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Recommended Citation

Snyder, Melissa J. (2012). "Reconnecting with Your Passion: An Action Research Study Exploring Humanities and Professional Nursing," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/43>

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Reconnecting with Your Passion: An Action Research Study Exploring Humanities and Professional Nursing

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Abstract: The purposes of this study are to examine the process of how nurses engage in a professional development program that draws on reading and creative narrative writing related to their professional values and ideals and to examine the nurses' perspectives on how their involvement in the process and program relates to changes in their professional roles.

Healthcare organizations in most developed economies are witnessing unprecedented shortages of registered nurses (Ross, Polsky & Sochalski, 2005). This shortfall is real and is expected to persist into the future. Despite some easing of the nursing shortage due to the economic recession, the U.S. shortage is expected to grow to 260,000 registered nurses by 2025 (Buerhaus, 2009). The factors influencing this shortage are multidimensional including fewer nurses entering the profession, the aging of the current nursing workforce, and a shortfall in the number of nurse educators needed to educate future nurses (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2009). These trends play a significant role in raising the stress level of nurses, impacting job satisfaction and driving many nurses to leave the profession (Buerhaus, Donelan, Ulrich, Norman & Dittus, 2005).

In today's healthcare environment, it is imperative that healthcare organizations retain nurses in an effort to stabilize their workforce, improve patient outcomes, and avoid financial demise. However, effective strategies to promote retention depend on understanding factors influencing nurse retention. Nurse turnover tends to center around several key factors including inadequate staffing perpetuated by the current nursing shortage (Letvak & Buck, 2008), increasing workplace stress (McVicar, 2003), and the inability to provide care desired by the nurse and expected by the patient (Maben, Latter & Clark, 2007). When nurses face constraints on their ability to practice in a way that is congruent with their professional values and ideals and feel forced to compromise the professional values and standards of practice, they may experience moral distress. Moral distress is defined as "the physical or emotional suffering that is experienced when constraints prevent one from following the course of action one believes to be right" (Pendry, 2007, p. 217). Despite widespread concern and research regarding work environments in health care over the last two decades, many nurses continue to face serious challenges in fulfilling their commitments to patients receiving care. When a nurse's own values are breached and they experience moral distress because they are unable to provide the care they wish to provide; they may be ridden with guilt, suffer in silence or consider leaving the profession (VonPost, 1998).

As retention issues continue to mount, little attention has been paid to the factors that impact on the ability of professional nurses to maintain their professional values and ideals and provide high quality patient care. When nurses are faced with practice situations that force them to lower their expectations and practice in ways that are not congruent with their professional values and ideals, the risk of attrition from the profession increases (Maben et al., 2007). The study of medical humanities provides one approach to addressing this issue by utilizing the humanities as tools to embrace the complexities of human existence through deliberate

exploration of the human side of medicine focused upon such areas as the patient's experience of illness, the social and cultural issues surrounding illness and health, as well as the moral dimension of the physician-patient relationship (Hawkins, Ballard & Huffor, 2003; Dellasega et al., 2007). Each of these complex experiences speaks to and reflects upon the professional values and ideals of the healthcare provider. Many of the principles of medical humanities can be applied to the profession of nursing by exposing individuals to a wider range of human experiences. The use of humanities can lead to new ways of learning and practicing and aides in identifying and reconnecting with professional values and ideals (Dellasaga et al., 2007). A variety of humanities based strategies including journal writing (Gillis, 2001), concept-focused autobiographical writing (Clark & Rossiter, 2008), reading of literature (Jarvis, 2003, 2006) and expressive writing (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Lepore & Smythe, 2002) can be used to provide opportunities for reflection, sharing of experiences, and the promotion of well-being.

Recognizing the challenges of professional nurses to improve career satisfaction and well-being and to provide care that is congruent with their professional values and ideals, research is needed to explore how humanities based strategies can be used to assist nurses in addressing these issues. To accomplish this objective, this research project sought to investigate how a professional development program designed for registered nurses could utilize humanities based strategies to assist nurses in reconnecting with their professional values and ideals. More specifically, it meant exploring questions such as: How do nurses view the use of reading and creative writing as tools to reconnect with their professional values and ideals. What reading and creative writing strategies do nurses perceive to be most useful in helping them reconnect with their professional values and ideals? How does engagement with reading and creative writing influence career satisfaction and well-being in nurses? By addressing these questions and others, this study begins a process of identifying how humanities based strategies can be used to assist nurses in reconnecting with their professional values and ideals and provides a guide for designing professional development programs based on values and ideals. Therefore, the purposes of this study are to examine the process of how nurses engage in a professional development program that draws on reading and creative narrative writing related to their professional values and ideals and to examine the nurses' perspectives on how their involvement in the process and program relates to changes in their professional roles.

Theoretical Framework

The overall framework for this study is transformative learning theory. Transformative learning is intended to be a comprehensive, idealized, and universal model of the generic structures, elements, and processes of adult learning (Mezirow, 1994). Within the field of transformative learning, there are several theoretical perspectives that stem from the seminal work of Mezirow. The framework of this study builds upon several of these perspectives. The first perspective considers the work of Mezirow (1979, 1991) focusing on the cognitive and psycho-critical perspectives of transformative learning. Each of the four critical components of the process of transformative learning including the disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action are critical to the framework of this study (Mezirow, 1994, 2000). Next, Kegan's (2000) developmental perspective adds two key concepts to the theoretical framework of this study including the epistemological change and a move to greater self-authoring. Finally, some of the most contemporary work in transformative learning is in the direction of extrarational ways of learning. This study recognizes that learning takes place in the

rational or cognitive and the affective dimensions of the adult learner. For this reason, an integrated approach to transformative learning is used to establish the theoretical framework of this research.

Methodology

An action research design was the methodology for this study. Consistent with the purpose of this study, this design allows for the opportunity to gain insight into the process of implementing a professional development program utilizing humanities based approaches focused on professional values and ideals. Action research is learning by doing – a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). The action research design allowed for ample opportunity to try various humanities based strategies and to identify what approaches were most useful to the process of reconnecting with their professional values and ideals.

A process of self-selection was used to recruit participants for the study via a recruitment handout. Participants were required to meet specified criteria including current employment as a licensed, registered nurse, achievement of a baccalaureate degree or higher level of education, and a minimum of five years of experience as a registered nurse. Participants received ten continuing education credits for completing the entire professional development program. Eleven participants started and completed the professional development program. The participants were all women representing an array of specialty nursing practices. Three participants held master's degrees in nursing while the others held baccalaureate degrees. Their careers in nursing ranged from eight to more than 40 years and there were varied degrees of career satisfaction among the participants.

Study participants were required to actively participate in an eight session professional development program spanning approximately three months. The time frame for each session was approximately two hours in length and each session focused on a particular theme related to professional values and ideals such as empathy, integrity, accountability, and empowerment. The professional values and ideals focused upon in the program were identified and agreed upon by the participants. Participants were provided with a variety of readings predominantly focusing on the works of nurse authors. These readings encompassed several genres including excerpts from fiction and non-fiction books, essays, short stories, children's books, quotations and poetry. Prior to each session, participants were given three brief readings based on the identified theme. They could choose to read any or all of the pieces based on their individual interest. Also prior to the group session, the participants were asked to complete journal writings and respond to a writing prompt focused upon the specified theme. The participants had the freedom to determine the style of creative writing they would use. During the early stages of the program, the group sessions were facilitated by me, the primary investigator, but in two of the later sessions study participants volunteered to facilitate two of the sessions. The role of facilitator included selecting readings, developing questions for journal writing, identifying writing prompts and facilitating the discussions and activities during the group sessions. During the course of each group session, participants were asked to reflect upon the readings and were also given opportunities to share their writings. Along with discussion of the theme, participants also completed additional reading and creative writing activities during the group sessions. Data sources included journal entries, response to writing prompts, field notes, and transcriptions from

a pre and post participation interviews. The extensive volume of data was analyzed using a thematic analysis leading to the following findings.

Findings

The themes were separated into three categories including reading and writing and group sessions, reading and writing strategies found to be most useful, and influences on career satisfaction and well-being.

Reading and Writing and Group Work

Throughout this action research study, participants were required to be involved in multiple humanities based learning strategies involving reading, writing, and group work. Several themes emerged involving the use of reading and writing strategies to assist nurses in reconnecting with their professional values and ideals including: writing strategies are a challenge, writing is a personal pursuit, reading and writing provide a time for reflection, participation in these strategies is a source of personal nurturing, and reading and writing strategies help nurses reconnect with their foundational values.

The challenges of writing seemed to arise from one of three areas including the participants' personal beliefs that they are not good writers, recognition that they did not enjoy the writing process, and negative feedback regarding their writing abilities from previous educational experiences. As one participant indicated, "Any writing that requires me to clearly share my ideas with someone else can be a problem. I have never been good at it in school or in my job." Writing is a personal pursuit and places the writer in a vulnerable position. Participants wrote about very personal experiences and feelings. "These are highly personal thoughts not necessarily written for public consumption", wrote one participant. What writing does provide is an opportunity for reflection on personal and professional experiences. The reading and writing activities as well as the group sessions were viewed as vehicles for reflection by giving the nurses permission to take time to reflect. Through the activities one participant acknowledged, "I am looking at my thoughts and feelings. Without this opportunity, I do not give myself time to reflect or think about what I do". Therefore, participation in this professional development program offered an opportunity for the nurses to experience a time for personal nurturing. As one participant discovered, "Self-care is not selfish and the time I spend reading and writing and working on this program are benefits to my well-being". This time of self-nurturing and reflection led to a sense of reconnecting to foundational values and ideals. Each of the participants recognized that their core values and ideals had not changed from the beginning of their careers to the present. As participants, they were able to recall their original values and ideals while providing opportunities to reflect on their current thoughts and actions as nurses.

Most Useful Reading and Writing Strategies

Each of the participants acknowledged from the beginning of the study that reading was an enjoyable activity. Many of the readings were written by nurse authors and were found to be motivating and interesting for the participants. The participants identified a connection with the authors' messages and frequently modeled their writing after the readings they had completed. The brevity of the readings was also identified as being useful in keeping the participants involved despite their busy schedules. There were many writing strategies implemented throughout the program, but specifically four writing prompts or projects were considered to be

the most useful in providing the participants with an opportunity to explore their professional values and ideals. These included the prompts of *This I Believe about Being a Nurse...*, *My Journey into Nursing...*, and the writing projects including the illness narrative and found poem. Each of these strategies provided an opportunity for retrospection on past experiences while also providing a tool to explore the connection with current professional practice.

Influence on Career Satisfaction and Well-Being

Throughout the study, the participants frequently commented on the new appreciation for nursing they were gaining as a result of participation in this study. The nurses expressed a renewed appreciation for their individual roles as nurses, pride in being a part of an exceptional group of individuals who selected nursing as a career path, and a realization that nurses are more alike than different – sharing common values and beliefs. As a whole, the participants agreed that the reading and writing activities coupled with group discussions did in fact give them a better perspective of their career path. “I have a renewed appreciation for the work we do on a daily basis. I have the highest respect for these women [participants] I just met. I am very proud to be in this profession” stated one participant. Another participant indicated, “I think of their [other participants and authors] words and I feel inspired to do a better job. I also feel a sense of pride for the collective good that nursing is doing for others”. It was apparent that the participants shared a common connection rooted in their professional values and ideals. “We are grounded in the same values and ideas about what constitutes good patient care. Because we agree on these important points, many of our differences don’t seem to matter as much”. This new consciousness contributes to career satisfaction and well-being.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the use of humanities based strategies can be useful tools for assisting nurses in reconnecting with their professional values and ideals and therefore improving their sense of career satisfaction and well-being. The implications for practice are significant and extend to the fields of adult education, nursing professional development, and humanities. An action research design offers a useful approach to understanding the concept of learner centeredness. Participants assisted in the development of the program including theme selection, strategies, evaluation and in some cases assuming the role of facilitator. The findings indicate that this approach to a professional development program encourages group ownership and individual agency which according to Taylor (2000, 2007) are important aspects of learner centeredness. Time is also a crucial aspect in promoting learner centeredness (Taylor, 2000). This study provided an opportunity for the participants to carve out time to reflect and focus on their professional development needs and the participants recognized this as a crucial aspect in their learning. As the findings indicate, writing was a challenging process however by participating in these activities, new learning and meaning was realized. Creating a tension as a result of engagement in uncomfortable activities can be the catalyst or disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 1994) that leads to new learning. Through this learner centered approach, participants developed a new awareness of their ability to acknowledge and act upon these values and beliefs rather than being controlled by unexamined values and beliefs. Keegan (2000) describes this change as a move to greater self-authoring by re-engaging and acknowledging previously held beliefs.

The findings of this study support the connection between professional development and career satisfaction and well-being among nurses by focusing not only on the technical skills and competencies need for practice but also by enhancing the personal development of each participant (Andrews & Dziegielewski, 2005). Nurses are seeking professional development opportunities to expand their knowledge of the art of nursing in addition to the science of nursing. In addition, the findings indicate that nurses are seeking professional development that is learner centered by providing time for discussion and reflection rather than the typical teacher centered approach that is commonly used today.

Similarly, findings from this study imply that the interest and motivation to participate was sparked by the uniqueness of this professional development program because of the use of humanities based reading and writing strategies. The findings do indicate that humanities based strategies are well received by nurses and are found to be useful tools in assisting nurses in reconnecting with their professional values and ideals.

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