

A creative health placement: challenging student nurses to learn creatively

Keywords

- Creative health
- Social prescribing
- Practice-based learning

Headline

Creative health: challenging students nurses to learn from the arts

Standfirst

An arts-based practice learning placement helped nursing students develop an understanding of the value of social prescribing

Meta description

Read this article to learn how an arts-based practice learning placement helped nursing students develop an understanding of the value of social prescribing

In this article...

- Why it is important to bring arts-based practice into nurse education
- Learn about how students respond to creative challenges
- What the benefits of creative learning are for practitioner wellbeing

Key points

- The Creative Health Review (2023) recommend opportunities to gain skills in creative health should be part of healthcare education
- Many nursing students express little knowledge of community arts and social prescribing
- Arts on prescription has grown as a solution to psychosocial problems beyond traditional clinical settings
- The placement helped equip students to translate the theory of creative health into action
- Both the public and practitioners themselves can benefit from arts-based interventions

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Abstract

There is a drive to promote population health as a preventative measure. The use of creative health has been advocated to relieve pressures on healthcare services, but this can only be achieved by greater awareness of and immersion in such practices. The creative health placement at the University of Chester responded to this need, offering 60 nursing students the experience of an arts-based practice learning placement and the chance to explore their personal wellbeing. Such learning presented a challenge for students, requiring them to reflect on their expectations of nursing placements and respond creatively to the healthcare issues facing our profession.

Pull quotes

“In uncertainty and being brave to try something different is where the greatest potential for learning lies”

“The placement challenged students’ ideas about what constitutes nursing and what a placement should entail”

“The students underestimated the skills involved in being creative and lacked confidence in engaging in art-based activities”

The concept of creative health is a relatively new phenomenon in healthcare and there is a paucity of evidence regarding this in nurse education. Creative health is defined by the National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) as “creative approaches and activities which have benefits for our health and wellbeing” and can contribute to preventative health measures, management of long-term conditions and recovery from illness (NCCH, nd). Activities can include arts, crafts, dance, film, literature, cooking and activities in nature such as gardening. Approaches to implement involve development of healthcare services, such as social prescribing, education of professionals and workforce development.

The aim of this article is to share and reflect on the value of a creative health placement at one university from a student perspective and explore its impact on student learning and understanding of art-based activities. Involving students as partners in the project provided a critical insight and insider perspective of their experiences.

In 2014, an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing led by Lord Howarth initiated an inquiry about the use of the arts in healthcare. The resulting report,

Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing, recommended the formation of a national strategic centre for arts, health and wellbeing, the NCCH (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017).

This organisation, a registered charity, supports and advises on creative health, with designated individuals to champion the arts, drawing health and social care and art and cultural organisations into collaboration. The NCCH has carried out a series of round-table reviews exploring health and wellbeing in the education system and workforce development and recommends that higher education institutions provide education on creative health. The resulting report articulates an ambition to embed creative health as an integral part of health and social care provision (APPG AHW and NCCH, 2023).

Social prescribing, as outlined in the *NHS Long Term Plan*, is a key component of personalised care that connects individuals through a social prescribing link worker to local community activities and groups to address social, practical and emotional needs affecting their health and wellbeing (NHS, 2019). Arts on prescription has grown as a potential solution to psychosocial problems; APPG AHW and NCCH's (2023) review includes case studies that show effective returns on investment.

The APPG AHW's (2017) report stressed the importance of accredited modules in evidence-based and practical arts for health professionals. In addition to these recommendations, understanding public health is a fundamental aspect of becoming a nurse registrant.

For the nursing profession, the 2017 report stressed the importance of accredited modules for health professionals in evidence-based and practical arts and the 2023 review continues to recommend education on creative health. In addition to these recommendations, understanding public health is a fundamental aspect of becoming a nurse registrant.

Platform 2 of the *Future Nurse* standards (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), 2018), 'Promoting health and preventing ill health', stresses the importance of improving and maintaining mental, physical and behavioural health and wellbeing of people and populations is stressed. It stipulates registrants need to engage in public health and community agendas. This is reinforced in the *NHS Long Term Plan* in which social prescribing was recommended to widen and diversify health and wellbeing interventions and chapter 2 focuses on NHS action on prevention and health inequalities. It has also been acknowledged that one in five GP appointments are for social reasons and social prescribing saw a 40% reduction in GP visits (National Academy Social Prescribing, nd).

Creative health practices such as music, dance, literature and visual arts are used to promote self-esteem, reduce loneliness, aid community networks, improve the quality of life for an individual, and aid healthy ageing (Fancourt and Finn, 2019; APPG, AHW, 2017). While there are no known examples of creative health placements for student nurses published, there is an existing evidence base supporting the use of arts and creative practices for wellbeing.

In particular, the All-Party Parliamentary Group produced a systematic review of all available evidence that formed part of the 2017 report. Evidence includes benefits on physical health

with pre-existing long-term conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and hypertension symptom improvement, improvement in mental health wellbeing, peri- and post-natal care benefits, and in providing quality end-of-life care (Fancourt and Finn, 2019; APPG AHW, 2017).

There is also an emerging evidence base citing the benefits of social prescribing in nurse education, but there is a lack of contemporary information about how in practice the theory of public health is translated into action in the students or registrant's own practice (Donaghy et al, 2022). Therefore, we took the opportunity when writing our 2018 pre-registration nursing curriculum to include the creative health recommendations and to promote the concepts, benefits and challenges of creative health and social prescribing to new students.

This was added as an overarching programme aim and was built into the teaching strategy, which included simulation. We wanted to offer our nursing students the opportunity to experience the benefits of creative health and social prescribing in practice and help initiate early changes in their educational journey. As knowledge developed, we sought and gained permission from the NMC in relation to the recovery standards (NMC, 2022) for approval to deliver alternative methods of simulated practice of up to 600 hours across the pre-registration nursing programme, and this included a creative health placement.

The placement

The creative health placement was designed to offer practical experience of the arts to pre-registration nursing students. The placement aimed to integrate the arts into a formalised practice-based learning experience and used Annexe A proficiencies (communication and relationship management skills) (NMC, 2018) and the importance of person-centred care as a basis of practice. The placement was mapped to the practice assessment document, including the assessment of professional values, proficiencies and the episode of care, and we employed indirect practice supervisors and assessors as recommended by Knight et al, 2022).

Over two placements, starting in February and May 2022, 60 year one nursing students from all four fields of nursing were allocated to this placement, as part of their predetermined placement circuit. They attended regular sessions (four times a week) facilitated by community artists with expertise in the visual arts, music and dance. In these sessions, they participated in art-based practice such as drawing, sculpture, dance and music creation. The first placement was for six weeks, the second for five.

Experiencing the arts directly, these activities challenged students to reassess their preconceptions about their own creativity, health and wellbeing, and so deepened their understanding of person-centred care. Some of the resulting artworks reflect this process clearly; Fig 1, for example, shows a "self-portrait of feelings" produced by one of the students during the placement.

Drawing on these experiences, the students put this knowledge into practice by themselves hosting creative health cafes. These also took place four times a week, and the students

developed, advertised and facilitated their own creative health sessions under the artists' guidance.

Students were then further required to research and engage with local social prescribers (once a week), allowing them to develop a working knowledge of systems of support, build relationships with the local community and see first-hand creative practices in action. They were asked to reflect and record all this activity as evidence for their practice assessor. The timing of the placement, in the winter and spring of 2022, as we moved away from the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic – namely, lack of in-person learning, isolation of students and challenges forming friendships – affected students' wellbeing and this is reflected in some of the comments.

Students from the first placement were employed to support an ongoing research project that ran alongside, and it was their feedback that led to the development of this article as they became passionate about the placement and felt it was important to share their experiences. We used the final day group evaluation to draw the reflections and experiences together for the collective student perspective and one student wrote their own personal experience (**Box 1**). Permission to use the feedback was granted by the faculty ethics committee.

Outcomes

Learning from creative health – the collective perspective

Students were asked to complete a narrative about the placement. They were asked the following questions:

- How did it feel to take part in the placement?
- Did this change during the placement?
- What aspects about the placement would you change?

Students initially found it difficult to take the creative health placement seriously and there were several negative comments regarding being allocated this compared to their peers who were on “traditional” placements.

They underestimated the skills involved in being creative and lacked confidence in engaging in art-based activities. They found it difficult to connect with their own nursing practice, with many focusing on skills acquisition rather than appreciating the skills they could learn. Before the placement, the placement team received a range of comments such as: *“I would like a proper explanation of why you think putting students into a university simulation suite is in any way adequate for a six-week placement”*; *“Told are you going to be doing dance and music and art and we will like hang on a minute I need to know how to change your bed or change a dressing I don't need to know how to draw a picture”*.

However, almost all of the students came to appreciate the value of creative health in nursing. At the end of the placement, they reported that they had learnt a variety of skills

such as proactiveness, communication, collaborative working and confidence building. Comments included:

“At the end I could see how important it is in providing person-centred care that continues beyond the clinical setting.”

“Overall, the experience of creative health has been eye opening and has changed the way I will deliver healthcare. I have expanded my skills and knowledge on social prescribing and my communication skills. I will definitely be suggesting some of the preventative methods to patients in the future.”

Other benefits that they cited were the opportunity to make friendships and build working relationships with their peers and the local community:

“I’ve learnt to socialise better with colleagues and peers.”

Students also found techniques for stress relief and relaxation useful, not only as tools to care for others, but to manage their own health and wellbeing.

One said: *“This placement was beneficial for my wellbeing”*.

“Something I started to pick up on last week but have noticed has followed me through into this week is my awareness around my own thoughts and feelings and recognising how I have felt doing the different sessions. For example when in working with the artists I have felt relaxed, enjoyed the sessions and been able to go home and enjoy my evening with my family, however on the day when I have been on my spoke visit, while I enjoy going there and supporting the patients, I do recognise that I feel different at the end of that day”.

Many were surprised by how much social prescribing was on their doorstep. One student summed up their experience by stating: *“We need to move from over medicalisation and from a prescriptive service to more a supportive one”* and reflected on how important social prescribing and creative health was and how they now knew what was accessible for all.

Overwhelmingly, the students appreciated the learning that the placement had afforded and when asked to list three words to describe their creative health experience, they frequently used words such as ‘inspiring’, ‘influenced’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘life affirming’, ‘fulfilling’, ‘beneficial’ and ‘informative’.

Challenges

A small number found the experience emotionally draining and intense. One student stated they were *“tired and mentally drained”* and some felt the length should be altered:

“I believe that this placement is too long and could be shortened”.

Others found the indirect supervision model difficult: *“Hardly seen practice supervisors and assessors throughout the placement”*.

The placement challenged students' ideas about what constitutes nursing and what a placement should entail. The experience helped them contextualise person-centred care and understand the wider healthcare offer. In the placement evaluation, 75% (45 out of 60) reported that engaging with social prescribing increased their knowledge of health and wellbeing interventions, and 67% (n=40) in placement one and 70% (n=42) in placement two felt their perceptions of a typical nursing placement had been challenged.

Conclusion

Experiencing creative health encouraged the students to step outside their comfort zones by asking them to confront unfamiliar ideas, engage with people in unfamiliar ways and consider an alternative form of practice. As creative health is a relatively unknown area in nursing, we anticipated some negativity about the concept, but the learning and reflection completed by the students has enabled us to appreciate how creative health can benefit wellbeing. All nurses can take away an important lesson from this: namely, that great potential for learning lies in uncertainty and being brave to try something different. Further, as nurses we need to move away from the focus of acute care and skills acquisition and appreciate all forms of practice to enable person-centred care. This is just the start of our creative health journey; we intend to learn from these initial experiences to enable all year one pre-registration nursing students to experience the benefits of creative health and social prescribing.

Key Points

- The 2023 Creative Health Review recommends opportunities to gain skills in creative health should be part of healthcare education
- Many nursing students express little knowledge of community arts and social prescribing
- Arts on prescription has grown as a solution to psychosocial problems beyond traditional clinical settings
- A placement helped equip students to translate the theory of creative health into action
- Both the public and practitioners themselves can benefit from arts-based interventions

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Box 1. The creative health journey – one student's personal perspective

When I arrived at the creative health placement, I was in a dark place. I had lost interest in my hobbies. I was diagnosed with depression, I had low confidence and I had missed the interaction with people, but due to my own mental health I was afraid to make connections and interactions. When I started the placement, I did not know what social prescribing was or indeed creative health.

I learnt how to express myself through music, by song writing, something that I had previously been engaged with as a personal hobby and which I had lost interest with. Through music I was able to see how creative health could help those receiving palliative care or how this would help reduce agitation with people living with dementia. I had also learnt how falls prevention by the expression of dance aided patients be more independent and allowing them to have a choice.

This placement did not just teach me how to help patients, it helped grow my own confidence. It helped me to express how I was feeling, it taught me that it was okay to make a mistake, it also taught me that if you listen to someone, you can use creative health to voice what they are feeling. Visiting social prescribing also enabled me to recommend services to people if they needed help. This placement was great for self-growth; I could not be more grateful for the opportunity this placement has given me and I will take these skills with me in the rest of my career.