



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Using creative writing to explore facilitation skills in practice

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Abstract

Background: Facilitation skills are key to the effective use of practice development strategies. Students on a masters degree in practice development and innovation undertake a module on facilitation skills that incorporates the use of a creative writing piece to explore facilitation. The aim of this article is to critically reflect on the use of creative writing within an assignment from the lecturer's perspective.

Critical reflection: The Rolfe et al. (2001) model of reflection will be used to structure the reflections, considering the questions 'What?', 'So what?' and 'Now what?'. This will form the basis of a discussion of concerns about the assessment method, students' thoughts, relationship to practice development and evidence of effectiveness of the strategy. Examples of creative writing from the students will be used to demonstrate the diversity of the approach.

Ethics: All students have given permission for their work to be included.

Discussion: Using creative writing can be freeing for students as they can use their voice to explore a topic. For the lecturer, courage is needed to facilitate this expression but it is rewarding as it links to the principles of practice development to embed new ways of working. Important within the process is the need to give students 'permission' to use a non-traditional style of writing; lecturers may benefit from practising the technique themselves to feel comfortable with the creative writing strategy.

Conclusion: Creative writing offered an opportunity to explore facilitation in different ways and relate it to different aspects of real and imagined life. This paper shows that creative writing can be used successfully by students to engage in novel ways of thinking. However, future actions identify the importance of guidance regarding relevance to academia and ensuring the lecturer is familiar with the aim and techniques of the process when using it for masters-level assessment.

Implications for practice:

- Creative writing may empower students to change their approach to practice development
- Lecturers need effective ways to facilitate this process
- Facilitative questioning offers a novel way to challenge and support students' ideas

Keywords: Practice development, creative writing, facilitation

Introduction

Facilitation skills are a key element of practice development strategies (Trede and Titchen, 2012) and the idea of being a creative and active learner is thought to be central to professional and practice development (Dewing, 2010). Canterbury Christ Church University offers a distance learning masters

programme in practice development that enables students to develop these skills within their own work setting through a variety of learning strategies. This paper explores the use of a creative writing piece to examine facilitation skills in a contemporary way and uses a process of critical reflection, employing the reflective model of Rolfe et al. (2001) to discuss the effectiveness of this strategy from a lecturer's perspective. Examples of students' stories/narratives are included, with the students' permission.

Background

Creativity can be viewed as putting something together in a new way and has often been associated with originality and effectiveness (Kara, 2015). Creative writing has been described as a form of artistic expression that transmits meaning through use of, for example, narratives, short stories, poetry and fiction (Duke University, nd). However, 'creative non-fiction' is a term used to explain writing based on factual information but transmitted in a more stylised way that transcends the normal boundaries of academia (Literature Wales, 2016). Creativity is seen as one of the attributes of practice developers (Sanders et al., 2013) and 'facilitated active learning' is incorporated into the practice development conceptual framework (McCormack et al., 2013, p 9). Facilitation can include a range of methods to promote learner engagement, and Dewing et al. (2014) include a number of creative approaches that can be used to explore topics. Therefore, a creative writing approach was developed for use within a masters facilitation module.

As part of the module examining facilitation skills in practice, students were asked to analyse and evaluate factors influencing facilitation and develop 'a creatively inspired 500-word short story/narrative'. They were given some guidance, being told they could use a particular author, genre or style and were to focus on an aspect of facilitation. No referencing was required. This narrative/story formed part of a 4,000-word assignment and could be inserted in full at any point where the student felt it was relevant. The students undertaking the module are generally experienced practitioners who are influential in their work setting, such as clinical nurse specialists or ward managers.

The following reflection will outline the 'What?', 'So what?' and 'Now what?' based on the reflective model of Rolfe et al. (2001). This model is founded on the principles of reflexive practice, which are consistent with practice development attributes (Sanders et al., 2013). Jasper and Rosser (2013) note that the Rolfe et al. model combines the work of several theorists and, beyond its three main areas, includes a number of cues to deepen reflection. I like its approach – it is succinct but promotes analysis while focusing on what could be improved. This fits with Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning theory, which encourages the use of personal reflection to identify where learning has occurred; Hoggan (2016) highlights that narratives can be part of this process. The transformative nature of practice development suggests that this could be a useful approach to change understanding.

Reflection – What?

The use of narratives for learning is not new and has been used successfully in other settings to promote personal and professional knowledge (Schwind et al., 2012). Narratives are accounts that can be true or fictitious, and I have used patients' personal accounts in undergraduate education (patientstories.org.uk), which were well received by the students. Ironside (2006) believes that a narrative pedagogy in nurse education encourages students to draw on experience and interpret their thinking, and challenges assumptions – all of which are important to change practice. Using narratives as creative non-fiction for masters-level students was an exciting opportunity but I was concerned about how I would be able to guide students in the creative process. I was also relatively new to directing students in practice development methodology and was learning about many of its principles and trying to apply them within the educational setting.

I felt that students often think they need to use a formula to complete a module successfully, and allowing innovation can be daunting when they have been previously encouraged to follow a structure. Although creative methods are being promoted within nurse education to enable freedom and

diversity in learning (Chan, 2013), students are often familiar with a more didactic form of teaching; this resonates with my previous experience with undergraduate students. However, I was keen for the masters students to engage with the activity, as original thinking about practice issues is fundamental to the practice development journey (McCormack and Dewing, 2013). A creative writing approach fits well with this philosophical viewpoint.

I hoped to enable the students to develop their creativity in their writing and felt this might help them identify how creative strategies can influence thinking. This links with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2009), which encourages adult learners to self-reflect and examine their assumptions, and is consistent with practice development, which aims to unpick values and beliefs that affect practice (Sanders et al., 2013). Via creative writing, I aimed to encourage a shift in students' consciousness to help them explore their understanding of facilitation and, ultimately, affect their feelings and actions as Hoggan (2016) suggests in his transformative learning metatheory.

Initially the students appeared quite anxious about the creative writing piece and asked for examples through discussion boards and meetings. Titchen and McMahon's (2013) chapter on practice development as radical gardening was offered as an illustration but students were encouraged to be original in their ideas. As a lecturer I was concerned that students would find the creative writing style unfamiliar and difficult but one student said that she found the opportunity 'freeing' and that it enabled her to draw on experience rather than being constrained. This comment seems to confirm Chan's (2013) view of the benefits of creativity for students so it challenged my own initial assumptions.

Reflection – So what?

Practice development principles focus on person-centred care and workplace culture (Manley et al., 2013) but include the professional remit of using the best available evidence to support care strategies (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2015a). The practice development masters module uses a distance learning approach with an emphasis on workbased learning to develop knowledge and skills. The students have responsible roles within busy work settings but I was encouraged to see them engage with the activities within the module to develop their facilitation skills (Kaner, 2014). The fact that facilitation skills were important to many of their positions and their desire to bring a participatory approach to their workplaces seemed to be evident in their engagement.

I am keen for students to succeed and gain good grades and I wondered if this was behind my wish to continue giving direction, which could have lessened the 'freeing' aspect of the work. This challenged me to consider whether my own desire to be needed and valued by students could, particularly for masters level students, be counterproductive and frustrate them when the aim of masters level study is to promote originality and application (Quality Assurance Agency, 2010). I consider myself to have a constructivist approach to learning (Legg et al., 2009) that promotes students' ability to build their own knowledge with the tutor simply facilitating this process, and the distance learning materials in the masters programme have been developed with this in mind as practice development is about identifying issues and enabling change (McCormack et al., 2013). However, I realised that my desire for the students to be successful might translate into a directive approach rather than one that values the students' contributions to learning.

Universities are often judged by their results (The Complete University Guide, 2016) and lecturers can find it difficult to 'let go' of a didactic teaching style when student-centred methods are introduced (McCabe and O'Connor, 2014). Practice development, however, has an emphasis on practitioners' central role in developing sustainable change in the workplace (Manley et al., 2013) and student assessments need to be relevant to promote this.

Kathrin Hirter's story about an orphan needing to find snowflakes for a king highlighted the importance of dialogue with self during the facilitation process. This resonated with me because I needed that dialogue with self to heighten my awareness of my own concerns around encouraging creativity in academic work.

'Estrella was desperate and walked further and further away from the castle. Suddenly, a beautiful white fairy appeared. With a beautiful soft voice, she asked: "How can I help you, my child?" "I need to capture snowflakes to bring them back to the prince", Estrella answered. The fairy whispered: "Love yourself. Then you will succeed in everything. Dig a hole in the ground until you hit water. Look closely at what you see on the surface of the water, this will provide you with a solution", and disappeared.

'Estrella started to dig a hole. After some time she hit water, crystal clear, which filled the hole like a little pond. Looking at the glittering surface, she saw a face. "Who are you?", she asked and moved to take a closer look. Suddenly, she realised that she was the reflection in the water. She recognised her golden hair and the snowflakes caught in her curls. "Is this really me?", she asked, and knew that she would never be alone any more because by dialoguing with her inner self, she had discovered a valuable companion' (Kathrin Hirter, creative writing extract).

Students did express apprehension about undertaking a narrative, seeming particularly concerned about what they should include. They also needed reassurance that referencing was not required. It made me reflect that healthcare is based on an outcome-driven model (Department of Health, 2010) that often requires adherence to set protocols, so opportunities for creativity can be restricted. However, I wondered if university targets and policies echo this focus, with the outcome being student success. Practice development strategies aim to promote problem solving in new ways and I wished to highlight how a narrative or story could be used by students in practice development work within their own setting. Claire Lippiatt is a project manager at an NHS trust based in the south of England and her story reflected some of my own experiences:

'I naturally find myself looking for early resolution, but the situation needs to be understood and methods applied. I have developed an understanding of resistance and how normal it is for an uneasy energy to exist. And importantly I am beginning to accept that there is an attitude that has to start from within me. I can frame my attitude and like a painting, others can admire it, critique it, not understand it or rebel against it. But I remain there, hanging on the wall. I sometimes need help to straighten myself again, like any picture that hangs on a wall, slightly tilted.



'Similarly if I were to be sarcastic, disengaged, dragging up what is already known to others, then surely like a tilted picture I would become irritating to others. They would want to straighten me, like a wonky picture hanging on a wall. And I am determined to not push away those characteristics in others' (Claire Lippiatt, creative writing extract).

This story holds a message for lecturers – the need to reflect facilitation skills in their actions and to draw on facilitation theory in their own practice. I reflected that lecturers need to enable person-centred relationships, as Titchen et al. (2013, p 111) say, by listening and hearing, sharing appropriately, being authentic and being caring. One of the challenges is that, on a distance learning course, the students have limited face-to-face contact with lecturers and are reliant on electronic communication. Brookshire et al. (2013) note the benefits of online learning as students can work at their own pace and fit around work commitments, and this is certainly true for these practice development students. However, the negatives aspects of ‘virtual’ online learning include the difficulty of group interaction and a potential lack of motivation (Brookshire et al., 2013). In practice development, feedback is a key aspect when facilitating individuals or groups (Titchen et al., 2013) so the lack of opportunity to obtain face-to-face feedback about the creative writing piece may have meant I overestimated students’ anxieties when they were actually enjoying the novel approach.

So what was my new understanding from reflecting on this situation? Facilitation requires feedback but also questioning skills (Kaner, 2014) and the creative writing was one way to articulate this. Talking about ‘May the facilitation force be with you’, Kerry O’Neill offered an insight into her journey:

‘In a Galaxy not too far away, a practice development journey is occurring – my practice development journey, which is creating within me a special set of skills called facilitation. Facilitation is like “the Force” described in the Star Wars films, so powerful and mighty yet so deeply subtle and sensitive that recipients may not appreciate the skill involved in its delivery.

‘To the naked eye, I don’t look any different but from within I am changing. I can adjust depending upon the context and person I am working with, I actively listen and give and receive constructive feedback all within a high support, high challenge arena.

‘The facilitation force is making me aware of the impact I have on others. Using these new found skills changes how people act around me. It’s like I have a power over them, I can make them want to change their practice by challenging them in a more supportive way often by the way I question’ (Kerry O’Neill, creative writing extract).

Looking back, I wonder whether I could have questioned the students’ journeys in greater depth through the high challenge/high support that practice development methodology embraces (Titchen et al., 2013). Heron’s (1976) six-category intervention analysis is widely used as a method to structure questioning to achieve more effective facilitation. Heron (1999) developed his ideas of facilitative intervention further by considering hierarchical, co-operative and autonomous modes of facilitation and how the mode and style of questioning chosen affects the process. This led me to consider how this depth of questioning and high challenge/high support could be achieved in a distance learning setting where the nuances of face-to-face communication can be lost.

The issues raised by the use of a creative writing piece to explore facilitation were:

- The potential of such a method to empower students to change their approach to practice development
- The need for the lecturer to find an effective way to facilitate this process
- The need for facilitative questioning to challenge and support students’ ideas

Now what?

The three stories I have included as examples are very different in their approach: a fictional representation, a visual representation and one that draws on emotions. Wells (2011) talks about how students need to find their own voice within higher education – one that complements their learning and writing styles – and this seemed to be reflected here. ‘Learning to learn reflectively’ was a phrase used by Wells (2011, p 112) and he felt students were nervous about this initially. This

ability to reflect is key in practice development and creative strategies to encourage different ways of thinking and problem solving are needed (Titchen and McMahon, 2013). Each of the creative writing pieces presented here related clearly to the aims of the module and linked well with the rest of the assignment around the students' facilitation skills; the stories did not feel out of place within the assignment structure. Also, the creative writing drew on the students' practice experience and, as the role of practice development is to influence the workplace (Manley et al., 2013), so it gave a different way to examine the topic.

For this module in future, I would use better questioning techniques to facilitate students' thinking around developing their stories. Students said they found it difficult to find examples to guide them and part of the journey maybe to empower them to find their own voice:

'I tried to find examples of narratives but could not find anything of use. I wonder if future groups will benefit from reading our work as I have been amazed at the different way we have all approached it, which has confirmed that there is no "right way"' (Kerry O'Neil, 21.7.2015, personal communication).

I was also interested in the areas that were addressed in the stories as they reflected the issues that students had to grapple with when using facilitation. The creative writing pieces show the anxiety that students often experience when they are learning facilitation skills that require insight and tact (Kaner, 2014) and the positive effect on practice when facilitation promotes new thinking. Kathrin comments about the value she found in writing her story:

'This story tells me about my own journey as a facilitator. It is important to manage one's own ego and ensure that the interaction with the others remains unbiased and neutral. This allows the facilitator to stay authentic, calm and self-centred. Only by staying detached from the group dynamics can a facilitator be supportive and empowering to the group. By writing the story I realised my feelings' (Kathrin Hirter, 13.7.2015, personal communication).

Feelings were evident in all the creative writing pieces, and values and beliefs about both practice development and facilitation were embedded in the writing. This may reflect the journey of practice development that McCormack and Dewing (2013) discuss but I think it also encompasses the growth of the individual and development of self-awareness. Self-awareness within facilitation is vital for the facilitator to adapt to situations and learn from experiences (Titchen et al., 2013). Thus, creative writing may be particularly useful as a novel way to promote reflexivity within practice development and could also be useful for other courses where reflection is important.

Each of the pieces used here outlines the values and beliefs underpinning the students' practice and there seems to be an aspect of enlightenment where students realised that not everyone had the same stance. The Johari Window (Luft and Ingham, 1955) outlines that people have aspects of themselves that they are open about and areas that they are unaware of or 'blind' too. Activities that promote self-awareness take the person through a process of self-discovery, which may also be shared with others, and the creative writing process seemed to give the students insights into their own hidden area. Consideration could be given to combining this with a critical ally, critical friend or critical companion approach to improve novice practice developers' facilitation skills further (Hardiman and Dewing, 2014). A multifaceted approach, including creative writing, that promotes self-discovery may aid personal and professional development. This journey of self-discovery seems to be evident in Kerry's expression of her feelings about using the story:

'I felt anxious about having to write a creative piece but once I had made a start I did enjoy the experience.'

'For me it was a chance to really explore my emotions and really reflect on my experiences and my journey from a facilitation perspective. Sometimes I think we get lost in data analysis and

performance and I think all our stories helped us to acknowledge how facilitation can assist us through the bad times. It gave me a chance to add some context to my work and express my own opinions without finding reference to someone who shared or disagreed with my view' (Kerry O'Neill, 21.7.2015, personal communication).

From my perspective as a lecturer this demonstrated how creative writing can complement other academic approaches, particularly in an area that requires self-reflection. However, this piece was used as part of a summative assessment and, if the creative writing process is reflexive, incorporating stories into formative and developmental strategies might be more enabling for student development. The masters programme included an opportunity to practise creative writing before the summative assessment but including this as part of an enabling relationship may promote reflexivity and personal development in a more robust way.

The workplace culture of many healthcare settings can be driven by outcomes, as already noted (Department of Health, 2010), and this may impact on student expectations within academic settings because they are focused on the assignment rather than the developmental process. This focus could have led students to worry whether they had done the creative writing piece in the 'right' way! As a lecturer, I needed confidence that it was an enabling exercise and needed to convey this to students, which Chan (2013) concurs with. I was challenged that I should undertake more creative writing myself – for example, the use of metaphor to develop my own self-awareness and gain insight into the students' experiences of the process. Some students said they found the initial writing provoked anxiety but others found it invigorating. Thus, the opportunities for students to explore their experience in a unique way can be freeing and give deeper insight and I think this should be encouraged. However, Klimova (2014) notes that there are cultural aspects to writing and exploration of this may be needed to ensure some students are not disadvantaged, such as where English is a second language. This would certainly need consideration for a multicultural society, such as the UK.

Conclusion and action plan

The use of creative writing as part of an academic masters-level assignment has encouraged a different form of engagement that should enhance student reflexivity in facilitation. The approach could be incorporated into other aspects where self-awareness is needed and might be a novel approach for developing practice, such as for compiling Nursing and Midwifery Council revalidation evidence (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2015b).

My key actions from the incorporation of this approach are to:

- Discuss with students how creative writing can enhance reflexivity in facilitation
- Practise using creative writing myself to develop my own self-awareness and understand the practicalities as well as the feelings it provokes
- Be more explicit about the value of the approach and give clear 'permission' for students to use new ideas
- Develop formative opportunities and enable reflection using high support/high challenge approaches
- Use facilitative questioning, possibly with the Johari Window, to uncover students' hidden areas (Luft and Ingham, 1955)

The use of creative writing for masters-level students within healthcare was an innovative approach. The benefits that emerged – of promoting reflection, facilitating problem solving and unpicking values and beliefs – could make it a particularly valuable tool in the context of practice development where creativity is promoted as a beneficial aspect of the process.

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