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Using creative writing to explore facilitation skills in practice
Final accepted version

Abstract

Background: Facilitation skills are key to the effective use of practice development strategies. Students on a Masters in Practice Development and Innovation undertake a module on Facilitation skills which incorporates the use of a creative writing piece to explore facilitation. The aim of this article is to critically reflect on the use of creative writing within an assignment from the lecturer perspective.

Critical Reflection: Rolfe et al (2001) model of reflection will be utilised to structure the reflections, considering the questions 'What?', 'So What?' and 'Now What?'. This will discuss the concerns about the assessment method, student thoughts, relationship to practice development and evidence of effectiveness of the strategy. Examples of creative writing from the students will be used to demonstrate the diversity of the approach.

Ethics: All students have given permission for their work to be included

Discussion: Using creative writing can be freeing for students as they can use their voice to explore a topic. For the lecturer courage is needed to facilitate this expression but is rewarding as links to the principles of practice development to embed new ways of working. Important within the process is the need to give students 'permission' to utilise a non-traditional style of writing and the lecturer may benefit from practising the technique themselves to feel comfortable with the creative writing strategy.

Conclusion: Creative writing enabled an opportunity to explore facilitation in different ways and relate to different aspects of real and imagined life. This paper shows that creative writing can be used successfully by students to engage in novel ways of thinking. However, future actions identify the importance of guidance regarding relevance to academia and ensuring the lecturer is familiar with the aim and techniques of the process when using it for Masters level assessment.

Key words

Practice development, creative writing, facilitation

Introduction

Facilitation skills are a key element of Practice Development strategies (Trede & Titchen 2012) and the idea of being a creative and active learner is thought to be central to professional and practice development (Dewing 2010). Canterbury Christ Church University currently offers a distance learning Masters programme in Practice Development which enables the students to develop the skills within their own work setting through a variety of learning strategies. This paper explores the use of a creative writing piece to examine facilitation skills in a contemporary way and uses a process of critical reflection, utilising Rolfe's et al (2001) reflective model, to discuss the effectiveness of this strategy from a lecturer perspective. Exemplars of students' stories/narratives are included, with the students' permission.

Background

Creativity is viewed as putting something together in a new way and has often been associated with originality and effectiveness (Kara 2015). Creative writing has been described as a form of artistic expression that transmits meaning through use of, for example, narratives, short stories, poetry and fiction (Duke University no date). However, 'creative non-fiction' is a term used to explain writing based on factual information but transmitted in a more stylised way that transcends the normal boundaries of academia (Literature Wales 2016). One of the attributes of practice developers is seen as creativity (Sunders et al 2013) and 'facilitated active learning' is incorporated into the Practice Development conceptual framework (McCormack et al 2013 p9). Facilitation can include a range of methods to promote learner engagement and Dewing et al (2014) includes a number of creative approaches that can be utilised

to explore topics and, therefore, using a creative writing approach within a Master's module was developed.

One module, examining facilitation skills in practice, asked students to analyse and evaluate factors influencing facilitation and develop '*a creatively inspired 500 word short story/narrative*'. Students were given some guidance stating that the narrative or story could use a particular author, genre or style and needed to focus on an aspect of facilitation; no referencing was required. This narrative formed part of a 4000 word assignment and the story could be inserted, as a whole, at any point where the student felt it was relevant. The students undertaking the module are generally very experienced practitioners who are influential in their work setting, such as Clinical Nurse Specialists or Ward Managers.

The following reflection will outline the 'What?', 'So What?' and 'Now What?' based on Rolfe et al (2001) reflective model. Rolfe et al (2001) model is founded on the principles of reflexive practice which is consistent with practice development attributes (Saunders et al 2013). Jasper & Rosser (2013) note that Rolfe et al's model combines several theorists and, although has three main areas, includes a number of cue questions to deepen the reflection. I liked Rolfe et al's approach because it is succinct but promotes analysis whilst focusing on what could be improved. This fits with Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory which encourages the use of personal reflection to identify where learning has occurred and Hoggan (2016) highlights that narratives can be part of this process. The transformative nature of practice development suggests that this would be a useful approach to change understanding.

Reflection – What?

The use of narratives for learning is not new and has been used successfully in other settings to promote personal and professional knowledge (Schwind et al 2012).

Narratives are accounts, that can be true or fictitious, and I had used patient personal accounts within undergraduate education (<http://www.patientstories.org.uk/>) which was well received by undergraduate students. Ironside (2006) believes that a narrative pedagogy in nurse education encourages drawing from experience, interpreting thinking and challenges assumptions which are important to change practice.

However, using narratives as creative non-fiction for Masters level students was an exciting opportunity but concerning about how I could guide students in the creative process. I was also relatively new to directing students in practice development methodology so was learning about many of the principles related to this and trying to apply them within the educational setting for student understanding.

I felt that students often want a formula to be successful at a module and allowing innovation can be daunting for students when they have been previously encouraged to follow a structure. Although, creative methods are being promoted within nurse education to enable freedom and diversity in learning (Chan 2013), students are often familiar with a more didactic form of teaching; this resonated with my previous experience with undergraduate students. However, I was keen for the Masters students to engage with the activity as having original thinking about practice issues is fundamental to the journey in practice development (McCormack and Dewing 2013) and so a creative writing approach fits well with this philosophical view.

I hoped to enable the students to broaden their creativity into their writing and felt this might help students identify how creative strategies can influencing thinking. This links with transformative learning theory (Mezirow 2009) which encourages adult learners to

self-reflect and examine their assumptions; this is consistent with practice development which aims to unpick values and beliefs that affect practice (Saunders et al 2013). The aim of creative writing, for me, was to encourage a shift in consciousness to explore their understanding of facilitation and, ultimately, affect their feelings and actions as Hoggan (2016) suggests in his transformative learning metatheory.

Initially the students appeared quite anxious about the creative writing piece and asked for examples through discussion boards and meetings. Titchen & McMahon's (2013) chapter on practice development as radical gardening was used as an illustration but students were encouraged to be original in their ideas. As a lecturer I was concerned that students would find the creative writing style unfamiliar and difficult but was challenged by one student saying that she found the opportunity 'freeing' and enabled her to draw on experience rather than being restrained. This comment seems to confirm Chan's (2013) view of the benefits of creativity for students so it challenged my own assumptions.

Reflection – So What?

Practice development principles focus on person centred care and workplace culture (Manley et al 2013) but includes the professional remit of using best available evidence to support care strategies (NMC 2015a). The practice development Masters module utilises a distance learning approach with an emphasis on work-based learning to develop knowledge and skills. The students have responsible roles within busy work settings but I was encouraged to see them engage with the activities within the module to develop their facilitation skills (Kaner 2014). The fact that facilitation skills were important to many of their positions, and reflected their desire to incorporate a

participatory approach to their workplaces, seemed to be evident in their engagement with the materials.

I am keen for students to succeed and gain good grades and I wondered if my desire to give direction was this hidden aspect of wanting students to achieve high marks. This challenged me to consider my own desire to be needed and valued by students and, particularly for Masters level students, this may be counterproductive and frustrate them when the aim is to promote originality and application (QAA 2010). I consider myself to have a constructivist approach to learning (Legg et al 2009) that promotes students to build their own knowledge and the tutor facilitates this process. Within the Masters programme the distance learning materials have been developed with this in mind as Practice Development is about identifying issues and enabling change (McCormack et al 2013). I realised that my desire for student success may translate into a more directive style rather than valuing students contributions to learning.

Universities are often judged by their outcomes (The Complete University Guide 2016) and lecturers can find it difficult to 'let go' of a didactic teaching style when student centred methods are introduced (McCabe & O'Connor 2014). Practice development, however, has an emphasis on practitioners being central in developing sustainable change in the workplace (Manley et al 2013) and student assessments need to be relevant to promote this. Kathrin Hirter's story about an orphan needing to find snowflakes for a King highlighted the importance of dialogue with self during the facilitation process:

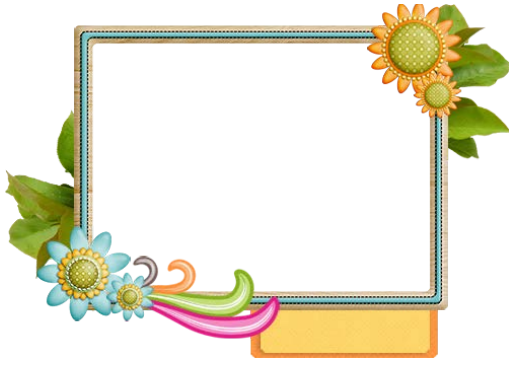
Estrella was desperate and walked further and further away from the castle. Suddenly, a beautiful white fairy appeared. With a beautiful soft voice, she asked: "How can I help you, my child?" "I need to capture snowflakes to bring them back to the prince", Estrella answered. The fairy whispered: "Love yourself. Then you will succeed in everything. Dig a hole in the ground until you hit water. Look closely at what you see on the surface of the water, this will provide you with a solution", and disappeared.

Estrella started to dig a hole. After some time she hit water, crystal clear, which filled the hole like a little pond. Looking at the glittering surface, she saw a face. "Who are you?", she asked and moved to take a closer look. Suddenly, she realised that she was the reflection in the water. She recognized her golden hair and the snowflakes caught in her curls. "Is this really me?", she asked and knew that she would never be alone anymore because by dialoguing with her inner self, she had discovered a valuable companion.

This resonated with me because I needed that dialogue with self to heighten awareness of my own concerns around encouraging creativity within academic work.

Students did express apprehension about undertaking a narrative, seemed particularly concerned about what they would include and needed reassurance that referencing was not required. It made me reflect that health care is based on an outcome driven model (DOH 2010) that often requires adherence to set protocols, therefore the opportunities for creativity can be restricted. However, I wondered if university targets and policies echo this outcome focus but towards student success. Practice development strategies aim to oppose this to promote problem solving in new ways and I wished to highlight how the narrative could be used by students in practice development work within their own setting. Claire Lippiatt is a Project Manager within an NHS Trust base in the South of England and her story reflected some of my own experiences:

I naturally find myself looking for early resolution, but the situation needs to be understood and methods applied. I have developed an understanding of resistance and how normal it is for an uneasy energy to exist. And importantly I am beginning to accept that there is an attitude that has to start from within me. I can frame my attitude and like a painting, others can admire it, critique it, not understand it or rebel against it. But I remain there, hanging on the wall. I sometimes need help to straighten myself again, like any picture that hangs on a wall, slightly tilted.



Similarly if I were to be sarcastic, disengaged, dragging up what is already known to others then surely like a tilted picture I would become irritating to others. They would want to straighten me, like a wonky picture hanging on a wall. And I am determined to not push away those characteristics in others.

This story emphasised how the lecturer also needs to reflect the facilitation skills within their actions and needs to draw on facilitation theory within their own practice. I reflected that lecturers need to enable person-centred relationships, as Titchen et al (2013 p111) say, by listening and hearing, sharing appropriately, being authentic and being caring. One of the challenges is that, as a distance learning course, the students have limited face to face contact with lecturers and are reliant on electronic communication. Brookshire et al (2013) note the benefits of online learning as students can work at their own pace and fit around work commitments; this is certainly true for these Practice Development students. However, some negatives of 'virtual' online learning is the difficulty of group interaction and the danger of fatigue or lack of motivation (Brookshire et al 2013). Within practice development feedback is a key aspect when facilitating individuals or groups (Titchen et al 2013) so the lack of opportunity to obtain feedback about the creative writing piece may mean that I overestimated their anxieties when they were actually enjoying the novel approach. So what is my new understanding of this situation? Facilitation requires feedback but also questioning skills (Kaner 2014) and the creative writing was one way to articulate

this. Talking about 'May the facilitation force be with you' Kerry O'Neill offered an insight into her journey:

In a Galaxy not too far away, a Practice development journey is occurring- my practice development journey, which is creating within me, a special set of skills called facilitation. Facilitation is like 'the Force' described in the Star Wars films, so powerful and mighty yet deeply subtle and sensitive that recipients may not appreciate the skill involved in its delivery.

To the naked eye, I don't look any different but from within I am changing. I can adjust depending upon the context and person I am working with, I actively listen and give and receive constructive feedback all within a high support, high challenge arena.

The facilitation force is making me aware of the impact I have on others. Using these new found skills changes how people act around me. It's like I have a power over them I can make them want to change their practice by challenging them in a more supportive way often by the way I question.

Looking back I wonder whether I could have questioned the students' journeys in more depth through the high challenge/high support that practice development methodology embraces (Titchen et al 2013). Heron's (1976) six category intervention analysis is widely used as a method to structure questioning to facilitate different depths of facilitation or information gaining. Heron (1999) developed his ideas of facilitation further by considering hierarchical, co-operative and autonomous modes of facilitation and which mode and style of questioning taken affects the process. This makes me consider how to engage in this depth of questioning and high challenge/high support in a distance learning setting as some cues of expression and voice tone can be lost. Thus, issues raised from the creative stories were the fact that this method could empower students, that the lecturer needs to facilitate this process and questioning may be needed to challenge and support student ideas.

Now What?

The three stories I have included as examples are very different in their approach; a fictional representation, a visual representation and drawing on emotional aspects.

Wells (2011) talks about how students need to find their own voice within Higher Education which complements their learning and writing styles and this seemed to be reflected here. "Learning to learn reflectively" was a phrase Wells (2011 p 112) used and he felt students were nervous about this initially. This ability to reflect is key in practice development and creative strategies to encourage different ways of thinking and problem solving are needed (Titchen & McMahon 2013). All the creative writing pieces presented here related very clearly to the aims of the module, linked well with the rest of the assignment around the students' facilitation skills so, generally, the stories did not feel out of place within the assignment structure. Also, the creative writing drew from the students practice experience and, as the role of practice development is to influence the workplace (Manley et al 2013), so it gave a different way to examine the topic.

In future I would utilise more questioning techniques to facilitate students thinking around developing the stories. Students said they found it difficult to find examples to guide them and part of the journey maybe to empower them to find their own voice:

"I tried to find examples of narratives but could not find anything of use. I wonder if future groups will benefit from reading our work as I have been amazed at the different way we have all approached it which has confirmed that there is no 'right way'".
(Kerry O'Neil 21.7.2015 personal communication)

I was also interested in the areas that were addressed in the stories as this reflected the issues that students had to grapple with when using facilitation. The creative writing pieces reflect the anxiety that students often experience when learning facilitation skills which require insight and tact (Kaner 2014) and the positive effect on practice when facilitation promotes new thinking. Kathrin comments about the usefulness of the story to her were:

"This story tells me about my own journey as a facilitator. It is important to manage one's own ego and ensure that the interaction with the others remains unbiased and neutral. This allows the facilitator to stay authentic, calm and self-centred. Only by staying detached from the group dynamics can a facilitator be supportive and empowering to the group. By writing the story I realized my feelings" (K. Hirter 13.7.2015 personal communication)

Feelings were evident in all the creative writing pieces and values and beliefs about both practice development and facilitation were embedded in the writing. This may reflect the journey of practice development that McCormack & Dewing (2013) talk about but I also think it encompasses the growth of the individual and developing self-awareness. Self-awareness within facilitation is vital so that the facilitator can adapt to situations and learn from experiences (Titchen et al 2013). Thus, creative writing may be particularly useful as a novel way to promote reflexivity within practice development and could also be useful in other courses requiring this element.

All the pieces outlined values and beliefs underpinning the students' practice and there seemed to be an aspect of enlightenment where students realised that not everyone had the same stance. The Johari Window (Businessballs 2015) outlines that a person has aspects that they are open about and areas that they are unaware of or 'blind' too. Activities that promote self-awareness means that the person goes through a process of self-discovery, which may also be shared with others, and the creative writing seemed to expand the students own hidden area. Whether this could be combined with a critical ally, critical friend or critical companion approach to develop novice practice developers in their facilitation skills further could be considered (Hardiman & Dewing 2014). A multifaceted approach that promotes self-discovery, including creative writing, may aid personal and professional development. This journey of self-discovery seems to be evident as Kerry noted her feelings about using the story:

"I felt anxious about having to write a creative piece but once I had made a start I did enjoy the experience.

For me it was a chance to really explore my emotions and really reflect on my experiences and my journey from a facilitation perspective. Sometimes I think we get lost in data analysis, performance and I think all our stories helped us to acknowledge how facilitation can assist us through the bad times. It gave me a chance to add some context to my work and express my own opinions without finding reference to someone who shared or disagreed with my view." (Kerry O'Neill 21.7.2015 personal communication)

From my own perspective as a lecturer it demonstrated how creative writing can complement other academic approaches particularly in an area that requires self-reflection. However, this piece was used as part of a summative assessment and, if the process is reflexive, incorporating stories into formative and developmental strategies might be more enabling for student development. The Masters programme included an opportunity to practice creative writing before the summative assessment but including this as part of an enabling relationship may promote reflexivity and personal development in a more robust way.

The workplace culture of many healthcare settings can be outcomes focused as already alluded to (DOH 2010) and this may impact on student expectations within academic settings because they are focused on the assignment rather than the developmental process. This also can lead to anxiety considering whether they have done the piece the 'right' way! As a lecturer I needed confidence that the creative writing was an enabling exercise and needed to convey this to students which Chan (2013) concurs with. I was challenged that I should undertake more creative writing myself, such as use of metaphor, to develop my own self-awareness and gain insight into students' experiences. Although some students expressed that they found the initial writing

provoked anxiety, I had assumed this was the case for all students when others found the writing invigorating. Thus, the opportunities for students to explore their experience in a unique way can be freeing and give deeper insights and I now think should be encouraged. However, Klimova (2014) notes that there are cultural aspects to writing and more exploration of different cultural views of creative writing may be needed to ensure some students are not disadvantaged, such as where English is a second language. This would need further consideration and exploration within a multi-cultural society, such as the United Kingdom.

Conclusion and Action Plan

The use of creative writing as part of an academic Masters level assignment has encouraged a different form of engagement that should enhance student reflexivity in facilitation. The approach could be incorporated into other aspects where self-awareness is needed and might be a novel approach for developing practice, such as Nursing and Midwifery Council revalidation evidence (NMC 2015b).

Personally my key actions from the incorporation of this approach are the following:

- Discuss with students how the creative writing can enhance reflexivity in facilitation
- Practice using creative writing myself to develop my own self-awareness and understand practicalities
- Be more explicit about the value of the approach and give 'permission' for students to use new ideas
- Develop formative opportunities and enable reflection using high support/high challenge approaches

- Utilise facilitative questioning, possibly using the Johari Window, to uncover hidden areas within the student

The use of creative writing for Masters level students within healthcare was an innovative approach that I was unfamiliar with. However, the benefits of promoting reflection, facilitating problem solving and unpicking values and beliefs means that it is a particularly valuable tool within the context of practice development where creativity is promoted as a beneficial aspect to the process.

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