Whitman's Legacy: The Art of Reflection in the Development of Empathy in Student Nurses

The goal of nurse educators is to produce nurses who practice safely and competently. This goal may cause them to lose sight of the need to promote the development of empathy, which is a “major component of the therapeutic relationship between nurses and patients” (Stover, 2010, p. 719). A nursing student may sympathize with a patient, but the acquisition or development of empathy may be more elusive; empathy requires respect for others and springs from a holistic perspective, wherein individuals experience and perceive things uniquely.

I have observed that nursing students engaged in a critical care clinical placement focus more on technical skills than on caring skills and sought a means of developing empathy and nurturing self-awareness, both of which contribute to the development of a professional identity. This article describes the informal execution of a reflective learning activity with the purpose of helping to develop these qualities in nursing students.

Background

Reflective writing affords nursing students an opportunity to focus inward to identify the meaning of any given experience (Fink, 2003). In addition to contributing to the development of empathy, reflection may also foster self-awareness, which is honed when one becomes aware of the values, attitudes, prejudices, needs, and beliefs (Cook, 1999) that mark him or her as unique.

During the American Civil War, poet Walt Whitman nursed his brother, George, who had been wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg; then Whitman moved to Washington, D.C., to comfort and support injured men of both armies. He visited them in hospitals and on the field, listening to their stories, tending their needs, drying their tears, and holding their hands as they died. Whitman’s “impromtu jottings…to refresh his memory of names and circumstances” (Walt Whitman Archive, n.d., para. 1) were published in Memoranda During the War, a book “of surpassing human interest…and such as no other book we should read possesses, unless it be the precious record of…Florence Nightingale at Scutari” (para. 1).

Collaborative Reflection Activity

In this learning activity, deliberate reflection was used to foster nursing students’ development of not only empathy for clients, clients’ family members, and colleagues (i.e., other students), but also their own self-awareness. Each week, students reflected on their experiences, responding first to the previous student’s entry, and although they may have described a specific situation, students maintained patient confidentiality at all times. The time required for this activity was approximately 30 minutes per week, and the resources required were few: small notebooks (provided by the instructor) and writing instruments.

The students who participated in an informal trial of this activity in the fall 2010 semester enjoyed reflecting on their nursing practice, as well as others’ experiences, and provided innumerable examples of enhanced empathy and self-awareness. For example, a student wrote:

It was hard not to judge this patient without knowing her H&P [sic]. But, if you saw how many [medications] she had, who wouldn’t judge? … These are events that we will encounter throughout our practice. Experience will only help us with these patients and not to pass judgment.

In addition to writing about the patients and people for whom the nursing students cared, as Whitman did in Memoranda During the War, students appeared to gain insights to practice, develop perspective, and place events into context by reading others’ reflections. The students’ responses suggest that reflective writing can be a valuable learner-centered activity that promotes nursing students’ development of empathy, as well as an enhanced self-awareness, which contributes to the development of a professional identity.

References


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