



## CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

### Person-centredness in graduate nursing education: practice development in action

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#### Abstract

*Background:* Person-centredness is an approach that views each individual as a unique being, and is supported by the values of mutual respect and individual right to self-determination. This approach is currently a prevailing principle in policy, education and practice settings globally. The relevance of person-centredness to postgraduate student learning is immense, as new graduate nurses are expected to assume leadership and advocacy roles in healthcare environments and engage with key stakeholders in the exchange of knowledge to inform practice. The application of person-centred practices by faculty within postgraduate nursing programmes is therefore instrumental in providing students with the necessary supportive environments to acquire the skills for person-centred care.

*Method:* Practice development was used as a foundation for implementing innovative teaching methods for postgraduate nursing students. Nurses enrolled in the advancement of professional nursing practice seminars and practicum, participating in various active learning and critical reflection activities throughout the semester.

*Implications for practice:*

- Practice development provides an innovative foundation for postgraduate nursing education
- Educators should consider this unique and person-centred approach as an alternative to the typical pedagogical approach

**Keywords:** Person-centredness, postgraduate nursing education, practice development, active learning, reflection

#### Introduction

I (first author) was first introduced to practice development in 2013, when I was one of four representatives from our school of nursing to attend the inaugural practice development school in Canada. The week-long workshop was hosted by expert nurse clinicians, educators, researchers and practice developers, including professors Brendan McCormack, Jan Dewing and Nadine Janes. During the workshop I engaged with fellow attendees in many creative activities that I had not done before in the context of academia and professional development. Initially, I felt vulnerable, like a fish out of water, but as the week progressed and we engaged with each other on a daily basis, I began to feel more comfortable. By the end of the five days, I felt as if I could show 'the real me'.

On completion of the workshop, I found myself reflecting on the many and varied activities that I had engaged in, alone and with others, and considered their relevance, importance and applicability to postgraduate nursing education. Concurrently, Brendan McCormack visited our school and hosted a postgraduate seminar employing some of the practice development methods used in the workshop. This observational opportunity was enlightening as I saw at first hand how a skilful practice developer applied these methods in a seminar classroom. This deepened my initial curiosity about practice development methods for postgraduate nursing education and opened up a whole new world of alternative teaching and learning modalities that I had not considered for this context before. I began to envision the design and delivery of the seminars and practicum courses in professional nursing advancement within our master of nursing programme using practice development methods as a core foundation for course delivery.

### **Reflections: person-centredness**

I entered academia after 28 years as a staff nurse, a clinical educator and a clinical nurse specialist in various paediatric settings. I have witnessed at first hand the challenges inherent to the healthcare system that would impede person-centred care. Person-centredness was not new to me; I understand it is an approach to practice that respects and values each individual as a unique being. It is established through the formation and fostering of healthy relationships between all care providers, patients and clients and others significant to them in their lives. It is underpinned by the values of respect for persons, individual rights of self-determination, mutual respect and understanding, and is enabled by cultures of empowerment that foster continuous approaches to practice development (McCormack et al., 2010).

However, the ideas central to practice development were new to me. I had not been exposed to facilitators who authentically engaged with individuals and teams to blend personal qualities and creative imagination with practice skills and practice wisdom (Manley et al., 2008; McCormack et al., 2013). So you can imagine my initial surprise when asked to engage with practice development facilitators in a different and novel way. This surprise turned to appreciation and excitement, and led to further reflection about new ways to engage with students using some of the activities I was exposed to and engaged in. I immediately recognised the relevance and importance to postgraduate student learning. New postgraduate nurses are expected to:

1. Contribute to knowledge development in nursing
2. Assume leadership and advocacy roles in healthcare environments
3. Engage with key stakeholders in the exchange of knowledge to inform practice

(Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing, 2015).

I believe practice development methodology could help prepare highly reflective practitioners with the capacity to engage with stakeholders to bring about changes in practice and cultures.

### **Context: master of nursing seminar and practicum courses**

The seminar and practicum in professional nursing advancement courses are considered the capstones of the master of nursing programme. [Webster's Dictionary](#) (Merriam-Webster, 2016) defines the word 'capstone' as a high point or crowning achievement, and as being synonymous with culmination, the end or final result of something. These courses are intended to provide students with multiple opportunities to synthesise all prior learning for application to advancing nursing practice. During the course, students are expected to:

1. Analyse theoretical and historical perspectives of advanced nursing practice from a variety of philosophical and critical standpoints
2. Examine linkages between theory, research, and advanced practice in their field of study
3. Focus on the synthesis and application of knowledge at an advanced level

Students participate in weekly seminars over a 12-week semester while concurrently completing 192 hours of clinical practice with an identified preceptor within a practicum setting. At the end of the semester, each student delivers an oral, poster or artwork presentation, based on a scholarly project, at a professional nursing symposium comprising faculty, preceptors and current graduate students. Given the interplay of theory, research and practice within the practicum placements and the expectation that postgraduate nurses will assume leadership roles to advance the practice of nursing, we believe that the application of person-centred practices within this programme could benefit the course and outcomes. Within supportive environments, practice development methods give students the opportunity to acquire and apply the skills required to practise person-centred approaches in their own practice; this can transform individuals and ultimately cultures of practice. We strongly believe that this is essential to their future clinical practice and their work with families and members of interprofessional healthcare teams, as well as to their development as postgraduate-prepared nursing leaders (LeGrow et al., personal communication, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to describe the experience of graduate nursing students when practice development methods were used to enhance student engagement and learning. It is a reflection of their experiences of engaging in critical reflection and dialogue within a graduate nursing seminar course. The practice development methods used during weekly seminars were modelled on the ideas of 'active learning' (Dewing, 2010).

### **Active learning**

Active learning is a dynamic process for in-depth learning that involves the use of multiple senses/intelligences, critical personal dialogue/reflection (learning from self), shared critical dialogue and experiences (learning from others), and intentional action (Dewing, 2010). This immersion in the use of our senses along with critical reflection and dialogue was of significant interest to me as I could relate to its impact on my professional development during and since attending the practice development school. Therefore, in the context of the seminar and practicum courses, I purposely chose active learning activities to be carried out on a weekly basis to promote authentic engagement in critical personal dialogue/reflection with self and shared dialogue and experiences with fellow students. The activities included identification of hopes and fears, critical reflections, sitting/walking meditations and an art installation. This paper will focus on hopes and fears and sitting/walking meditations, which will be briefly described and followed by the students' reflections about each activity.

### **Hopes and fears**

This activity took place early in the semester when students were settling into their practicum placements, getting to know their preceptors and beginning to finalise their practice projects for the semester. Each student was asked to identify one hope and one fear that they had in relation to their clinical practicum. [EVOKE cards](#) were used to facilitate students' identification of the thoughts, feelings and emotions that their hopes/fears represented. These specialty cards capture a plethora of everyday images and are designed to evoke a range of emotions, memories and ideas, and to help participants share their stories with others. The students' reflections on their experiences illustrate the following themes that stood out for them (Table 1):

- Vulnerability
- Fear of failure
- Feeling lost
- Role confusion
- The universality of their experiences

**Table 1: Active learning: students' reflections on hopes and fears**

<b>Student A</b>	<p>'Opening up to a group of colleagues, some of whom I did not know very well, was a positive and eye-opening experience. As strangers in the classroom, I had not yet made a connection with many of them; I did not see, or had not taken the time to understand how someone else's experience and emotional perspectives on their practicum could relate to my own unique experience. Nevertheless, by hearing my colleagues' hopes and fears, as well as sharing my own, I recognised that although we were all experiencing different practicums and creating our own life journeys, our mentalities of embracing our hopes while being threatened by our fears were all very similar. In a time of uncertainty and emotional change, this exercise established the fact that I was not alone, and my self-confidence, which had been diminished by the fears we all shared, was revived by the assimilation, empathy and normalcy I established with my colleagues. This regained confidence supported my learning by giving me back maybe some of the self-esteem I thought I had lost within my fears, all while giving me a stronger desire to continue to do the best I could within my practicum without getting lost in my fear of not knowing what I was doing'</p>
<b>Student B</b>	<p>'It was much easier to discuss my hopes than my fears. I quickly realised that others were feeling similar emotions to mine. Even though we each had our unique placements we were similarly challenged with stresses, since we were not sure if our hopes would materialise or our worst fears would come to fruition. Opening up within our group, and knowing we were all feeling similar emotions, started the collective journey that developed a strong bond. We knew we were all in this collaboratively and could travel through this journey together, depending on each other for support and encouragement. This supported my learning as I saw my classmates through a different lens. This exercise established the team and set the foundation for strong group support that lasted throughout the semester. This was rewarding, since I was able to strip away some vulnerabilities and speak more openly, which proved beneficial through the strong bonds developed among the group'</p>
<b>Student C</b>	<p>'This small group activity was introduced within the first few weeks of the course. Many of my classmates I had met before, but I didn't know them well. In this smaller setting, with fewer people, the exploration of hopes and fears had the capacity to go beyond the surface level for everyone. One by one, each of us opened up about our hopes and fears related to our practicum experience. At first, I was apprehensive of sharing my fears with the group – I firmly believed that I was likely to be the only one experiencing a high level of apprehension and fear of failure. Even though I felt lost, I was hopeful that I would eventually figure out my role and make a meaningful contribution to the organisation I was doing my practicum with. As everyone shared, certain universal patterns surfaced and by listening to one another's hopes and fears it became obvious that though we were all in different practicum environments, working on very different projects, our hopes of succeeding and our fears of failure were very similar, which was comforting'</p>
<b>Student D</b>	<p>'Participating in sharing hopes and fears with peers was not easy. For me, the most difficult part was allowing myself to be vulnerable and then sharing that with others. This sense of vulnerability was not a characteristic that I commonly share in my practice or in my academic endeavours. The thought of admitting that I was concerned that I might not be good enough or that I may not know what to do in this new role was overwhelming. The outcome was comforting; to feel the genuine concern that students shared for each other. The camaraderie that began to flourish was like nothing I had ever experienced before in my masters education. After we were aware of each other's hopes and fears we were able to help each other identify strengths and strategies to reach goals and cope with barriers'</p>

### **Meditation**

Students engaged in many critical reflections and meditations, at the beginning and/or at the end of each seminar. The meditations would take place either in the classroom with soft music playing in the background (for example, guided meditations) or outside the classroom in green spaces on campus (for example, meditative walks). With each session students were instructed either before or during the meditative/critical reflection session. They lasted anywhere from five to 25 minutes. The students' reflections on their experiences illustrate the following themes that stood out for them (Table 2):

- Challenges and difficulties focusing
- Shared sense of camaraderie
- Present moment awareness
- Personal learning

**Table 2: Active learning: students' reflections on meditation**

<b>Student A</b>	'This was an attempt to de-stress and create personal awareness in a time of mental chaos, however I did have a challenging time attempting to prevent my mind from running in a million directions with thoughts of school, work and my personal life. I realised that I was not the only one in the class who had difficulty with fully being present in the moment, as other students verbalised their difficulty with the activity. Once again, I learned I was not alone, and the expectation was not to be perfect at meditating, but to learn to come into the present moment, if only briefly, and become aware of the stress, thoughts, and emotions that we were all feeling. I believed that this created empathy not only between my colleagues, but as well as with our faculty instructor, which in turn created a more relaxed and open learning environment'
<b>Student B</b>	'I was challenged by this exercise and easily distracted. I had difficulty focusing initially because my thoughts kept drifting back to many tasks at hand (school, family and work). Initially the stresses of life consumed my mind and I had to consciously force them out so I could focus. This exercise helped me to take the time to close off the parts of my brain that were concerned with "busy work" and reflect more deeply into how I was feeling at that particular moment. The meditation exercise helped remind me to slow life down, take a deep breath and shift to a deeper thought process that would ground me and move me to the next level of personal reflection'
<b>Student C</b>	'This activity promoted a sense of being mindful and living in the present state. At first I thought this exercise would not have much value as I didn't think I would be able to quiet my mind – which at the time was going at 100 kilometres a minute, constantly creating lists to try to manage the demands of school, work and everything else. When the meditation began, I realised that this was a challenging exercise. When we shared our experiences within the group setting, many classmates had a similar experience, and we collectively saw the merit in taking time to reflect and live more in the now'
<b>Student D</b>	'The meditation was not a new life experience for me but it was certainly unique within the context of an academic setting. This activity allowed for time and space to reflect on the experiences of the weeks prior and to settle into the present and recognise the changes that were occurring. Indeed, it was situated at a very meaningful time for me: I was experiencing a great deal of cognitive dissonance with new learnings from the practicum placement and the theoretical knowledge presented through class discussions and readings. Slowing down facilitated the realisation of how I had changed as a student, a nurse and a person. To further enhance this practice, a walking meditation helped to reinforce that being centred among the movement was not only possible but helped to keep me calm and focused'

## Self-learning and student learning

### *Self*

Even though I consider myself a newcomer to the use of practice development methods in a classroom and seminar context, I was motivated by and excited about the potential to transform the 'learning space'. To engage strategically with students in different kinds of conversations and in different ways about the course content was refreshing and invigorating. This manner and style of professional and practice development uniquely fits with the premise of situating postgraduate education and learning as a building block to advancing individual and collective professional nursing practice and education, with the ultimate goal of transforming cultures of practice. Witnessing the enthusiasm with which the students engaged in the practice development activities and with the course material provided rich data to suggest that this is a valuable and integral teaching methodology, not only to support postgraduate nursing education but to help graduates flourish and thrive in highly complex healthcare environments.

### **Students**

The students' reflections on their learning highlight the transformational nature of co-constructing a supportive and collaborative person-centred learning environment and culture, which is paramount to their academic and professional growth and ultimately to their success in the course and in the programme.

*'Through engaging in practice development activities and co-creating learning with peers and faculty we had the opportunity to transform our classroom into a collaborative community of practice, which continued throughout the duration of the course, and for some of us beyond the classroom. In my current workspace I implement practice development activities to facilitate group discussion, participation and co-operation, with successful results. Overall, I feel practice development has the potential to enhance reflection, enrich learning and create a positive collaborative environment in a multitude of diverse settings.'*

*'Experiencing practice development in this graduate practicum course was beneficial for me on a professional, academic and personal level. Slowing down to make sense of new nursing knowledge and clinical practice offered me the opportunity to excel in my practicum placement and secure future employment there. I was able to identify my fears and acknowledge my strengths, and move past them to provide quality work and become a working member of their team. Academically, I gained a great deal of confidence through this experience. Allowing myself to be vulnerable and identify my goals was instrumental in continuing to work on my thesis in a swift and self-assured direction. Finally, I learned to be able to lean on my peers. Some of the friendships developed during this course continue to be very important in my life. I am certain that the activities and events that occurred during this time helped all of us to be less competitive with each other and cultivate success and encouragement for all.'*

*'Through expressing our hopes and fears, as well as participating in meditation sessions, Dr. A employed a transformative and person-centred approach that truly put the students at the forefront of the teaching/learning experience and optimised our graduate education. Utilising person-centredness methodology was not only innovative but also enjoyable, and enabled students to be mindful of thoughts and emotions, which allowed us to flourish both personally and professionally.'*

### **Conclusions and next steps**

After much personal reflection, I believe practice development provides an innovative foundation on which to base postgraduate nursing education and is invaluable to students' learning and their development as future nursing leaders. The framework and methods offer a unique and person-centred approach to nursing education that is an alternative to the typical pedagogical approach used in traditional didactic classroom teaching. As the student reflections demonstrate, their engagement in practice development during their seminar and practicum courses was a transformational experience for them and one that was innovative and creative (Dewing, 2010; Titchen and McCormack, 2010). It was a novel educational experience for them all.

Practice development methods are largely absent from the Canadian healthcare context, locally or nationally and in both practice and academic settings, as Dr. Nadine Janes suggests in her critical commentary (Janes, 2014). However, with more clinicians, educators and researchers starting to be exposed to these methods in their local contexts and a cadre of critical facilitators available for mentorship and consultation, the future is ripe with opportunities and possibilities. Therefore, the next steps along this journey for me will be to attend future practice development schools and international conferences to network, and to develop and enhance my knowledge and skills as a practice developer. Ultimately, I would like to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills to guide and enhance the development of others and assume the role of critical companion (Titchen, 2004; Crisp and Wilson, 2011).

In addition, I will continue to integrate practice development throughout all the undergraduate and postgraduate courses I teach in the programme. Through the presence of other faculty in my classroom, I am receiving requests to explore and discuss how I am using practice development activities to support and enhance student engagement and learning. I am also seeking learning and teaching grants to support future research studies where these methods within undergraduate and postgraduate courses will be the focus of study.

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