THE VOICE OF PATIENTS AND FAMILIES

Gray Reflections: Poetry as a Pathway to Nursing Student Empathy and the Creation of Meaning in a Long-Term-Care Clinical Practicum

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The unique needs of the aging adult require caregivers who can completely comprehend the experience of this population. Purposefully educating nursing students to enhance development of empathy is crucial for the provision of adequate care. Innovative pedagogical strategies that produce opportunities for nursing students to reflect on patient care experiences are an opportunity for educators to guide the creation of meaning in practice for nursing students. The use of poetry reading and writing enhances the student reflective process in clinical practicum environments and may serve as a strategy to support empathic development in nursing students.

Keywords: empathy; nursing education; poetry; long-term care

Poets don't make headlines or laws, don't discover the next wonder drug or renewable energy source. But they are equipped to do practical work. After science, art and religion have their messy say, poets pick through the clutter—questions, suppositions, certainties—then abscond with their stash to that vast recycling bin where, parsed into singulars, they ply their slow trade in words, images, mystery

—Veneta Mason, Nurse Poet (2008)

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The aging population in the United States is expected to grow substantially in the coming years. Additionally, the number of “oldest old,” those over the age of 85, is projected to grow from 6.3 million in 2015 to 17.9 million in 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This population group has the highest disability rate and the highest demand for services in long-term-care (LTC) facilities (Centers for Disease Control, 2013; Harris-Kojetin, Sengupta, Park-Lee, & Valverde, 2013). The unique needs of the aging adult require caregivers who can fully grasp the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual needs of this vulnerable population (Wilson, 2010).

Due to these sociodemographic changes, gerontology competencies have become a required component of baccalaureate nursing education (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2010). Purposefully educating nursing students to enhance development of attitudes and values that align with the needs of older adults is crucial for the provision of adequate, safe, quality care. Multiple

chronic diagnoses, social isolation, prevalence of dementia, end-of-life care issues, and complex treatment regimens make the LTC facility one of the most challenging contexts encountered by pre-licensure nursing students. It is a context that calls for, not only a deep understanding of the needs of the aging population, but also of the unique circumstances of the LTC environment.

Empathy is a professional characteristic that has been linked to improved nurse–patient interactions, greater patient satisfaction with care, and improved patient outcomes (Doyle, Hungerford, & Cruickshank, 2014; Lavoie, 2015; Yang, Hargreaves, & Bostrom, 2014). Since nursing students’ attitudes toward aging adults and beliefs about LTC are varied and can be riddled with negative stereotypes, innovative pedagogical strategies that support the creation of meaningful experiences and enhanced empathy for older adults in this context are necessary (Reyna, Goodwin, & Ferrari, 2007; Yu & Yu, 2014).

Integration of the arts and humanities into health-care education has been used to improve empathy, draw awareness to the experience of health disparities, enhance cultural knowing, improve communication and assessment skills, advance understanding of the patient experience including connecting nursing students to the concept of pain and suffering, and create a humanistic approach to professional education (Adams, 2012; Cappiello & Vroman, 2011; Chochinov, 2016; Ferrell, Virani, Jacobs, Malloy, & Kelly, 2010; Marnocha & Marnocha, 2007; McKie, 2012; Wilby, 2011; Yu & Yu, 2014). Since nurses have firsthand involvement with the complexities of the human experience, arts and humanities, by nature, lend themselves to learning in nursing (Rieger & Chernomas, 2013). However, this content has yet to be given its rightful place alongside the sciences in the typical nursing curriculum. Using the arts and humanities in the clinical learning environment to expose students to rich visual and written narratives of human experience may serve to deepen understanding of the patient experience, creating meaning for both students and patients. Poetry reading and writing is one arts and humanities approach worth further examination.

Because poetry is often a powerful yet brief narrative of the human experience, it has the potential to serve as a formidable tool in the education of nurses. Due to its brevity, poetry is feasible to incorporate into a clinical course during the clinical day or even within the context of a clinical post-conference. Poetry reading and writing may offer improved insight into subjective experiences and in assigning meaning to human events (Kidd, Zauszniewski, & Morris, 2011), with the potential to stimulate deep student reflection on patient care and patient care contexts.

The purpose of reflective writing for nursing students is to critically examine experiences and convey in writing the meaning they have assigned to the events (Kennison, 2012). Students in clinicals are asked to analyze patient situations, make nursing judgments, and engage in human caring throughout the clinical day, and reflect upon the experiences. Reflection stimulates critical thinking, and the use of imaginative literature such as poetry as a stimulant may improve this attribute of the professional nurse (Cagle, Walker, & Newcomb, 2006; Kennison, 2012). Reflective writing also may improve the process of making sense of complex experiences and expose ideas that may not be evident in oral discourse (Roscoe, 2009). Olsen (2013) suggested that when nurses and nursing students reflect, they will “bend back” in an attempt to discover broader meaning in experiences with patient care (para. two). The purpose of this study was to incorporate poetry reading and writing into an LTC clinical practicum experience and explore nursing students’ reflective responses.

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METHODS

Nonexperimental descriptive methods were used in this cross-sectional study of nursing students in an LTC clinical practicum. A convenience sample ($n = 16$) of second semester senior baccalaureate nursing students from a private Midwestern university was recruited. In one clinical rotation lasting 2 days, poetry was used as a stimulus for reflection and as an opportunity for nursing students to gather and create meaning. At the outset of the first clinical day in the LTC facility, the students were given poems from various anthologies and collections of poetry that demonstrated themes of LTC living and the experience of the older adult. Students were asked to read the poems either alone or together prior to entering the unit, then reflect on the poems throughout the next 2 days. Students were asked to create an interpretative reflection of the clinical days in the form of a letter to their resident, a poem, or other original creative work.

A modified qualitative content analysis was used to examine the students' written work (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). First cycle codes were created using elemental and affective coding, including emotion and value codes. Pattern codes or themes were derived from first cycle codes using the process of code mapping (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Institutional review board approval was granted to carry out this study, and students gave informed consent to use their reflective responses for teaching, research, and publication purposes.

RESULTS: STUDENTS' WRITING

In this descriptive case study, the use of poetry as a guide for reflection with pre-licensure nursing students yielded meaningful pieces of work that revealed a deep reflective process. Students' poetry included rich description and synthesis of ideas related to aging and the experience of the older adult in the LTC environment. The emerging pattern codes or themes were analyzed; the commonalities found are presented after the student examples.

When I Get Old

People say when I get old
I will take trips
I will watch my grandchildren grow
I will age gracefully
I will enjoy my lifetime's work with my husband

People don't say when I get old
I will lose my mobility
I will be forgotten
I will watch my abilities dwindle
I will lose my husband and spend my last years alone

But this is the reality too often
When we get old

Extended Care Facility

Trapped in a body slowly failing
Senses dulled
Reflexes trailing

Minds full of spunk and spirit
Still learning
Growing older, trying to bear it

A fate shared by heroes, friends and foes
We will not be spared
Our active days come to a close

Remember to listen, and show respect
Growing older is not an illness
Age is no reason for neglect

Older People

Older people have been through a lot
So we should make a spot
For them to talk about their life
And how they lived with their husband or wife.
Older people are not dumb but very smart indeed
Give them a head start and you will see that they will catch up on speed
Everyone is going to get old, there is no doubt about it
But what truly matters is how you lived your life
So you can sit and tell about it.

Please Reflect

Getting older is not the new fad
Some call me funny, grumpy, mean or just plain sad

They never look at the accomplishments I've earned during this life
In their eyes I see pity, sorrow, fear and sometimes strife

I'm just a mere shell of what I used to be
Waiting day by day and year by year for God to take me to glory

But while I wait, please be kind
Don't judge or condescend with your quicker, sharper mind

When your time winds down you will be just like me
You will see

They won't treasure your journey or the path you took
So stop the cycle and remind them to take a second look

My Promise to You

I know your fears
I know your sorrows
Although I won't be here tomorrow
I will keep you in my heart forever and always.
But let us not dwell on what is to come
Instead, today let us focus on what has already begun
I know your sorrow
I know your fears
I will do anything to keep you from tears
Even though it is hard to let go
I am here to help you through
And be the light outside your room.

To My Dearest Patient

There are no words to describe you,
Nor are your sweet lips able to speak any,
But your kind heart speaks for itself.

Your baby blue eyes are glossy,
And even though they may not see too clearly,
They are bright and your heart shines through them.

Your hands are soft and warm,
They have the lightest touch,
And deliver the most comforting feeling.

Your feet may be dropping,
And may not bring you to the places you want to go,
But continue to follow your heart just as you are.

The words you write on your board speak for themselves,
I know you feel like they do not matter,
But they matter to me.

I just want to say you are one of the most special people I have ever met,
I know you are ready to go but before you do,
One thing you need to know is that you have a special place in my heart.

The Light Through the Window

A man sits for a moment after breakfast
Sits by the window watching the birds fly by
Sits and admires the grass he once played in
Sits and remembers the beauty of the flowers he picked years ago.

A caregiver walks by yet stops, pausing her daily work
Sits and listens to a story from the man
A story of his childhood fun and the flowers for his childhood love
Love, she sees the glow of happiness in the man's face.

Then goes about her day, thinking of the story and the warmth
The warmth in the man's heart and on his face
As she begins to notice every little thing in her day brightened by the light
By the light that shines through every window.

The Letter

Dear Jenette (name changed),
Have you heard of the book *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*? It is by a French journalist, Jean-Dominique Bauby. He suffered from a massive stroke that left him with a condition called locked-in syndrome. The syndrome resulted in him being entirely aware of his surrounding mentally, but physically paralyzed. The only thing he was able to move were his eyelids. This incredible man made the decision to not give into despair, but rather to move forward with hope. With the help of his nurse and a learning assistant, he wrote an entire book through blinking. The learning assistant repeated the entire French alphabet to Bauby and he would blink when she said the letter that went next. They did this 4 hours a day for 10 months. He escaped from his paralysis by moving through his mind.

Jenette, when I saw you in your bed, this is what I thought of. Although, I'm unsure of whether or not you were cognizant of your surroundings. I was heart-broken to see you in this state. Your television was tuned into a station that played old movies. I hope that you were able to watch these movies, and find some enjoyment from them. Are you able to escape in your memories? I pray that your mind is a wonderful refuge that you can take solace in. Your body has betrayed you with Parkinson's, dementia, and a stroke. I hope that your mind has not betrayed you in the same way. I hope that you can travel back to your childhood memories, and play in the same fields that you did as a young girl. Although I'm not sure if you are able to communicate with those around you, I pray that your needs are met, and that you are comfortable.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet you, and observe your life. I hope that your soul is able to travel through your mind, like a butterfly.

Sincerely,
[Student's Name]

Silence

Your room is quiet as I walk in to meet you.
The T.V. glows on your sleeping face.
As I gently nudge you awake, one eye opens.
I introduce myself as you stare on silently.
Without a response, you close your eye
And return to your slumber.

When I return to help with your care,
You are lying in bed motionless, unchanged.
We move you around like a lifeless doll
And clean your body for the day to come.
I try again to start a conversation,
But to no avail. Only silence
As we sit in what is left of the morning.

Don't Forget Me

Don't forget me when you go off to college
And you are provided extensive knowledge
Don't forget me when you find your love
And you guys get married and have some fun
Don't forget me when you start your career
And you are tired from a long-time day and
Jus' want a beer
Don't forget me when you have kids
Bring them by so I can see their precious bibs
Don't forget me when you retire
Come see me in the facility
Don't forget me when I can no longer care for myself
Come by and provide me with your love wealth
Don't forget me when I die
Jus' remember all the good times that we had
Remember me
Remember me
Remember me
Jus' Don't Forget Me!

RESULTS: COMMONALITIES/THEMES OF STUDENTS' WRITING

"We" See Ourselves in Others

The pronoun "we" was used in *When I Get Old* and *Extended Care Facility*, in stanzas about the "reality" of aging and the ultimate "fate" of all humans. In other poems, there was evidence of seeing self in others and connection to the process of aging as a universal experience. An example of this is in *Please Reflect*. The student writes in the voice of the aging adult: "(W)hen your time winds down you will be just like me." In *Older People*, the student writes that "everyone is going to get old, there is no doubt about it." These poems with their multiple levels of expression represent a recognition and reflection of self in others and an internalizing of the experience of others. This work also reflects the empathic behavior of standing in the patient's shoes and recognizes the common human experience (Hojat, 2016).

Recognition of Stereotypes

Student's poems also reflected themes of aging and the propensity for the older adult to be stereotyped as "slow" and to be "pitied." In *Older People*, the student

reflects, "Older people are not dumb, but very smart indeed," recognizing the potential need to advocate for the intelligence of an older person to dispel stereotypical points of view. In *Extended Care Facility*, another student writes, "minds full of spunk and spirit...growing older is not an illness," and that "age is no reason for neglect." These student poets are able to reflect how the older adult might be viewed and, as a result, potentially neglected. These poems reflect the empathic behavior of perspective taking (Hojat, 2016). They reveal themes of how older adults may be negatively stereotyped, and how consideration for the perspective of the older adult allows for growing empathy and advocacy for this population.

Hope, Loss, and the Fear of Being Forgotten

Hope is metaphorically expressed by "light" in *My Promise to You* and *The Light through the Window*. Light refers to the care provider or the student nurse, and is also referred to as a hopeful brightening in remembering the past and happy times lived as younger people. Students expressed that the older adult's story may be perceived as hopeful, but has the potential to be filled with loss and the fear of being forgotten. *When I Get Old* and *Don't Forget Me* speak to loss of mobility, the loss of a spouse, and time spent alone and forgotten, imploring the reader to remember not to forget. Empathic behaviors of standing in the patient's shoes and providing compassionate care are described (Hojat, 2016).

Meaning in Interaction

The poems reveal the impact that working with patients in LTC can have on nursing students. These reflective pieces provide evidence of the creation of meaning in the nurse-patient interaction. In *Silence*, *The Letter*, and *My Dearest Patient*, students expressed feelings and wishes for their patients as they move forward. In particular, students wished that patients would retain knowledge of their "special" status in the student's experience. Students also expressed that they would pray for patient comfort. In *Silence*, the student reflects on the desire to interact with a patient who is nonresponsive. Although the patient is silent, care is provided and conversation is attempted. Although the conversation is unsuccessful, the student observes the silence and the meaning of silence as "we sit in what is left of the morning." The empathic behavior of providing compassionate care is reflected in the creation of meaning in interaction for these student poets (Hojat, 2016).

The experience of reading and writing poetry, as a reflective activity during and after a clinical experience, had a perceivable and measurable impact on this group of nursing students. Students' comments revealed that, in general, they appreciated the opportunity to reflect in this manner; they also appreciated reading creative literature in the clinical setting and found this experience helped to connect earlier class content in the liberal arts and humanities to nursing practice.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Assignments such as the one described in this article call on students to reflect on the experience of providing patient care using creative writing and combining their experiential accounts of patient care to create meaning. Student reflections

Reflection stimulates critical thinking, and the use of imaginative literature such as poetry as a stimulant may improve this attribute of the professional nurse.

exposed themes of seeing the self in others, recognition of stereotypes, awareness of hope, loss and the fear of being forgotten, and creating meaning in interaction. Each of these themes support the three crucial empathic behaviors proposed by Hojat (2016): standing in the patient's shoes, providing compassionate care, and engaging in perspective taking.

The students graduated soon after this clinical rotation and were not available for further discussion. Follow-up interviews would have been useful to explore students' intended meanings.

The clinical environment is rich with experiences, and students' reflections should be indicators that they are engaging in deep reflection to create meaning and to process their clinical experiences as a path to enhanced empathy. Using poetry as a reflective strategy can have a deep impact on student learning and enrich the student experience of direct patient care. Participation in reflective exercises such as this encourages nursing students to become empathic practitioners capable of engaging in meaningful practice.

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