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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Courageous collaboration in co-constructing learning and teaching resources

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Abstract

Background: This paper describes the experiences of a group of academics in a metropolitan university who were invited to collaborate in the co-construction of a postgraduate nursing subject. The principles of practice development and person-centred practice informed our ways of working. This reflection was undertaken by unpacking shared assumptions, using Mezirow's transformative model of critical reflection.

Aim: The aim of this reflection was to share the experiences of an academic team in collaboratively designing face-to-face learning opportunities for a masters of nursing subject and to invite others to consider this valuable way of working.

Conclusions: Three conclusions were realised within the reflection. First, meaningful connections can be established in the virtual space through the development of authentic relationships. Second, working collaboratively and feeling valued for our contributions can lead to a meaningful investment in time preparing to facilitate learning. And last, having the courage to create a safe space where vulnerability, creativity and flourishing could occur can enhance the facilitation experience and the connection with the students.

Implications for practice:

- This reflection demonstrated collaborative design can effectively occur in the virtual world, although more research is required to enhance the limited literature covering virtual connections in teams
- Having explored the impact of facilitation in a team, a future challenge is how students could be authentically engaged in the collaborative design process of resources

Keywords: Collaboration, inclusion, participation, virtual connections, human flourishing

Background

A group of five academic staff, a mixture of sessional and permanent, collaborated to review and co-construct learning and teaching resources for a postgraduate nursing subject in a masters of nursing programme in a metropolitan university in New South Wales, Australia. The subject explores care and compassion through a person-centred lens, and invites students to gain an understanding of their roles in developing and sustaining healthful workplace cultures. This was an opportunity to co-construct postgraduate workshops that support active learning opportunities (Dewing, 2010) enabling students to use their own experiences, introduce critical creativity and engage in critical dialogue to fully explore and consider the constructs in the subject. It challenged us, both as individuals and as a collective, to develop our understanding and skills as facilitators of learning. This journey was transformative and supported our own flourishing, and we would like to encourage others to consider this as a valuable way of working in a truly collaborative team.

The co-construction processes resonate well with participatory practice development principles, where collaboration, inclusion and participation are crucial to ensure all stakeholders are heard (Manley et al., 2013). In the review process, the students provided feedback on the course content and what they would find most beneficial in workshops to support their learning; their thoughts were incorporated into the revised programme. We hoped by participating in this process we would influence the development of a person-centred learning culture and enhance student engagement (O'Donnell et al., 2017) and interaction during a series of three educational workshops.

As part of our own learning we have critically reflected on the collaborative design experience and have been guided in our meaning making by Mezirow's critical reflection (1997, p 222). We undertook a process of shared reflection where we authentically challenged each other to identify and unpack our assumptions on this new way of working together. We use the word 'authentic' as we felt we had developed relationships where we could communicate our thoughts openly and honestly, and we were also open to reflecting on different viewpoints. We were surprised that some of our existing frames of reference required redefining as part of this process. Mezirow considers that adults have '….a coherent body of experience – associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their life world' (1997, p 5). In critically reflecting and challenging our own assumptions and frames of reference we have been enabled to change our pre-conceptions of the experience of working collaboratively in this process. We would like to share our learning by unpacking the assumptions that follow.

Reflection on assumptions

On reflection, the team agreed that our first assumption was the belief that we would take a passive rather than active role in contributing to each stage of the teaching process, from planning, developing to implementing, as had been our previous experience. Initially, we felt the subject coordinator (MM) would be responsible for decision making on course content, delivery and approach and would naturally assume a leadership and managerial role. Plowman et al. (2007) suggest that traditional leadership models situate power and influence within the individual and success within the leader's capacity to plan, predict and direct behaviour. In the 1930s, Lewin proposed autocratic leadership was the most powerful and influential, with democratic leadership being less authoritative (Billig, 2014). Our assumptions about autocratic leadership style were challenged; what we experienced was quite different and far exceeded the expectations of even a democratic leader.

Initially the subject coordinator facilitated two exercises: values clarification and ways of working. These engaged each team member equally in establishing roles, expectations and boundaries. A creative representation of these shaped our decision making, collaboration and contributions to the process, and also supported our ability to be authentic in our interactions, informed by respect and care for each other (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Creative representation of values and ways of working

Collaborative leadership of this kind is described by Burns and Mooney (2018) as transcollegial and focuses primarily on the use of collaborative processes to enhance relationships between group members, and to ensure the contributions of all team members are equally valued so power and influence can be mobilised depending on needs beyond the individual. In this instance the facilitated foundational processes supported the successful collaboration that occurred.

Manley and McCormack (2003) highlight the importance of transformational facilitation as an effective strategy to ensure collaboration, inclusiveness and participation in change processes. We believe that having a subject coordinator who actively facilitated group practices in a transformational way challenged our assumptions of leadership, power and influence, and enabled the emergence of shared ownership, risk taking and creativity. Team members felt respected and held in high regard, and this motivated them to contribute openly and enthusiastically.

Seligman (2011) suggests that flourishing is experienced when attention is paid to positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement (PERMA). Collaborative processes focused our efforts toward PERMA and resulted in team members experiencing our joint working as productive and empowering. This is captured by the team's summary of our experience:

> *'Being an active member helped with doing the doing'* and *'There was a perception that we encouraged each other to flourish'.*

Our second assumption was that virtual connection would be difficult. We all assumed connection between the team members would be difficult because of the physical distance between us and as a result of the various virtual platforms we used to communicate (we worked across two different university campuses). All communication and meetings were held via various virtual means – Zoom, Skype, WebEx and email – as well as telephone. As a virtual team, we each quietly anticipated that it would be difficult to connect meaningfully and emotionally without face-to-face encounters. White (2014) suggests that emotionally participating in virtual meetings is difficult and we also perceived there would be a virtual and emotional 'wall' between the members; we weren't expecting meaningful connection within this team.

However, we discovered a deep sense of emotional connection and unity as a facilitation team. When we first met in the virtual space we were intentionally asked to share a bit about ourselves, our values and what we were bringing to the team. The intentional space and dialogue enabled us to establish foundations for our connections, based on shared values. We were able to identify individual strengths in team members and use them for tasks and ideas on an ongoing basis. The collaborative and values-based approach meant leadership and responsibility for the subject was shared. Trust was quickly established and everyone's contribution was valued, which added to the feeling of connection within the team. We reflected regularly on the workshops delivered and shared feedback. So in contrast to White's suggestion (2014), emotional participation in a virtual team wasn't difficult after the intentional space was created to enable safety and sharing.

Establishing the psychological safety among team members allowed us openly to share information and discuss challenges within our created safe space each time we joined together. By sharing our values with each other we were able to establish ways of working that felt authentic and honest, meaning our subsequent connections with each other had the same attributes. Han et al. (2017) support establishing a space of psychological safety and shared leadership for a virtual team, and go further, saying it facilitates team creativity.

We found that 'socio-emotional' aspects of relationships – so important in terms of establishing productivity and creativity within teams – can be achieved in a virtual space (Han et al., 2017). We met regularly on various virtual meeting platforms, and never experienced the anticipated invisible emotional wall. We found ourselves to be well connected members of a virtual team. We discovered the key components of our connection were psychological safety, trust, shared values and shared leadership (White, 2014; Han et al., 2017). Our strong connections filled us with the courage to connect with students. Our biggest learning was that the emotional team connection actually came easier than expected, despite its virtual nature.

Our final assumption was that there would be uncertainty about the commitment required and what investment in time would be needed. The very premise of Mezirow's (1994, page 224) theory of transformational learning is the 'disconcerting dilemma'. When asked to facilitate the workshops we envisaged the content requirements would be delivered to us, prepared diligently by the subject coordinator, and we would facilitate the workshops based on previous knowledge and experience of the subject content. Our co-creative space was an intriguing innovation, but how would it fit with our expectations of academia and our established way of working?

Challenging our own orientation of feelings of uncertainty turned out to be an amazing opportunity. Dialogue among the team allowed us to participate and share without feelings of vulnerability. The opportunity to combine multiple views within the shared context opened each of us up to learning, and contributed to self and team flourishing (Dewing and McCormack, 2017). Increased avenues for communication embedded our trust of each other and the process further.

We were concerned the collaborative process would infringe on our time but it reduced the need for individual preparation and was an efficient use of our preparation time. Our thoughts and feelings of what should be part of the workshops garnered immediate feedback in team discussions. This allowed building of comfort and confidence in the subject matter, as well as greater understanding of the meaning of the content through this process of communication and sharing. Issues or concerns regarding the workshops could be aired openly and the discussions benefited from the diverse experience in the team.

Meetings were organised at intervals to enable time between for reflection on the discussions and the opportunity to consider others' input and strengths, and the reasons behind certain decisions on the content.

Team discussions allowed innovation to shine and increased the facilitative responsiveness throughout the workshops. Each follow-up feedback session with the team also empowered us to improve and be reflexive for future workshops. Ultimately, the collaborative process provided us with the confidence to follow content and maintain consistency in the workshops but also the ability to adapt quickly and flexibly to meet student needs.

Implications for practice

How to include postgraduate students in the design of learning and teaching resources

As a facilitation team we have highlighted that time was a challenge within the process of collaborative design and this is also true for postgraduate students, who often have other family and work commitments. The next stage of this work would involve enabling the students to authentically become part of the process for designing future teaching and learning resources.

Having the courage to show vulnerability and to share with others in order to co-construct curriculum

Brown (2012) in *Daring Greatly* challenged people to consider that living wholeheartedly requires us to have the courage to be vulnerable. She proposes that extraordinary things happen when you have the courage to show your vulnerability; in order to co-develop curriculum we all had to show our vulnerabilities and consider our strengths and limitations. In doing so, we feel we were able to allow each others' strengths to shine, and our contributions were innovative and authentic. Courage was required for the subject coordinator to open their learning resources to review and critique, and for the other facilitators of learning to put their ideas forward and challenge the existing materials. Overall, we feel the courage to have voice and contribute wholeheartedly provides the platform for developing quality teaching and learning resources.

Begin with a clarification of values and beliefs and then ensure you remain true to them

The process of co-development of teaching and learning resources began with a clarification of the facilitation team's values and beliefs. Knowing who we were and what we believed in set up our processes with a shared understanding, provided clarity for our intentions and built trust in the facilitation team. For us this was congruent with the person-centred approach to teaching espoused by the school we work in, and with our own personal beliefs about ways of working (O'Donnell et al., 2017). Implicit in a person-centred approach to learning and teaching is that the people who will deliver the materials have the ability to inform the development of the teaching and learning resources. As a facilitation team it was important that we found the right balance of flexibility and structure to have consistency in learning across three different groups in two geographical locations, while enabling the facilitators to be innovative and responsive to the different groups of students. Having clear values from the outset and including all facilitators in the co-design of the resources provided a platform for consistency and innovation, enabling a person-centred approach tailored to each group and at times the individual's needs.

Conclusion

Overall this reflective process has provided the team the opportunity to consider our individual and shared learning and growth as facilitators of learning. We recognise the flourishing that has come from our collaborative experience and the value this has contributed to the overall experience for us as facilitators and for the students. Our next challenge is to consider how we can authentically include students in the process of co-design. We realise that we hold assumptions for this similar to those we had for ourselves, but we hope these assumptions will be challenged as ours have been in this collaborative, empowering process.

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