EMPOWERING LEARNERS THROUGH ONLINE REFLECTIVE JOURNALING IN GRADUATE NURSING THEORIES EDUCATION

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Abstract

Driven by the increasingly expanding higher educational environments and expectations of nurses as lifelong agents of reflective practice, Schools of Nursing continue to explore new pedagogical approaches to graduate level learning. In this article, we showcase the context, design, and effectiveness of one such pedagogical approach in a graduate nursing theories course. We share our approach (including educational aids) in implementing online reflective journaling within an asynchronous threaded online discussion forum to complement our video- and tele-conferenced classroom teaching. Despite it being a common nursing educational method, we believe journaling has not been used to its fullest potential. For example, traditional journaling often results in isolated writing and unshared entries. According to our graduate students, the online reflective journaling approach facilitates connections to self and others through the dissemination of practice experiences in peer-to-peer learning of major course concepts that inform their evolving philosophies of nursing. We briefly review the literature on the benefits and outcomes of online discussion forums in graduate nursing education. We explain the approach, constructivist conceptualization, and methodology adopted in designing and implementing our semi-structured reflective journaling activity. Finally, we provide our analysis of online reflective journaling and discuss the characteristics of an effective online discussion environment that renders student-centred learning, in which students are invited to imagine, construct, and reconstruct their learning individually and with their peers.

Keywords: Online reflective journaling, pedagogical innovation, higher education, video and teleconferenced classroom learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the last several decades, Canadian nursing has transformed from a primarily skills-based occupation to a more scholarly profession. Nursing education must foster the iterative interplay between practice, research, and teaching activities that advance the scholarly standing of nursing [1]. Importantly, the integration of research into practice combined with examining one’s nursing role and learning needs requires nurses to be skilled in reflection. In Canada, continuing competence programs require nurses to declare mandatory reflective practice requirements annually in renewing their provincial/territorial professional licenses [2] [3]. Given that 50.6% of Canadian nursing programs currently use some form of distance education delivery [4], new pedagogical approaches require advanced communication technology that can respond to dynamic educational environments and provincial/territorial regulatory expectations for reflective practice.

2 AIM

Our aim is to describe the pedagogical approach (including educational aids) we used to complement online reflective journaling in our video- and tele-conferenced graduate nursing theories course. We consider online reflective journaling as an extension of what nurses already do as life-long learners. Journaling, however, has not been used to its fullest potential in graduate classroom education.

2.1 Context

Our course, Theoretical Foundations of Nursing, was delivered totally online via weekly video- and tele-conferenced three hour classes with eight Master of Nursing (MN) students from three provinces in 2016 and seven MN students from one province in 2017. During 2016, six of the eight students were enrolled in the Nurse Educator stream; two were in the thesis stream. In 2017, six students were in the Nurse Practitioner (NP) stream and one was in Nurse Educator stream.
2.2 Design
We implemented online reflective journaling alongside our video- and tele-conferenced classroom teaching. The reflective journaling component was implemented through an asynchronous threaded online discussion forum within the course webpage. Our desired outcome was student-centred learning [5], a teaching method based on the philosophy that the student is “at the heart of the learning process” (p. 8). This method is designed to develop learner autonomy and independence at every opportunity by replicating and building on skills and practices that facilitate lifelong learning and self-directed problem-solving. The online reflective journaling dimension acknowledges student voices as central to the learning experience. This approach to student-centered learning emphasized cooperation and negotiation between students, enabling them to compare their understandings of weekly readings. In designing the online reflective journaling activity, we invited learners to contribute their passion for nursing in their practice area based on their unique experiences, interests, abilities, and learning styles.

2.3 Constructivist paradigm
From a constructivist perspective, learning occurs contextually as learners construct and reconstruct their knowledge [6]. Students actively make meaning of their experiences by interpreting what happens to them, evaluating their current perspectives, and drawing conclusions about the significance, storyline, and organization of such experiences. The meanings they construct depend on their current assumptions about themselves amid varying opinions and worldviews. We encourage students to imagine nursing theories as ‘lenses’ that they could put on, adjust, readjust, and remove to actively create/recreate and appraise new knowledge and possibilities. According to Chiovitti [7], on-going construction is invited as students “experiment and play with ideas…formulate, reformulate, and rejuvenate their ‘informed’ evolving definition[s] … and opinions…in a cyclic interplay” (p. 55). Shifting lenses in this constructivist manner enables continual personal and professional development and renewal.

3 LITERATURE REVIEWED
In creating an on-line reflective journaling forum with graduate nursing students in three satellite sites in Canada, we searched the nursing and education literature on the benefits, limitations, and pedagogical use of online discussion forums and reflective journaling (Fig. 1). Given the small number of articles that initially met our inclusion criteria, we extended the search parameters to as far back as each database allowed. We compared aspects of traditional reflective journaling at the individual level with online group reflective journaling. Individual reflective journaling was found to result in isolated writing and unshared entries [9]. Also reflective online journaling is consistent with the essence of our provincial regulatory reflective practice requirements [2] [3] which move beyond individual self-assessment to include peer feedback. In addition, these requirements correspond to values of lifelong learning expressed by the Canadian Nurses Association and the International Council of Nurses.

3.1 Search strategy: Online journaling in nursing graduate education
From the literature, we identified processes, learning outcomes, and faculty/student perceptions of reflective journaling. Reflective journaling was illuminated by Lauterbach and Becker Hentz [10] as “a process that validates experience and allows one’s reflection to be viewed and processed by self and with those who have access” (p. 31). Reflective journaling personalizes the learning experience [11], records process and content [12], and includes reflection on and in action [13]. Within this conceptualization of reflection, the element of reflexivity (e.g., reflecting on own assumptions and attitudes) is included. In short, reflective journaling involves bending back of attention on experiences of self, education, and care while looking at possible theoretical applications and the fittingness of theoretical perspectives.
3.2 Outcomes identified in the literature

Some learning outcomes of online reflective journaling we noted in the literature are professional development, personal growth, empowerment, facilitation of lifelong learning process, and positive learning environment. Reflection is both process and product.

3.3 Professional development

In terms of professional development, online reflective journaling creates linkages between personal and professional roles [14]. It increases students’ confidence in justifying actions and decision making in their professional positions [15] [16]. Reflective journaling in an online format clarifies professional role and bridges the gap between theory and practice [17]. Further, it entails learning something new/different and then considering what this means for practice [18]. Glaze [15] found that 14 graduate nursing students compared the development of their reflective abilities to being on a journey through stages of entry shock, struggle (to overcome grammatical difficulties and develop arguments), acceptance, making connections with the literature, learning to reflect more deeply by considering broader socio-political forces, perspective transformation from analyzing their critical incidents, internalization of reflection into everyday practice, and dissemination.

3.4 Personal growth

Reflective journaling promotes personal growth through recognition and recording of strengths and weaknesses and dealing with these in a safe environment [15]. For instance, Williams et al. [19] found nurse practitioner (NP) students expressed their personal growth and development as being thankful,
becoming aware of own biases and feelings, and coming to understand personal pain (or growing pains) in relation to being fully present with their mentally ill clients. Their greater self-awareness, in turn, enabled them to become more genuine in their client interactions. Personal growth as an outcome of reflective journaling facilitates self-care [10]. It promotes change and greater insight into personality [20] and enhances the development of coping skills to counter frustration or anger and reduce stress [17].

3.5 Empowerment

Online reflective journaling strengthens the creation of personal meaning which helps students connect internal values and personal styles and approaches to deal with external realities [17]. Incorporating reflection in course activities has been found to influence the environment, processing, and focus of learning in the course, thus reducing anxiety, increasing peer support and cooperation, and propelling students from passive to active roles [21]. To illustrate, an online asynchronous, facilitated discussion format in a graduate nursing bioethics course was found to increase individual student participation [22]. Clarifying personal opinions, beliefs, and feelings lays the groundwork for developing personal philosophies and ethical conduct which enable evaluation of interpersonal interactions, professional goals, ethical concerns, and political issues [23]. From there, reflective journaling becomes a platform for voicing opinions, feelings, and disconcerting issues in an informed manner and supported by the literature. In this way, reflective journaling increases active involvement and ownership of learning [24]. Students are thus equipped to be evidence-informed change agents in their learning environments and professional practice worlds [25] [26].

3.6 Facilitation of lifelong learning process

Reflective journaling fosters self-monitoring and capacity for identifying multifaceted issues and implementing solutions [27]. It enables appreciation of complex issues and concepts, facilitates integration of new content and insights, and reinforces attainment of course objectives by revealing what students think about what they have learned [17] [28]. Quality of learning is improved through students' active engagement in the learning process [29] [30] [31].

3.7 Positive learning environment

Online reflective journaling provides opportunity for all students in the class to examine and benefit from sharing and reflecting on their wide-ranging clinical experiences. According to Daroszewski, Kinser, and Lloyd [32], one of the strengths of having students in multiple clinical settings is the richness and range of experiences they bring back to the classroom. Feedback from faculty and peers clarifies misunderstandings of course content; it moves students toward the introspection that integrates theory, concepts, and practice [23]. Faculty feedback and trusting relationships with faculty are crucial for students' personal growth and quality of learning [33]. Freedom to express ideas and feelings without fear [34] contributing to the positive learning milieu. Online reflective journaling has been found to enhance a trusting relationship between most students and faculty [17].

4 METHOD

We chose to facilitate students' engagement in reflective journaling through a weekly worksheet activity titled Developing your informed evolving philosophy of nursing for advanced nursing practice designed by and adapted from Chiavitti [7]. The worksheet aligns with the course outcome of synthesizing ways of thinking, being, and doing and using competing forms of nursing knowledges in formulating a personal philosophy that provides a lens or compass for developing advanced nursing practice.

As shown on the left side of Fig. 2, students modify their evolving philosophy of advanced nursing practice based on one or more main theoretical idea(s) that stands out for them in each week’s readings and resources. Each theoretical idea is considered for its possibilities toward thinking, being, and acting as an advanced practice nurse. Students are invited to think about the theoretical idea either as a pair of glasses to put on and remove to view their practice or as a compass that helps guide them in a chosen direction. Using the glasses or compass helps students track their thinking over each week as they create, recreate, articulate, organize, reorganize, and celebrate any new insights (“aha moments”).

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Students prepare their reflective journal by choosing one or more main theoretical idea(s) from the course readings. They define or describe each aspect of the theoretical idea based on the readings and provide examples of how each aspect of the definition of the theoretical idea would guide their work in their specific area of practice. They describe any new insights or ‘aha’ moments prompted from the week’s readings, class discussions, and peers’ posted online reflective journals. Weekly, they address one of twelve (12) common reflective questions which correspond to course outcomes. Three of the twelve questions are shown in Fig. 2 in the right column.

Students had input into the weekly due date and time for the reflective journal to be posted online. They were also asked to contribute to the evaluation criteria which included expectations for students to respond on time, give opinion with rationale, cite required and supplemental readings, and respond to another student’s online post by demonstrating insight and critical review of the post and the overall discussion. Students worked to validate their responses with independent research on the weekly topic and analyze evidence supporting their personal views on the topic based on their area of practice. At the end of each term’s classes, we invited feedback from students to understand their experiences in reflective journaling and took notes as they offered their ideas. A copy of each set of student feedback was returned to students for confirmation or refutation and clarification before inclusion into the findings.

4.1 Cyclic interplay between individual, peers, and course readings

Working from the weekly worksheet activity and twelve reflective questions, students move back and forth between theoretical concepts and practice experiences (praxis of weekly concepts) (Fig. 2). Reading the posts of peers enables sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experience between students and movement from independent, individual meaning making to interdependent, mutual understanding. With the emphasis on the learning process, students benefited from the informational and emotional support they offered to each other in navigating the learning task itself.

5 FINDINGS

Analysis of student feedback reveals specific characteristics of an effective online discussion process and environment into which students imagined, constructed, and reconstructed their learning individually and with peers. The students describe the online reflective journaling effectiveness as facilitating connections to self and others, expanding the dissemination of practice experiences, and enhancing individual as well as peer learning of major course concepts that inform evolving philosophies of nursing.

5.1 Creating my own vision for myself as a theory-informed advanced practice nurse

Coding, sorting, and clustering the student feedback into emergent categories reveals online reflective journaling as a process of creating my own vision for myself as a theory-informed advanced practice nurse. The process begins with learning to overcome the initial shock of not knowing how to prepare an online reflective journal post, to submitting it, and monitoring for peer responses. After several posts, students see the value of the assignment. They appreciate the freedom, confidence-building nature, and sparkle of this student-centred learning activity. They are expanding their comfort zone by responding to shared examples of deep professional and personal significance in their posts which further solidifies their learning and sense of community. They apply greater self-knowledge and theoretical perspectives to reduce the theory-practice gap. Immersed in the culture of online reflective learning, they recognize that they are stepping into their vision of themselves in their advanced practice roles. In the words of one student, online reflective journaling “helped me create my own vision for myself as an advanced practice nurse by seeing different theoretical possibilities that I can make real in practice through resources already in place or need to advocate for.”
Figure 2: Template for facilitating students’ cyclic interplay between reflective questions, individual learning, peer learning, and weekly major course concepts

5.2 Initial shock

In the beginning, students are feeling “overwhelmed with the 12 questions even though it was laid out in the course syllabus.” They are uncertain about how to proceed because “this way of posting was new to me” and different from any previous online assignments. Students fear “freezing up” and “not knowing what to say.”
I must say that for the first few weeks I did not understand how the 12 weekly reflective questions would work out, because of my previous experiences with online posts. Then I discovered that it was not going to be ‘willy nilly’ where anything goes. Instead it had a structure guided by the 12 questions and still allowed me to put my own twist on it.

5.3 Seeing the value

Despite feeling overwhelmed and uncertain in posting their first reflective journals online, they identified value in finding commonalities and differences in their practice and learning along with an increased sense of belonging. Certainly, “once things got going, I started to think about how these theoretical ideas and theories would influence me as an advanced practice nurse now that we are in our final term.” Writing the posts guided by the reflective questions “made me feel like I was producing something valuable for us to discuss in a community learning environment.” For students who connected to the class via tele-conferencing only and were unable to see each other in the classroom, the online reflective journaling activity served to make connections. To illustrate, “It got conversations going back and forth based on questions, readings, and the areas of practice we come from … You may not have a face to go with the name, but you have their nursing experiences.” Seeing the value of the activity emerge as students work collectively in relation to the 12 reflective questions, students overcome their initial shock.

It is almost like we were developing our philosophies of nursing together by working through these theoretical concepts and theories which at first seemed so overwhelming until we got into talking about our specific areas of practice, course readings, and choosing from common reflective questions. It got us all writing and talking.

5.4 Appreciating the freedom, confidence, and sparkle of student-centred learning

Students appreciate the freedom to choose the weekly reflective question from “questions [that] were general enough to lend themselves to different perspectives in the readings.” According to one,

The online posts were a good thing for me because I do not want to be pigeon-holed into working with one theorist or one paradigm. I want the choice of choosing theorists and concepts that speak to me in my area of practice.

Having faculty integrate the on-line posts into class discussions helps students feel more prepared and confident. “The weekly online posts gave me that security to reflect, think, and write about my chosen reflective question and to get responses from peers … so that when I came to class I could expand on it” as well as “talk about any ‘aha’ moments that my peers inspired in me [by] their posts or responses.”

Students appreciated the posts were “scholarly” and “thoughtful” which resulted in feeling “involved and immersed in the readings.” The aha moments come out of “peers responding to my posts” and are eagerly sought. As a learning approach, online reflective journaling sparkles because students are “fascinated by other students’ interests.” One student expressed. “It was eye-opening to hear about how the same concepts are applied differently by my peers that are working with clients in cardiac care, internal medicine, community, military, labor and delivery, intensive care unit, etc.”

5.5 Expanding own comfort zone

The reflective questions facilitate independence from their prevailing ways of being. Students see the benefit of addressing all twelve questions as well as the advantage of revisiting the same question(s) throughout the course. Wishing to deepen their learning, they are split between choosing one option over the other, citing “comfort zone” as a critical decisional factor.

I think having students choose the same reflective question more than once is an option, but I do believe that if you leave it to me to pick the same questions over and over again I will do that! It is for this reason that I prefer students pick a different question for the 12 weeks so that I can move beyond my comfort zone …I think that choosing a different question each week helped me grow past my comfort zone and to address different course outcomes.

For our 13 week course, I think the next time I would recommend having students pick a different question for only the first eight weeks of class … For example, my understanding
of metaparadigm had a different meaning for me as I progressed through the course and so did Carper’s patterns of knowing especially in relation to my practice. Revisiting previous questions might be helpful but definitely keep all twelve questions for students who want a different question every week.

5.6 Lifelong learning to reduce the theory-practice gap

Learning entails (re)visioning the role of advanced practice. For example, one student initially “hesitated about writing what I would do with these theoretical ideas as an Advanced Practice Nurse” because the student did not see self that way yet. However, the reflective questions in the context of course theory readings helped the student “imagine” being an advanced practice nurse. In contrast another said “we are in our final term we have had several clinical placements as nurse practitioners and we are reflecting on these 12 questions to bring it together.”

Students are changed by the learning process. “As an undergraduate, there were some theories. The theories are now in the back of my mind, lurking there, and providing more depth. I see more than I would have previously seen -- like with new glasses.” A student expressed

The twelve questions are meant to help us shift lenses. Like viewing ambiguous [dual] figures of a duck, rabbit, or fish ... You take the same information and see it differently (e.g., you flip it to see the duck’s beak as the rabbit’s ears). That sums up the class perfectly. The 12 reflective questions ... allowed me to see outside the box and maybe see the rabbit for myself.

Another student spotted discrepancies between espoused caring theories and clinical realities.

I came across this one lunch room and I thought to myself ‘this does not correspond to caring environments we talked about such as Watson’s theory of caring or Patricia Benner novice to expert. This was one example that showed the theory – practice gap.

Students also identified the reflective questions as tools for ongoing change. “The writing lessened the gap. It is one thing to learn a theory; another to apply it. I can draw on this approach in the future.”

6 CONCLUSIONS

Consistent with the literature sampled, our findings reflected outcomes of professional development, personal growth, empowerment, facilitation of lifelong learning process, and positive learning environment. For example, the semi-structured reflective questions propelled students from passive to active roles as they moved beyond initial shock, expanded their comfort zone, and connected to their personal meanings and experiences in multiple clinical settings (empowerment and positive learning environment outcomes) [17][21][23]. The sense of belonging, the recognition and recording of insights (strengths, weaknesses) in a safe environment [15] was part of students seeing the value of journaling and is parallel to personal growth outcome. The increase in student confidence, freedom, and sparkle from linkages in personal and professional roles is associated with professional development outcome [14]. The self-monitoring associated with (re)visioning of students' roles, reducing theory-practice gap, and on-going change is consistent with facilitation of lifelong learning process outcome [27]. We identified an overarching process of students creating their own vision for themselves as theory/evidence-informed advanced practice nurses. The reflective questions were paramount in facilitating the transformative process in which students imagine and reimagine their advanced practice role. Based on this, we recommend that faculty clearly and comprehensively prepare students for the initial shock of not knowing how to get started with online reflective journaling. We encourage faculty to integrate excerpts from students’ online posts in weekly classroom discussions. We found this provided an opportunity to unpack, (re)view and reinforce learning pertinent to shared theoretical ideas and practice experiences, and contributed to transparency and trust. Integrating online posts that students have already thought about seems to alleviate students' fear of freezing and not knowing what to discuss when coming to class. With the focus on student-centred learning, students fully engaged in online journaling and developed confidence in their ability to co-create a culture of collective learning. As the course unfolded, students applied their greater self-knowledge and theoretical understanding to practice and learning environments with the intention to overcome the challenges of the theory-practice gap. This work demonstrates one of the ways in which online reflective journaling was extended as a transformative tool. The work further expands Chiovitti’s [7] rendition of how perspectives of individuals are co-created and negotiated through a cycle of development and renewal which repeats for learners sharing and responding to posts as a learning
community. It is hoped this analysis of online reflective journaling further contributes to the dialogue on creating student-centred learning environments in which student voices are invited at every opportunity individually and with their peers.

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REFERENCES


