From evaluation of students' clinical reflection to a practice-led gerontology curriculum

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Abstract Aim: To evaluate the reflective journals of 2 classes of Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) year three students after undertaking the 45 hours gerontology nursing program with 10 days clinical placement in elderly care institutions. Students' feelings on the process of interaction with the older people, practicing skills acquired, distinctive scenarios / difficulties / dilemmas encountered, and outcomes of reflections provided themes that contributed to practice-led gerontological curriculum. Methodology: A qualitative approach utilizing content analysis was employed to analyze reflective journals of 74 BSN year three students. A start list was developed to evaluate student's reflective journals. Two coders were involved in establishing and checking of the content analysis codes. The coding procedure managed to reach inter-rater agreement at 79.6%. Results: The patterns and descriptive codes further categorized and emerged 5 themes of students' practicing experiences in the caring process among old aged residents, namely: perception on ageing & health, caring needs & concern of older people, acquired caring attitude, acquired nursing skills and ethical concern. It identified the common thought and feelings of the students during the caretaking of older people. It also highlighted the critical situations that students encountered with ethical, humanistic, benevolent considerations and advanced nursing skills required by a gerontological nurse. Conclusion: This evaluation has implication for nursing educators to involve in reflective curriculum development. Reflection incorporated within the curriculum is apt to ensure that practice is placed at the center of professional development. Understanding the significant attributes in elderly care in local context through students' reflections would facilitate a practice-led content by putting the essential attributes into existing gerontology curriculum.

Key words   Students' clinical reflection   Gerontology curriculum

1.   Introduction

In university undergraduate nursing programs, the focus of education is on enabling students to develop clinical competencies from solely 'doing' to 'understanding' by integrating theoretical knowledge into clinical nursing practice, from which reflective practice is attracting considerable interest within nursing education and practice. It enables learners to access, understand and learn through their lived experiences (John, 1995). Reflection involves an understanding of routine activities, contemplative moral judgment, and careful thought that result in self-discovery and personal meaning. It is suggested that the process of reflection can provide the evidence required for nursing practice. It also assists in identifying area of knowledge and skills that students feel necessary and that may even provide directions or changes in teaching and learning plans. Strategies for reflective learning include journal writing, peer reflection, self-reflection and coaching (Atkins & Murphy, 1993; Lau, Chuk & So, 2002 ;Reid, 1993).

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Kiang Wu Nursing College of Macau (KWNC) has undertaken the nursing baccalaureate program since 2002. Nursing educators and clinical instructors have been using reflective journaling to engage students in recalling and documenting their narrative stories. It is a tool necessary for integrating knowledge and skills, and yet an effective way for critical analysis on situations encountered. As for the clinical placement for gerontology nursing program, students are required to practice in the elderly care institutions in community dwelling. Immediate after practice, they have to write up reflective journals to reflect their roles and activities in the caring process to the old aged residents in the practice settings. The process of reflection validates care and empowers the nurse to continue to care because of powerful and meaningful client responses (Schaefer, 2002). It is through this process that new understandings on contextual issues related to older people and appreciations of nursing specifically for this group of people can be attained.

Schön (1987) once encourages students to try new ways of exploring their observations, to critically think about what they did that shaped future actions. It is expected that this unfolding process of reflection will

facilitate a new way of knowing and learning. By reviewing the reflective journals, the manifest and latent meanings from respective students were found to have significant suggestions for the gerontology curriculum. It also provided an opportunity for exploring the common issues in the gerontology field of teaching and practice.

2.   Literature Review

2.1 Reflective Practice

The process of reflection is not a new concept. Boud, Keogh & Walk (1985) defined reflection as: "an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it." Hence, reflection is testing out theoretical concepts through experience. It can involve principles of connecting (one-to-one interaction) and cooperative knowing (group knowing). Sharing experiences help nurses see the commonalities of nursing as a caring practice (Schaefer, 2002, p.288).

The essential purpose of reflective practice is to enable students to access, understand and learn through their lived experiences so as to enhance their effectiveness within the context of practice by congruent action followed (John, 1995). It is a means of self-examination that involves looking back over what has happened in practice in an effort to improve performance or to encourage professional growth (Ruth-Sahd, 2003). It also aimed to help students obtain the maximum benefit from practice-based learning (Bines, 1992).

Various authors have discussed reflection in terms of differing of depths and levels that nurses mainly reflect (Day, 1993; Duke & Appleton, 2000; Goodman, 1984; James & Clark, 1994; Kim, 1999; Mezirow, 1991; Wong et al., 1995). Those studies mostly focused on how the reflective ability and levels of reflectivity of the students / learners were demonstrated at particular area or at particular moment of time. Whereas, Duke & Appleton (2000) demonstrated that reflection is developmental and students can achieve deeper levels of reflection over time. On the whole, these studies aimed at understanding the competency building by reflective practice and provided guidance that emphasized how to undertake reflection. Very little about the outcome of reflection has been discussed from learning and teaching strategies' perspective, i.e. how students' reflection suggested practice-oriented content to link up what happened in the classroom and the field experiences.

2.2 Reflective Journaling

Writing is considered an integral part of the reflective process (Atkins & Murphy, 1994; John, 1995). The concept of journaling as a means of developing reflective practice has become a popular topic in classroom, professional journals, conferences and continuing education programs (Boud & Walker, 1998). It is also a common method being used in our nursing programs to facilitate reflection and connection of teaching and practice within practicum by reflective journal. Students have to record down the impressive personal experiences and observations during their practice. The journal can then be used to recall and analyze past events. It allows students to examine their own roles and activities when related to the context of the clinical setting.

Kobert (1995) stated that what is taught and learnt in clinical setting are diverse. Journaling is a method of tying the diverse bits of information together. Withherall (1991) further stated that journaling enables the writer to discover connections between self and other barriers to understanding, and to know more deeply about the meaning of one's own culture narratives. That is what Blake (2005) summarized the benefits from use of journaling as an active learning tool. It meant journaling served the purpose of discovering meanings and making connections between experience and knowledge in the classroom. Apart from these, the transition from reports of incidents and personal reactions to insights into clients' situation alike and health can extrapolate the health needs of a community's population (Blake, 2005). In Hughes & Heycox (2005) study, they evaluated their gerontology course by their 29 social work students' feedback from observation in students' field works. Results reported that what had learnt and used in the practice setting challenged their perceptions of their own and other's on ageing and stimulated a reflective approach to practice with older people. Students had

greater awareness of issues affecting older people. Issues could be put back to classroom discussion and provide an opportunity for further exploration.

Journals can also be used as a means to gain insight into practice and illuminate how personal perceptions have become distorted. As such, journaling can attain professional gains. Williams and Wilkins (1999) used reflective summary writing as part of a qualitative study designed to promote reflective think. The authors also used the formation to make alterations in the curriculum to better meet the needs of their students. As a whole, it is apparent that journaling is an important vehicle for knowing students better. For the nursing educators, students' writings provide directions and changes in teaching/learning plans. As there was limited or even no study about the outcome of reflection discussed from student perspective, by reviewing the reflective journals, the manifest and latent meanings from respective students would generate significant suggestions for the gerontology curriculum. It also provided an opportunity for exploring the common issues in this field of practice.

2.3 Context for reflective journaling

Aged care tends to be dominated by medical construction of ageing. The construction is apparent not just in aged care service, but also in educational institutions (Hughes & Heycox, 2005). Gerontology nursing course has been one of the essential specialty nursing programs being commenced in Bachelor of Science in Nursing at year three level. The course planned to develop a more holistic approach to understanding ageing experiences and current issues in both normal ageing and aged with ill health was encompassed. The construction of those concepts such as dependence and disability, risks in ageing, care-giving, abuse and negligence, long term care in community dwelling was emphasized. The focus of this course was on enabling students to integrate knowledge and skills in reflective practice with older people. Clinical placement with 2 weeks interval was introduced immediately after completion of the course. Students were required to practice in the elderly care institutions in community dwelling and write up a reflective journal to reflect their roles and activities related to the context of the clinical setting. It is

through this process that new understandings on contextual issues related to older people and appreciations of nursing specifically for this group of people can be acquired.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the reflective journals of 2 classes of year three students of Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) after they undertook the 45 hours Gerontology nursing program with 10 days clinical placement in elderly care institutions. Students' feelings on the process interaction with the older people, practicing skills, the distinctive scenarios / difficulties / dilemmas encountered, and outcomes of reflections provided themes that contributed to practice-led gerontology curriculum.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodology utilizing content analysis was employed to analyze the reflective journals of 2 classes of BSN year 3 students in 2006 and 2007. It aimed at identifying prominent themes and patterns among the themes from the content of narrative data (Polit & Beck, 2006). A coding scheme was developed to evaluate student's reflective journals. The coding scheme was used to help the coders to tie the objectives of the study directly to the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Permission to conduct the study had been obtained from the nursing college. The researchers also submitted research proposal for scrutiny by the KWNC Research Committee. Researchers then explained the purpose of the study to all students. They were required to give verbal permission to the clinical instructor (principal researcher) to copy their written journals and use of the data for analysis at a later time as well as possible publication. Voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality of the data were assured.

4. Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using content analysis. It is a process of identifying, coding and categorizing the themes in the data. Categories were then analyzed for repeated and recurrent patterns from which major themes were derived. After that, both

manifest and latent analysis was used (Morse & Field, 1996) to identify categories and themes from the journals.

Firstly coding a coding approach as suggested by Mile & Huberman (1994) to create a general counting scheme ofr codes was adopted. It was conducted using an inductive approach and points to the general domains or categories with reference to the proposed general coding scheme which primarily guided by the aims of the study. The use of this general coding scheme or category scheme will help to develop the codes later. For the purpose of validity testing, all narratives were number coded by the principal researcher to guarantee anonymity. Subsequently, they identified emerging categories independently. Two coders were involved in establishing and checking of the content analysis codes in the meeting. The initial inter-rater agreement was 79.6%. When opinions differed, two coders were discussed until agreement was reached (Kvale, 1989).

During the phases of analysis, confirmability, meaning-in-context and recurrent themes were used to support the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It meant that the authenticity of the coded data was confirmed through discussions between the coders. Through discussion, coders also discovered the inherent meanings from recurrent themes. Besides, the principle researcher possessed gerontological knowledge and clinical experience which enabled her to search for meaning in the context. At the end of the analysis, principle researcher would share the results with the students and let them verify the interpretations in correspondence with their real feelings.

5.　Results

There were 73 narrative scripts included in this study from which 36 scripts were from class 1 and 37 scripts were from class 2. The textual material was initially classified into four categories with the guidance of the start list, i.e. interaction with elderly, practicing skills in use, difficulties encountered and dilemmas encountered. A total of 21 reflective elements were coded with most of the elements dispersed in the first category. The components of perceived ageing image, caring needs among the elderly and caring attitude seemed to be the prominent features. The components of difficulties encountered during the caring process seemed to be students' inexperience and lacking confidence in practicing advanced / specialized skills. The patterns and descriptive codes were further categorized and five themes of students' practicing experiences in the caring process among old aged residents emerged (Table 1).

Table 1　Descriptive codes and themes of students' practicing experiences

Coding-start list	Descriptive Codes	Theme
Interaction with elderly	Desperate(negative) ageing Positive ageing	Perception on ageing & health
	Love & care (benevolent) Personal integrity with dignity & respect Assist / help / Being with	Caring needs & concern of older people
	Empathetic / Patience Client-centered / holistic	Acquired caring attitude
Practicing skills in use	Effective communication skills therapeutic relationship with older people	Acquired nursing skills
Difficulties encountered	Specific health assessment skills: 　1. psycho-social assessment 　2. cognitive assessment 　3. assessment for depression Advanced nursing practice: 　1. Wound care 　2. Continence care 　3. Care for dementia	
Dilemmas Encountered	1. Quality of care 2. Dignity and privacy 3. Abuses in elderly	Ethical concerns

5.1　Perception on ageing & health

In perception on ageing & health, students described more on negative stereotypes about elderly persons, such as "life is desperate", "burden of others", "hopeless and loneliness", "incompetent and ineffectual", e.t.c.. However, there were still 5.2% (4 cases) of the students with positive effects of ageing stereotyping. They stated that individual elderly had passion to sustain their potential strength and power in their later life. Three exemplars stated:

"The self-care ability of the two elderly in their 90s has deteriorated and they now need help from others. They are not satisfied with their current health condition, thinking that their existence is only a burden to others."

(那兩個90歲的長者，自理能力不及以前，需要別人稍作協助。她們不滿意自己現時的健康狀況，認為自己的存在是 "累人累物") - (24-1-9)

"What concerns me is not only whether the elderly are fed but more importantly, how people value these elderly. Elderly are labelled as 'useless', 'awaiting death'...etc. These labels affect not only the carers' mind but also the psychological condition of the elderly."

(使我注意到的不單是老年人的溫飽問題，更重要的是怎樣看待一個老人的價值問題，因為一個老人，被示為"無用"、"等死"……。這些標籤，除了左右照顧者的思想外，還會影響到老人的心理。) - (30-2-3)

"I constantly remind myself never underestimate the ability of the elderly...As a nurse, I should let the elderly fully reveal their potential thus to make their mind and body healthy."

(我不斷提醒自己，不要輕看老人家的能力。……作為護士，應讓老人家的潛能盡顯，才能讓他們的身心健康！) - (32-2-9)

5.2 Caring needs & concern of older people

Being loved and cared are the essential elements of basic human needs. The basic needs of the older people are of no difference. When they feel weak, incompetent and helpless, love is particularly essential. Also, personal integrity was found to be a dynamic, intrinsic quality of self, dignity and autonomy. It was a great concern among elderly. "A caring gaze, a gentle word, a patient ear, a constant company" were their real needs. Exemplars showed:

"Elderly are one of us, they need as much love and concern as any of us does. When they feel weak and helpless, love is particularly essential. Besides catering for their basic needs, we also need to care for their mind and soul. A caring gaze, a gentle word, a patient ear, a constant company can show them all the love and care they need."

(老人都是人，他們同樣需要愛及關懷，特別在他們感到虛弱無助時，愛更顯重要。除了解決他們的基本需要外，還必須關顧他的心靈，一個眼神，一句說話、聆聽、陪伴顯得真摯) - (47-3-4)

5.3 Acquired caring attitude

The narrative data described numbers of acquired caring attitude amongst which empathy was the common concern. 52.6% (40 cases) of the students expressed the imperative to read the minds of the elderly, to think from their perspective and to respect them as an ordinary person in the caring process. Exemplars stated:

"I found that "empathy" is the most difficult human quality to master and learn. Due to the lack of personal experience, I found it difficult to understand how the old people really feel in their present situation."

(我感到難掌握及學習的便是同理心，因為個人經歷淺，我很難真正感受到伯伯的處境) - (65-1-11)

"Why should we mix the rice with all those medicines and pills, and make these old people to eat them? If we put ourselves in their shoes, would we enjoy eating those bitter dishes?"

(為什麼將所有的藥與飯攪在一起，給公公婆婆吃進肚子裡？將心比心，我們喜歡吃苦的東西嗎？) - (10-1-11)

5.4 Acquired nursing skills

Practicing specialized nursing skills was commonly addressed in students' reflective journals. Specific gerontological knowledge and skills mentioned included interpersonal communication skills, psycho-social assessment, cognitive assessment, advanced nursing procedure such as continence care and wound management, e.t.c. However, students often expressed lack of experience and confidence to demonstrate proficiency in acquired skills.

"I feel a sense of helplessness... I believe enhancing my communication skills is a must, because learning how to handle the elderly emotional problems by communicating with them effectively is a very important aspect in healthcare for the elderly."

(有種束手無策的感覺…，我認為自己在溝通技巧方面要多加學習，懂得與長者溝通及處理他的情緒問題，在老年護理上是十分重要的。) - (6-1-19)

"I found my inadequacy to do psychological care and also had difficulties to assess his (elderly) psychological distress"

(發現自己的不足就是心理輔導，在找出他的心理困擾上遇到了很大障礙) - (51-1-3)

5.5 Ethical concern

Ethical concern was another aspect to arouse students' attention. It is not uncommon that caring

activities in elderly care institution challenged dignity by devaluing the personal activities of the elderly. Privacy, quality of care and elderly abuses were described in one third of the narratives. Exemplar listed:

"They (elderly) had self-esteem. They needed the respect of others. The personal care assistant did not protect their privacy. In their conversation, I heard words of insult on the old people"

(他們也擁有自尊，需要得到別人的尊重。護工沒有保障到老人的私隱，在他們的言談中也能夠聽到很多羞辱老人的說話。) - (11-2-1)

"We used the curtain to protect my client's privacy while doing wound dressing, but they pulled the curtain open!"

(當我們作傷口清洗，拉上布簾保障病人私隱時，他們卻將布簾拉開！) - (34-3- 24)

6.　Discussion & implications

The reflective journal is a communicating tool to document clinical learning. Rather than receiving passively the clinical experiences, nursing students keeping clinical learning journals are empowered to direct their own learning, to actively express facts, thoughts, feelings and ideas in journal entries (Callister, 1993). In this study, manifested and latent meanings in the themes expressed students' learning needs. It provided direction for changes in my gerontology teaching and learning strategies.

6.1　Practice-led gerontology curriculum

"The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned that - learning..." (Heidegger, 1968, p.15). Learning from students' narratives provides insight and rethinking on the teaching of nursing knowledge and practice. The curriculum revolution has encouraged educational reform through the use of alternatives pedagogies from which, narrative pedagogy, experiential learning are examples of the kind (Nehls, 1995). More recently, attention has been turned towards journals, diaries (Callister, 1993), and stories (Taylor, 1992) as alternative modalities. The gerontology curriculum has not yet infused the following teaching modalities. These teaching modalities that specially addressed the themes emerged from the study will be

structured in the coming semester year (Table 2). For instance, the real narratives describing common ethical issues would be the lived-experiences and case studies at the core of human conducts which sought for better ways of nursing care. Besides, the facts of students' caring encounters that led to reflection on the meaning of caring facilitated the necessity of using experiential learning and film show. These types of creative teaching modes helped students apprehend the cues of acquired attitudes and skills in nurse-client interaction.

Table 2　Suggestions for gerontology curriculum

Direction to gerontology curriculum	Themes
Group discussion Seminar presentation	Image on ageing
Experiential Learning - real case demonstration	Caring needs & concern for older people
Film show and reflection	Acquired caring attitude Acquired nursing skills
Holistic approached- nursing procedure	
Case studies Scenario studies	Ethical concerns

6.2　Understanding on ageing

The findings of this study gave rise to prominent themes which yielded to rich content of learning. They were the real perception of students' reality. Narrative jokes about the elderly appear to be very uncommon. They are mostly negatively stereotyped as ill, unattractive, senile, incompetent, ineffectual, stingy, poor and isolated (Bowd, 2003). Students' narrative also described negative stereotypes with high percentage. The extent to which individuals ascribe elderly to stereotypes directly influences their behavior, and negative stereotypes about older persons clearly result in passive acceptance of supposed negative consequences of ageing (Whitbourne & Wills, 1996). Perhaps, these narrative descriptions told us the urge for exercising positive approach on ageing in our gerontological education. It could be taken toward "immunizing" the nursing students against negative consequences of stereotypes. As such, this study helped to facilitate the connections between classroom theories and clinical reality. And we, educators always strive to find a way to fuse the theory-and- practice gaps.

7. Limitations of the study

There were few limitations in this study. Obviously, the sampling size was regarded as sufficient to generate rich content. However, almost all of the students' reflection described the negative cases. One of the prominent reasons was probably the sites of clinical placement was similar in nature. Sharing of feelings among students in majority would project negative stereotypes on ageing issues which may threaten the extent to which the findings represent an authentic picture of the reality. Only 5.2% of the reflective journal described positive cases. As such, explanation of the perspective on the other edge can enhance the quality of the qualitative study (Shek, Tang & Han, 2005). Lincoln (1998) suggested that the community be used as an arbitrator of quality which includes peer checking (i.e. invitation of peers who are not researchers to check the quality of the study) and member checking (i.e. ask the participants to check with the quality of the study). This will help the researcher to arrive at a truthful understanding of the reality (Lincoln, 1998; Padgett, 1998; Rizzo, Corsaro & Bates, 1992). In the study, only member checking was addressed.

8. Conclusion

Conclusively speaking, the study provided valuable information for students' learning needs, concerns in elderly perspectives. It is hoping that enriching content would bridge the gap between knowledge in classroom and clinical experience. Cases and scenarios told in the narratives provide real samples for narrative case studies, experiential learning. It can also provide opportunities for further exploration of specific ageing issues common in the gerontology field and for professionals to exercise positively in gerontological education. Making meaning by using students' reflective journals enriches their clinical experiences as well as the gerontology content of the educators.

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從學生反思報告看實踐為本的老年護理課程

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摘要　目的：評價2屆護理學士學位課程三年級學生老年護理之反思報告，分析學生的感受、操作技能、特殊情況、困難以及反思的結果，為老年護理課程提供參考。方式：採用質性研究對3年級74名學生的反思報告進行內容分析。兩名分析者就報告的內容分析進行確認和核對，分析者之間的同意度達79.6%。結果：學生對長者照顧過程之經驗可分為5大類，主要分為：老年化及健康的感知、長者的照顧需要與關心、照顧的態度、護理技巧及倫理關注。發現學生在照顧長者中呈現的共同想法及感覺，亦強調一些重要的因素：如倫理、人文、仁愛之考慮因素及創新的護理技巧。總結：本評價有助於護理教育工作者從事反思課程發展。反思融入課程有利於確保實踐為專業發展之中心，透過學生的反思報告能明瞭本地老年護理的重要特質，在現行的老年課程中融入這些特質亦將促進以實踐為本的內容。

關鍵詞　學生反思報告　老年護理課程