Viewpoint

Values-based teaching: Supporting [com]passion in nursing

Sara Morris Docker¹ (Sheffield Hallam University)

Copyright © 2014 Sara Morris Docker. This is an open access journal article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits the unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract

This paper is essentially a statement of intention; to further pursue and investigate an interest on ‘values-based’ teaching and learning methods. In a context where values-based exercises are now being used for employment selection, I believe we have a responsibility to generate educational opportunities to support students staying in touch with the key beliefs and values that originally brought them into health care practice. Recent innovations in my teaching practice have revealed that ‘visual – emotive’ rather than text-based learning triggers can be highly effective in stimulating shared and (often critical) evaluation of the challenges learners experience holding fast to their professional ideals.

This paper is essentially a statement of intention; to further pursue and investigate an interest on ‘values-based’ teaching and learning methods. Three rather odd bedfellows have served to facilitate this evolution in my approach to teaching. These are; completion of a short course on motivational interviewing, close involvement with developing curriculum and organisational support of the employability agenda for undergraduate preregistration nursing students and a very privileged opportunity to work with a number of nurses visiting from Iraq.

In a context where values-based exercises are now being used for employment selection, I believe we have a responsibility to generate educational opportunities to

¹ Corresponding author email address: s.morris-docker@shu.ac.uk

support students staying in touch with the key beliefs and values that originally brought them into health care practice. These values defined them as being suitable to join the nursing programme and thus should be nurtured throughout the course wherever possible. Education for nursing, either undergraduate or post registration (including internationally-focused continuing professional development) can rightly be seen to focus largely on knowledge and skills acquisition in order to ensure the relevant, development or enhancement of competence. However such a focus may lead to limited attention (within a curriculum) being paid to how students make sense of the dissonances they may experience when matching their heartfelt beliefs and values regarding their practise against the challenges of highly complex contemporary work environments. In an effort to redress this deficit, recent innovations in my teaching practise have revealed that ‘visual – emotive’ rather than text-based learning triggers can be highly effective in stimulating shared and (often critical) evaluation of the challenges learners experience holding fast to their professional ideals.

To this end one, values-based learning exercise has been particularly successful. Utilising a visual-emotive trigger, it capitalises on the spirit and principles of motivational interviewing (Mason et al., 2010), specifically focusing on the identification and examination of discrepancy, to help students revisit and re-energise the positive values that underpin their nursing practice. Within the session the relationship between the facilitator and students is one of collaboration, evocation and respect. Values and beliefs addressed come directly from the student for discussion between group members and students are encouraged to share any tussles that they may have experienced reconciling personal values with those levied by the complexities of UK health care work (Barnett, 2000).

So far student groups exposed to this learning and teaching approach have been remarkably willing to engage with, and examine how their personal and professional values are challenged within their learning experiences. Furthermore the approach appears to generate useful opportunities for students to articulate the strategies they have or wish to use to re-energise and maintain positive attitudes and values within in all of their professional practice. In addition senior students expressing their feelings regarding such issues seems to be of value in preparing themselves effectively for employment selection activities.
In the spirit of equality and collaboration the rationale for values-based teaching methods is explained to the students by first acknowledging the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional components of learning; the values-based element being characterised in the often under-represented emotion element. Attention is drawn to the idea that emotion driven attitudes will colour the way knowledge or cognitive learning and behaviours or skills are applied to or skills to patient care. Following activities that help the students articulate some of the values that underpin their own lives; discussion is encouraged regarding the values that drive their interactions with the people they care for professionally. The use of visual-emotive images rather than text-based learning triggers is a feature of this approach and is designed to make the teaching method accessible to a wide range of students, at various stages of maturity or readiness to engage in earning tasks (Hersey and Blanchard, 1979). Coincidentally this has also made the approach accessible to learners whose first language is not English (the Iraq cohort). Applied to a range of subjects; the increased the emphasis on values as part of a framework for learning has, in my opinion, been pivotal in enhancing student engagement in the classroom. Presented with opportunities to find out what the learning experiences of other students are, particularly what their values are, what others feel in practise, students appear to become enlivened and willing to share their practise critically. Whatever the experience of the student, what follows seems to be an enhanced understanding of the relationship between what they know, what they do and what they believe about the world of learning to care professionally.

I am privileged to have found a teaching method which, as well as being, so far, seemingly exhaustive of subject matter, engages with the emotional values of nursing as a profession. It speaks to me again in my career of the need to be heedful of the work of Carper (1979). Her thesis on four fundamental ways of knowing for health care practice is still apposite today and each element is equally fit for discussion although, sadly not all are visited as vigorously as each other. I feel we still need to be somewhat wary of pedagogics that over-emphasise the teaching of just empirically derived knowledge. Continued expansion of evidence on which to base best practice prevails rightly, but this must be married with knowledge and action derived from a sound professional and ethical framework in order to build integrity and professionalism. The ability to be mindful of the immediate situation, be capable of direct practical action; which includes
having an awareness of the patient and their circumstances as uniquely individual, and of the contextual relatedness of the situation (Ibid), will bring safe and effective problem solving, decision-making and leadership. It is however the perhaps more personal, emotional or intuitive values, attitudes and actions derived from personal self-understanding and empathy (Ibid) that are least acknowledged. In my opinion it is this way of knowing that has the unique potential to build resilience and support the most invaluable of nursing characteristics: (com)passion.

The salient interest in pursuing an investigation of this teaching method for the more intuitive and emotive features of professional caring roles, is the evaluation of non-text based learning triggers in for enhancing student engagement with the learning experience.

References