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CRITICAL REFLECTION

A critical reflection on the transformation from bachelor of nursing student to researcher

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Abstract

Background: The school of nursing at the University of Wollongong developed an innovative approach entitled the 'Students as Researchers Internship' to provide an opportunity for students who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders to experience research as co-researchers. This programme was developed in response to a need to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons who complete research degrees and progress to academic careers in nursing. The initial programme included two students who identified as Aboriginal women in their final year as bachelor of nursing students, with both employed as research assistants.

Aim: This article aims to share the students' perspective of their learnings from participating in the Students as Researchers Internship programme through a critical reflection using the Mezirow model of reflection.

Conclusion: The opportunity to be a research assistant and co-researcher during the final year of the bachelor of nursing degree offered the students a platform to gain skills, and an understanding of the research process and the application of research in practice. It also provided the experience of being supported in their academic studies.

Implications for practice:

- Mezirow's model of reflection provides an effective framework for students to unearth their assumptions and learnings from experience
- Developing skills and experience in research can transform undergraduate students' understanding of the application of research in their practice
- Participation in writing ethics applications and research publications offers students insight into the skills of referencing, academic writing and critical thinking
- The experience as co-researchers enabled students who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders to consider future career opportunities in research

Keywords: Critical reflection, co-researchers, student, transformational learning, Cultural Safety

Background and context

In the Australian context, the gap between the health outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is significant, and one of the worst in the world (McGough et al., 2018). The term 'Indigenous' is used within this article to describe peoples who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous people do not universally accept this term as they are not a homogeneous group, but a unique race of many nations and tribes (Moyle et al., 2019). Indigenous people perceive care as more Culturally Safe when it is provided by Indigenous health professionals. In Australia, there are low numbers of Indigenous nursing students, and they are (up to 23%) more likely to leave the degree course than any other group of students (Taylor et al., 2019). This also means there is a low number of Indigenous nurses undertaking research and entering academic careers. Many Indigenous people consider completing a PhD to be out of their reach (Department of Health, 2014; Taylor et al., 2019; Sherwood et al., 2021).

In an attempt to encourage interest in research among Indigenous nursing students, the school of nursing at the University of Wollongong piloted a programme entitled 'Students as Researchers Internship'. Lasting for nine months, across two academic sessions, it targeted students who would potentially meet the criteria for an honours programme after completing their degree. Two students expressed interest from a possible 25, and they were supported with 100 hours of paid work as research assistants.

Over the two academic sessions, both students were invited to be involved in all aspects of the research process, with consideration given to ensure they were able to fulfil their study requirements. This paper has been completed by one of the nursing students (MK) in consultation with the second student who chose not to be an author. The perspectives presented are largely representative of both students' views.

Table 1: Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning

Phase	Description
1	A disorienting dilemma
2	A self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
3	A critical assessment of assumptions (epistemic, sociocultural or psychic)
4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6	Planning a course of action
7	Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8	Provisional trying of new roles
9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

Reflection

As Indigenous students enrolled in the school of nursing, we were given an opportunity to work as co-researchers alongside academic staff. This gave us the chance to gain an understanding of Cultural Safety and wider aspects of the research processes (including writing an academic paper). Cultural Safety here can be understood to encompass a supportive and safe environment for individuals who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Our initial thoughts and assumptions were that research activities were out of reach for Indigenous students and that we might not be very helpful in the research project. However, throughout our nine months of involvement, we were constantly surprised by how our voice was heard and our input was valued. For example, during research meetings academics

would seek and consider our opinions before making a decision on crucial research matters. Using the 10 phases of Mezirow's (1990) reflective model (Table 1), this article will examine our assumptions, feelings and experiences during the time of our internship. Mezirow's (1990) model was chosen as it supports deep critical reflection through development of new perspectives and transformation of personal understanding of the world. Its application enabled us to explore our transformational learning journey and use previous and learned skills to implement a future plan.

Disorienting dilemma

The first phase of Mezirow's model considers a disorienting dilemma, by looking at new experiences that do not match our previous ones. Acting as co-researchers was a new experience, offering insights into the complexity of researching, collecting and analysing data, and examining literature. The academic staff supported our exposure to new challenging situations within the research project as we progressed through our nursing degree, and this helped us improve our writing skills and assessment task outcomes. While some of the tasks we completed as co-researchers had similarities with those we did as students, we had not previously experienced the level of analysis and research.

Self-examination

Phase two of Mezirow's model involves self-examination, with reflection on how past experiences are related to our current experiences. Acting as a co-researchers felt overwhelming at times due to the responsibilities associated with the phases of the research process, such as learning how to complete and submit an ethics application and implement strategies for data collection. Working alongside academics in the school of nursing gave us significant insight and advice for further developing the referencing, academic writing and critical thinking skills associated with our undergraduate studies. At times we did lack confidence in our abilities and potential but, as we progressed, we were able to identify the skills and knowledge we already possessed. Our experiences and feelings reflected those depicted by Taylor and colleagues (2019), who found that Indigenous students who are supported by academics develop skills in research and flourish in academic studies.

Critical assessment

Mezirow's third phase – a critical assessment of assumptions – asks us to assess and critique our previous assumptions with a view to analysing incorrect beliefs and remaining open to new information. As we began working as co-researchers, we realised we held a number of false and unrealistic assumptions with regard to our understanding of the research process and of Cultural Safety. We had been unaware of the challenges faced by researchers, including complex processes with ethics applications and extraction of the literature to inform research. One of our biggest assumptions was that using a survey to gain data from students would be easy; we believed that once we had promoted the survey, enough of our fellow students across all years and campuses would participate. However, we sometimes found it challenging to recruit participants despite the power we assumed we held as third-year students. Power over people is an interesting concept. Brown (2020) discusses the concepts of 'power over' and 'power with' people. We discovered we needed to actively address the place of perceived power and create a culture of influence rather than pressure with students.

As Indigenous students, we were unaware of the lack of literature supporting the definition of Cultural Safety and what this meant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experiencing an undergraduate nursing curriculum. This made it difficult to find evidence to support the information discussed in the research. Furthermore, after undertaking a subject on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health as part of our second-year studies, we held assumptions and concerns regarding the content, structure and layout of the subject. However, after an analysis of the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM) curriculum framework (2017), we were able to develop an understanding of the reasoning behind the learning and teaching processes. Before starting as co-researchers, we did not have access to information about the development and implementation of an Indigenous curriculum. As Indigenous students, we assumed we had developed

an understanding of Cultural Safety and how healthcare professionals embed it into care but, after examining the literature, speaking with co-researchers and collecting information, it was evident there were many aspects we were unaware of. For example, we did not know the term itself required capitalisation as a sign of respect for the identities, governments, institutions and collective rights historically considered illegitimate (CATSINaM, 2017). Also, as we began working with academic staff who were experienced in this area, we were unaware of the power we could hold as students in designing data-collection strategies, implementing surveys, and undertaking research development and coordination. We were given a variety of responsibilities within the research team and felt well respected and supported throughout our duties as co-researchers.

Recognition of shared experience

Stage four of Mezirow's model involves recognising that others have shared similar transformation processes and experienced similar situations. Acting as co-researchers, we felt fully supported by the academics within the school of nursing, and they often reassured us about their confidence in our potential. Their sharing of their own previous assumptions and insecurities with research and their ability to overcome hurdles validated our feelings as we progressed through our internship. It was also incredibly reassuring as students to have each other, and share common goals as co-researchers and future graduates. Furthermore, it was comforting having one of the academic staff identify as an Indigenous woman working alongside us, sharing our culture and new experiences. Support from Indigenous academics shows Indigenous students that achieving a career in research is possible, and helps to create a culturally safe environment for learning (Taylor et al., 2019; Sherwood et al., 2021).

Exploration of new skills

Mezirow's fifth stage is the exploration of new roles or actions – a focus on how new skills can be beneficial for new roles in the future. As students entering our last undergraduate session, we shared a passion for continuously developing new skills and knowledge to assist us in our future careers. The skills and knowledge we learned during our internship had a ripple effect across our lives as students: assisting us in our studies and exposing us to new training and future opportunities. Looking beyond our undergraduate degree, we can focus on implementing the experiences and knowledge gained as co-researchers in future practice as registered nurses. The opportunity reaffirmed our potential to further our studies as postgraduate students, and use our research knowledge to integrate evidence-based practice as healthcare professionals. I am now enrolled in an honours degree, something I would not have thought myself capable of before. Seeing research careers as a possibility was one of the aims of developing the Student as Researcher Internship programme, and to have one intern move to the honours programme is a positive outcome for the initiative, as well as for the nursing and midwifery workforce (Meyer et al., 2020).

A plan of action

Stage six of Mezirow's model is developing a plan for action, and considering how we build confidence in our abilities. Working alongside the school of nursing academics enabled us to feel supported and to develop confidence in our abilities and in our contributions to the team, and we actively sought opportunities to further advance the skills and knowledge we gained. Staying abreast of resources and evidence on Cultural Safety will help us implement our personal experiences with Indigenous healthcare and our understanding of Cultural Safety to advocate for the Indigenous peoples we care for as registered nurses. There are skills we can focus on to enhance our future research activity, which include academic writing, data analysis and innovative strategies for surveys. As we do this, and take forward our previously held knowledge, we can continue our contribution to research and strive to reach our full potential. This blend of inputs into our learning is analogous to active learning, a process described as using multiple intelligences and where the learner uses their senses to fully embody the learning process (Dewing, 2010; Middleton, 2013). The student experience as co-researcher was one where values and ways of working were explored to enable us to truly belong to ourselves and learn in ways that enabled us to flourish (Angelou and Elliot, 1989).

Acquiring knowledge and skills

The seventh stage of Mezirow's critical reflection model is the acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the plan, which requires us to reconsider our previous beliefs, develop a new perspective and plan a course of action. As we entered our role as co-researchers, we were required to do extensive research on the CATSINaM curriculum, using research databases and processes associated with obtaining ethics approval. We had the opportunity to attend a training session with the librarian to develop specific skills with reference-management software Endnote, and to search a variety of databases effectively. Furthermore, before starting our research we completed ethics training to obtain an ethics certificate. Being exposed to new web browsers, applications and databases enhanced our computer skills and understanding of different programmes to assist us in the research process and for our assessments as students. The development of serendipitous academic skills for students through experience as co-researchers appears to be absent from the literature, and this article can help to demonstrate those benefits.

Trying new roles

In consideration of stage eight of Mezirow's model, we can carry out the plan from the seventh stage to enable transformational learning. As we entered our last university session, we held the assumption that it would be challenging to apply ourselves equally to our research and our third-year studies. For some time, it was difficult to assign the time and dedication to each, but as we developed an effective routine, we were able to apply our knowledge and learning from each side to enhance the other. Implementing this balance was vital, and the lessons we learned in this respect will help us work to our full potential while maintaining a healthy lifestyle as we progress into our careers. Expanding on the skills learned as students and co-researchers can also potentially guide us through postgraduate studies, such as an honours programme. A realisation of the transformation we undertook through working as co-researchers has emerged through this reflective process. Change is challenging, and we were often caught up in that rather than reflecting on the learning opportunities.

Developing competence and self-confidence

Mezirow's ninth stage – development of competence and self-confidence in new roles – is about exploring and understanding changes through continuous learning. Feedback from other co-researchers while working on the article instilled confidence in our abilities and the extent to which we have contributed throughout the research process. Furthermore, the positive implications of our time as co-researchers was evident in our academic grades through improvements in our critical reflection, academic writing and referencing. Confidence in our abilities as co-researchers and students grew as a consequence.

Implementation of new perspectives

The final phase of Mezirow's critical reflection model concerns how we can successfully implement new perspectives and experiences into our plan. Our co-researcher role gave us a passion for research development and collaboration, and we gained an understanding and appreciation of academics' role in healthcare education and research. We also became clear about our potential to progress in our academic careers and expand on our research skills; working alongside the academics made us aware of the variety of career opportunities available, including participating in postgraduate studies. Although we are not yet certain about the path we will take, we both understand and appreciate the potential we have to contribute to Cultural Safety in healthcare and participation in future research endeavours. Our learning perspectives are forever changed; we know and understand this change will be continuous throughout our careers (Mezirow, 1990). Writing this article has highlighted that there is no need to fear change; we are now more open to embracing change.

Conclusion

Using Mezirow's (1990) critical reflection model has enabled us to analyse our previous assumptions, experiences and beliefs to guide us through new situations and recognise our transformational learning experiences. Before our co-researcher role, we had limited knowledge or understanding of

the processes of research but we were given a variety of opportunities to enhance our skills and support the research team. This has opened up career options we had been unaware of and instilled respect for the role of academics. Developing our personal network and support system within the research team guided us through our co-researcher role, helped us excel as students and made us more confident of becoming registered nurses.

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