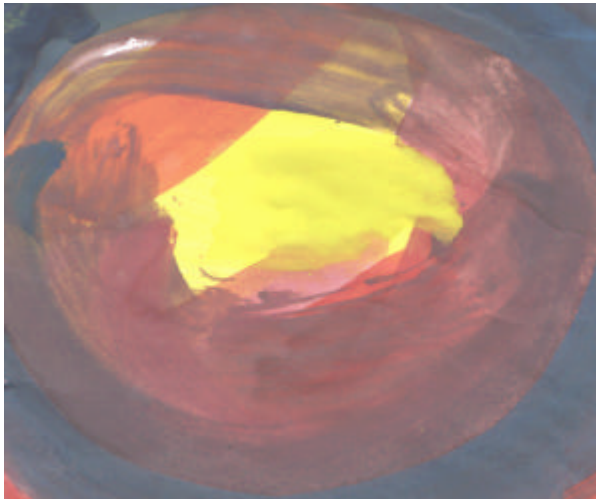


Illustration 3 Body experiencing wellbeing

“A body experiencing wellbeing is a body in balance and a constant, eternal flow round and round, with the eye of the spirit in the middle.”



Illustration 4 Body experiencing suffering

“A body experiencing suffering is chaos and disorder without balance in the body”

The same student chose the following pictures to demonstrate her thoughts about a soul experiencing wellbeing (Illustration 5) and a soul experiencing suffering (Illustration 6), and made the following comments on her pictures:



Illustration 5: Soul experiencing wellbeing

”A soul experiencing wellbeing is a mixture of light and darkness all over the place, but still in balance. A sort of balance between light and darkness.”



Illustration 6: Soul experiencing suffering

”Light and darkness has been mixed and become unbalanced. There is no sharp contrast. An eternal grey.”

In the pictures one can see examples of the student's choice of forms and colours to express wellbeing and suffering. It was common that wellbeing was expressed by paintings composed of circular shapes. The students used this form mostly to express balance and harmony. A suffering soul was most often painted using grey and black, and swirling forms, or merely using one colour, as in the example given in Illustration 6.

Reflective questions and dialogue

The students' individual reflections and presentations were followed by supportive questions from the teacher. These questions helped the students to become aware of the colours and forms chosen and to reflect on the meaning. A common discussion concerned the fact that black is often chosen to demonstrate suffering. In the discussion that followed the students sought something positive in suffering and the black pictures. One student said:

“A soul that has been totally black can become more bright than others if you work with the darkness. Without darkness we could not be able to see the light. Why are we so afraid of the dark inside?”

By sharing their thoughts with each other, different perspectives emerged that widened the students' (and teachers') thoughts. Their awareness of and search for a general pattern and meaning were enlarged, as well as their perspective on the issue.

The narratives that followed the sharing of each other's presentations focused to a great extent on the importance of the soul for feeling healthy. The students discussed the value of one's personal view of the soul compared with the official definition of health. The students also noticed that they more often used words like balance, harmony and flow of energy to express wellbeing. It also became obvious that it is most important to listen to individual patients' personal narratives to create an understanding of the other. As one student said:

“Imagine, a colour that symbolises joy, love and freedom for one person can in another person's mind symbolise pain, anxiety and anger.”

One of the conclusions of the students was that nurses cannot take anything for granted about patients' feelings and thinking. It became obvious that it is most important to ask and listen to the patient.

Evaluation and discussion

Students' and teachers' written evaluations after the sessions were used to evaluate the reflective thinking project. We have come to understand that it is necessary to start the reflection of all the teachers on learning and reflective thought before we start to work with reflective thought amongst the students. The kind of learning involved in working with reflective thinking requires the teacher to become more of a facilitator than a teacher.

The teachers expressed that there was a great value inherent in the reflective thinking sessions, especially when working with paintings. Merleau-Ponty (1995) has stated that there is something behind spoken language, something that cannot be expressed verbally, a silent and tacit language that can be visualised through the creation of pictures. At the same time the experience of insecurity and being a novice in the role of the tutor was noticed. From this perspective the need for further education and individual support when being a tutor within reflective thinking groups was revealed.

The students mainly reported positive experiences in connection with their participation in the project. They expressed the importance of meeting in small groups, working with important issues without being assessed and being offered time and space for reflection. According to Öhring (2000) student nurses need more time for reflection. The negative experiences were expressed as a feeling of wooliness related to making the painting and a feeling of being exposed when talking about inner emotions. Some of the students also expressed a lack of understanding related with the meaning of reflection.

Another result found was that student nurses were trained in listening and being open-minded to others' thoughts, views and perspectives. Being engaged consciously in their own and others' reflection during the sessions might lead to a higher level of professional interaction.

Creative art seems to be a powerful tool for stimulating personal feelings and thoughts. It is therefore necessary to use the method in an well-organised way. The aim must be clear and related to nursing issues. Using such a strategy creative art can be used to integrate individual experiences with theoretical knowledge, to form a knowledge that will work in practice.

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