Classroom Conversations: the Use of Dialectical Dialogue to Facilitate Critical Thinking

Abstract

Conversation is mandatory in a classroom that aims to develop the learners' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is facilitated in general and in nursing education particularly in order to aid learners to render care in diverse multicultural patient care settings. Classroom conversation involves thinking as an interactive process that constitutes the use of dialectics and dialogue. However where the aim is to facilitate critical thinking the conversation cannot be haphazard. Conversation in the classroom must have structure as it happens in dialectical dialogue. **Purpose:** This paper aims to explore and describe how dialectical dialogue can be used in classroom conversations to facilitate critical thinking. **Design:** A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design was used. **Methods:** Purposive sampling method was used to draw a sample and Miles, Huberman & Sadana's methodology of qualitative data analysis was used to analyse data. **Trustworthiness:** Lincoln and Guba's strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness, while Dhai and McQuoid-Mason's principles of ethical consideration were employed. **Findings:** The conceptualisation of findings culminated in the formulation of guidelines on how dialectical dialogue can be used to facilitate critical thinking in the classroom.

Key words: conversation, dialectic, dialogue, critical thinking

Introduction

Critical thinking is a necessary skill and virtue that every professional is expected to have. The health care terrain has continually change as patients' profile and needs change. It has however been a challenge for nurse educators to facilitate critical thinking in class. Furthermore the creation of a classroom environment that has conducive to conversation, dialect and dialogue has eluded many educators. The inclination is to use the lecture method with a focus of covering content. Literature has it that the educator must encourage classroom conversation if there is to be thinking going on. The process of talking aids the learner to clarify their thoughts, and those listening get the opportunity to reflect on alternatives to their own perspectives in as far as the content is concerned. The purpose is to arrive at new insights, implies a co-operative process and reciprocal inquiry. The interaction should be based on argument and predisposition to engage both critically and respectfully with the views of others.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper was to explore and describe how dialectical dialogue can be used in classroom conversations to facilitate critical thinking.

Research Design and Methods

A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design that is contextual was used (Burns & Grove, 2013).

Sample and sampling method

Purposive sampling method was used to draw a sample. The sample consisted of 15 nurse educators who are teaching in the 4 year Bachelor's Degree at the university and 20 student nurses who were registered for the first year level of study. Sample size was determined by data saturation (Burn & Grove, 2013).

Data Collection

Unstructured individual interviews were used to collect data from the educators. Data collection among the educators was stopped at the twelve participant as saturation was reached. Three focus group interviews of seven, nine and twelve respectively were used to collect data from the students (De Vos et al, 2011; Krueger; 2009).

Data Analysis

Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2013) methodology of qualitative data analysis was adapted and used to analyse data. Chunks of information were extracted from the transcripts and the perceptions were grouped meaningfully. Codes were used to locate key information from the written chunks of information so as to enable the researcher to easily get back to them in the content, should the need arise. Specific illustrations from written up field notes were included. The researcher read through the transcripts in order to get original responses, while concentrating on similar patterns, feelings, and thoughts. When saturation of data was reached, similar patterns were grouped together to derive meaningful categories. Content–analytical summary tables were used to clarify the researcher's understanding. Conclusions were checked, confirmed, and verified for accuracy. The data analysis protocol was given to an independent coder to analyze the collected data independent of the researcher to verify data analysis which further increased the dependability and confirmability of the findings. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) strategies namely credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability were used to ensure trustworthiness.

The principles of autonomy, informed consent, beneficence, justice and non-maleficence were observed (Dhai & McQuoid-Mason, 2013). The ethics committee of the university gave ethical clearance for the study and participants gave informed consent. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw their participation at any stage in the study.

Definition of key concepts

Conversation

Conversation is a form of interactive, spontaneous communication between two or more people.

Dialectic

Dialectic is a dynamic form of logic leading all apparent differences to be subsumed into identity in the form of a more integrated synthesis (Wegerif, 2009).

Dialectical procedure can be intimate and engaging. It invites students to exercise aspects of their rhetorical activity in one activity – listening focusing, claim making, question-posing, analysing, revising, challenging, delaying judgement and negotiating.

Dialogue

According to McKee (2010) posit that dialogue is a communicative educational drive that is characterised by exploration and interrogation. Dialogue is a process underpinned by values of mutual respect, humility, trust, faith, hope, love and critical thinking (Freire 1997, Rule, 2009).

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is purposeful, self-regulatory judgement that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations on which judgement is based (Facione, 1990).

Findings and Discussion

Classroom conversation characterised by dialectical dialogue requires a commitment on the part of the educator and students. The educator should ensure that the learning environment fosters engagement of the learners in the teaching/learning process through classroom conversation. The argument is that without dialectical dialogue there can be no authentic education. Dialectical dialogue joins the educator and the learners together in a purposeful attempt to reach a common understanding about their shared reality with a view to changing it for the mutual benefit of facilitating the learners' critical thinking skills.

> "Language is a tool of thought and is central to the facilitation of critical thinking. Therefore the educator should acknowledge its value and build on the different language backgrounds the learners bring to class. The learners should be allowed to express themselves in order to better understanding some aspects of the learning material in their language, which is why if a need arises I sometimes explain things in the learner's

language so as to get them to engage with the subject matter using their critical thinking skills better". (Participant 4)

The learning activities should be such that they use language to form ideas, shape and influence their critical thinking. I do this in group work and I have since discovered that the learners tend to think critically if you do this. It is therefore important that while we want to cover content and at the same time facilitate critical thinking, we should also appreciate and accommodate language diversities as educators". (Participant 1)

"The learners should also be given topics to research and come back and present in class. I use methods such as talk shows to help them with language proficiency and thereby facilitate their critical thinking skills. Language can be a barrier and an enhancer of critical thinking" (Participant 6)

Wegerif (2009) asserts that learners learn well in dialectical situations where they are allowed to engage in dialogue with fellow learners, and are encouraged to continually express their point of view through the use of language and conversation. During this process, issues are examined from multiple perspectives with the aim of highlighting complexities, moving between one's ideas to those of others with an openness to consider other ideas, and to revise one's thinking in light of new information. Dialectical dialogue refers to the philosophical method of formal inquiry. It is a process in which a questioner response process is followed and guided by rules of formal logic, in which the interlocutors begin with a set of questions in their search for answers and ultimate truth. It allows for the acceptance of alternative truths and ways of thinking (Freely & Sternberg, 2009). Dialectical dialogue involves a form of thinking and testing the explanations given for how and why things are the way they are. Dialectic thinking consists of an exploration of contradictory possibilities that result in cognitions that reduce cognitive dissonance. This means that mental contradictions and discomfort that occurs in the learner's mind during conversational interaction with others, directs them towards knowledge-construction aimed at quietening the disequilibrium created by contradictions that arise from the conversation and interaction (Armstrong, 2011). Dialectical dialogue considers classroom conversation arising from diverse perspectives. It is a kind of social relation that engages participants. The dialectical dialogue that ensues involves a willing partnership and cooperation in the face of likely disagreements, confusion, failures, and misunderstanding. It involves examining factors that oppose each other and making sense of them by merging them into a

single unit or idea that is greater than either of them on their own (Burns & Grove, 2013; Magrini, 2012). This dialectic dialogic interaction also involves collaboration that is driven by interactive facilitation of the learners' critical thinking.

According to Siry, Brendel and Frisch (2016) classroom dialectic dialogue is a form of shared cognition that facilitates exchange of ideas and negotiation of new meanings in accordance with others' perspectives. Participants justify their views, are willing to change their minds and reflectively criticise their own ideas. Authentic dialectic dialogue in a classroom context is shared inquiry in which answers give rise to further questions forming a continuous chain of questions and answers marked by co-existence of many voices through the use of language.

The context necessary for dialectic dialogue

In a dialectic dialogical and collaborative educational climate there is an explicit attitude of reciprocity among the learners, underpinned by the interest, trust, respect, and concern they share for one another, even when there is disagreement or misunderstanding. Such an environment is ideal for facilitating critical thinking. The educator needs to ensure that there is more of learner talking, collaboration, and co-operation characterised by interactive facilitation as the dominant driving force of the learning context.

> "In an environment where the learner knows that their inputs will not be taken seriously and treated fair-mindedly, they become scared to voice their opinions and that stifles their critical thinking". (Participant 5)
> "Yes a context where a partnership between the educator and the learners exists provides an environment where there is co-learning and co-ownership of the learning that takes place without the other feeling superior to others". (Participant 2)

The nurse educator has an obligation of ensuring a learning environment that involves conversations that enhance a culture of intellectual challenge and argument that is characterised by dialectic dialogue between the educator and learners. The precondition in this classroom is a supportive classroom ethos for exploration and sharing ideas. The classroom context involves conversations that allows for dialectic dialogue that will facilitate critical thinking. The learning environment should enhance a culture of intellectual challenge and dialectical dialogue between the educator and learner and between fellow learners. It should enhance an explicit attitude of reciprocity, and allow for interaction that is based on argument and predisposition to engage both critically and respectfully (Hennessy, Mercer &Warwick, 2011). The educator should

ensure a learning environment that allows for collaborative dialectic dialogue and interaction (Ravenscroft, 2011). Seeing the educator engage in critical thinking will motivate the learners to engage in the process of critical thinking without fear of being ridiculed. Akbari (2008) asserts that the educator should ensure a learning environment that enhances the valuing of the individual learner's integrity in a manner that welcomes the worth and expression of their true self without fear of threat or blame. Educator should ensure a non-judgemental learning environment that allows for a feeling of safety and enhance a culture of intellectual challenge and dialectical dialogue between the educator and learner and between fellow learners. In support Wegerif (2009) is of the view that the learning environment should enhance an explicit attitude of reciprocity that allows for interaction that is based on argument and predisposition to engage both critically and respectfully. The learning environment should be one where the learner "takes to heart" what a fellow learner says, even if it challenges their thinking and vice versa while allowing for collaborative dialogue and interaction.

Attitude necessary in dialectical dialogue

The learner and the educator need to maintain a particular attitude that enhances dialectical dialogue in the classroom.

> "An attitude that will foster dialectical dialogue is important because it allows me to create an environment where my relationship with the learner is that of partnership which helps with the facilitation of their critical thinking. I realised that one has to display a certain attitude during the dialectic dialogue like being open-minded, humble and non-judgmental". (Participant 7)

The attitudinal traits necessary are openness to reason about their thoughts, (Kaddoura, 2010). The educator should make their competence and experience clear without displaying a superior attitude. The educator should ensure a non-judgemental learning environment that allows for a feeling of safety, and that trust is demonstrated by empathetic dialogue. To enhance dialectical dialogue that is facilitative of critical thinking, the educator and learners should keep their egocentric perspectives in check and practise fair-mindedness. Learners should be looked at as having equal status in the discussions and be encouraged to exhibit a disposition to engage critically and respectfully with the issue under discussion (Magrini, 2012). One other attitudinal trait that is vital is intellectual humbleness. According to Spiegel (2012), intellectual humility involves an awareness of the limits of one's individual knowledge, including sensitivity to

circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively, and a sensitivity to bias, prejudice to and limitations of personal viewpoints. Intellectual humility is based on the educator and learners recognising that they should not claim more than what they actually know. However, it does not imply submissiveness. It implies the lack of intellectual pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit combined with insight into the strength or weaknesses of the logical foundation of their beliefs.

Stapleton (2011) asserts the educator and learners should maintain an attitude of open-mindedness that involves an element of objectivity that will enable them to be explicitly conscious of the beliefs they hold, and become skilled in recognising when those beliefs shape their experience. This characteristic will enable the educators and the learners to see that events can be distinguished only to the degree that the assumptions they are making about themselves and others are truly justifiable. The educator and learners are to display empathy, which is the vicarious sharing of an affect. It is an emotional response that has to do with the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with their own situation. In contrast to mere emotional contagion, genuine empathy presupposes the ability to differentiate between oneself and the others' perspective without displaying a superiority complex (Mulnix, 2012). It is therefore necessary to ensure an attitude that will enhance the engagement in dialectical dialogue in order to facilitate the learners' critical thinking skills.

Guidelines for dialectical dialogic reasoning
Further conceptualisation and integration of categories and themes that arose from data analysis culminated in the derivation of guidelines on how to use classroom conversations characterised by dialectical dialogue to facilitate critical thinking skills of learners. Forneris and Peden-McAlpine (2009) suggest that after creation of cognitive dissonance in the learners' minds, the learners and educator should engage in disputation and conversation within an intentional, logical, and constructivistic learning environment. The educator need to start the dialectic dialogue with commonly held views and ideas while ensuring that dialogue leads to critical reflection among the learners. The learners are encouraged to engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas, while continually expressing their point of view. The educator should encourage the students to examine issues from multiple perspectives with an aim of highlighting complexities and urge the learners to test the strengths and weaknesses of

opposing points of view. The learners must see the educator model dialectical dialogic reasoning, while directing the learners toward exploration and interrogation of ideas. Dialogue is used to analyse the merits of a perspective using the dialectical manner of reasoning. The educator should direct the learners' thinking towards using the dialectical process to thoughtfully examine issues that bears contradictory truths, while encouraging them to question, probe, and carefully analyse ideas. The learners should be guided to identify inconsistencies in others' opinions and viewpoints, and further search for acceptable viewpoints and opinions in order to gradually attain deeper understanding and insights. When the learners connect ideas brought up in discussion, they should fairly and equally consider challenges or questions raised regarding a particular issue, in order to arrive at a better understanding (London, 2010). The educator should use concrete examples to raise general issues while focusing on conflicts between value systems rather than between learners, and encourage the learners to carefully think out positions and ensure that they are plausible and defensible. Furthermore the learners should be directed to use critical insight to support their own views and point out flaws in self and others' views, while being allow the to express emotions accompanying strongly held beliefs, and minimise the level of mistrust before pursuing practical objectives. Justification of reasons for a certain position on a specific issue is vital and connection of generated ideas in order to articulate an informed representation of reality is encouraged (Armstrong, 2011).

Freely and Sternberg (2009) assert that the learners should be directed to use dialogue to analyse the merits of a perspective using the dialectical manner of reasoning and the dialectical process to thoughtfully examine an issue that bears contradictory truths. The learners are guided to question, probe, and careful analyse ideas, identify inconsistencies in others' opinions and viewpoints and search for acceptable viewpoints and opinions in order to gradually attain deeper understanding and insight. The educator should direct the learners to connect ideas brought up in discussion, consider fairly and equally challenge or question raised regarding a particular issue, in order to arrive at a better understanding. The educator can facilitate the use of dialectical dialogue by using concrete examples to raise general issues while focusing on conflicts between value systems rather than between learners. According to London (2010) the learners should be encouraged to carefully think out positions and ensure that they are plausible and defensible and to use critical insight to support their own views and point out flaws in self and others' views. They must be allowed to express emotions accompanying strongly held

beliefs, and minimise the level of mistrust before pursuing practical objectives, and to justify their reason for a certain position on a specific issue.

Examples of teaching strategies that can use dialectic dialogue in classroom conversations to facilitate CT

There are teaching strategies that involves classroom conversation, whereby dialectical dialogue can be used to facilitate learners' critical thinking skills.

- Case study

In a case study the learner collect, organise, and present data collected from a real-life situation, e.g. a clinical situation. A case study usually involves a conversation in which learners and the educator can engage dialectically and dialogically. Case studies are used to teach learners to think and reinforce the need to understand the concepts in real-life situations (Lowenstein & Bradshaw, 2013).

- Value clarification

Value clarification enables the learners to become consciously aware of the values and underlying motivations that guide their actions, and provides opportunities for them to clarify and defend their values while they are aware of the values of others. During the process of value clarification the learners are involved in a dialectical dialogic conversation that guides their interaction (Bruce, Klopper &Mellish 2011; Chabeli, 2012).

Examples of assessment strategies that can use dialectical dialogue in classroom conversations to facilitate CT

- Portfolio assessment

Portfolio assessment could be used for comprehensive assessment assembled consciously from a number of tasks produced over a semester or year. The learner and educator work together to select the themes for the portfolio. During the presentation of the portfolio the learner and educator will engage in dialectic dialogue that will facilitate the learner's critical thinking (Fook, Chan & Gurnam, 2010).

- Interview assessment

Interview assessment may be used to assess the learner's progress in specific learning areas. Regular non-directive interviews with the learners will assist in ascertaining the depth of the learner's critical thinking skills and how well they use them. The interview usually involves a conversation that is characterised by dialectical dialogue (Chabeli, 2012).

Implications

The implication is that in any classroom setting the educator should consciously classroom conversation. Through conversation the learners will engage in dialect dialogue which when they are guided through properly will facilitate their critical thinking. The educator should also encourage certain attitudinal traits that will facilitate engagement in dialectical dialogue educator should also ensure that the classroom climate is conducive to conversation that involves the use of dialectical dialogue, because a quiet classroom is not a thinking classroom. According McKee (2010) dialectic dialogue as a communicative educational drive is characterised by exploration and interrogation. The process of conversation aids the learner to clarify their thoughts, and those listening get the opportunity to reflect on alternatives to their own perspectives in as far as the content is concerned. The purpose is to arrive at new insights, and it implies a co-operative process and reciprocal inquiry. It requires a commitment to dialectical dialogue and the educator should ensure that the learning environment fosters engagement of the learners in the teaching/learning process. This dialectic dialogic interaction also involves collaboration that is driven by interactive facilitation of the learners' critical thinking. In a dialectic dialogical and collaborative educational climate there is an explicit attitude of reciprocity among the learners, underpinned by the interest, trust, respect, and concern they share for one another, even when there is disagreement or misunderstanding.

Conclusion

This method can be readily applied in classroom both in classrooms with advanced technologies and those in the third world setting as it does not require any equipment but careful and meticulous preparation by the educator.

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The learners must see the educator intellectually move from knowing to doing, and vice versa.

Dialogue is underpinned by values of mutual respect, intellectual humility, trust, faith hope, love and critical thinking (Frere in Rule, 2009: 6)

Dialectic dialogic involves an extended exchange between differing points of view or frames of reference. Wegerif (2009: 347-361) asserts that learners learn well in dialogical situations where they are allowed to engage in dialogue with fellow learners, and are encouraged to continually express their point of view. During this process, issues are examined from multiple perspectives with the aim of highlighting complexities, moving between one's ideas to those of others with an openness to consider other ideas, and to revise one's thinking in light of new information. Dialogic reasoning means information is made available for analysis and evaluation. Maintaining openness to reason about one's own thoughts in relation to the perspective of others, keeps one's egocentric perspective in check. The dialogic process is not merely to state diverse opinions or understanding and appreciating others perspective, nor is it built on the notion that all views are equally valid, instead positions are to be well thought out by the learners.

Akbari (2008: 276-283) refers to what critical theorists call a "critical pedagogy", in which they argue that it is informed by dialogue that moves the learners and the

educator away from a deterministic subject-object way of knowing, which is characterised by strategies geared towards instrumental rationality. It refers rather to a situation envisaged where otherwise manipulative strategies associated with instrumental rationality should be openly and relevantly incorporated into the programme. This communicative context should entail a deliberate intention in the "give'" and "take" of reasoned careful conversation between the educator and the learner.

The learner and the educator need to maintain a particular attitude that enhances dialectical dialogic reasoning in the classroom. The learners and educator have to exhibit an openness to reason, fairmindedness and a disposition to engage critically and respectfully. The educator should make their competence and experience clear without displaying a superior attitude and keep their egocentric perspectives in check, (Freely & Sternberg, 2009: 152). Furthermore the learner must have an inclination towards intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, intellectual integrity.

The classroom environment must be non-judgemental and allows for a feeling of psychological safety. The learning environment should be such that it enhances the valuing of the individual learner's integrity in a manner that welcomes the worth and expression of their true self without fear of threat or blame. The learning environment should enhance a culture of intellectual challenge and dialectic dialogue between the educator and learner and between fellow learners. The educator should ensure that trust is demonstrated by empathetic dialogue,

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