

In-verse reflection: structured creative writing exercises to promote reflective learning in medical students



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Introduction

We explored how creative writing emotionally and psychologically supports students and how such engagement impacts on their ways of knowing.

Aims

RQ1: How might creative writing support MD2 medical students' reflective practice as they make sense of their experiences in clinical learning environments?

RQ2: How do medical students engage in the creative writing activities, and what impact may this have on their ways of knowing?

Methodology

The cohort of second-year MD students from the Melbourne University Medical School based at the Epworth Hospital was invited to participate in four one-hour workshops. The workshops consisted of several writing tasks designed to stimulate creative responses about students' clinical education experiences. They were not cumulative or sequential in orientation, though each provided an opportunity for students to take a more holistic view of their experience.

At the completion of each session, students were invited to share with the group the writing they had produced. Students were also asked to provide a few lines reflecting on the nature of the activity in which they had participated. Each workshop, therefore, produced both creative products and explicit reflections from each student on the activities by way of workshop outputs.

The collected data were analyzed for prevalence and significance, following the protocol for qualitative thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All authors read through the data independently, coding for significant ideas and collating relevant data into key themes, and then met to compare and discuss codes and resultant themes.

Results

Through the thematic analysis of students' written products and reflections on the activities, we identified four key themes about students' clinical learning experiences:

- the challenges of life as a medical student;
- the emotional demands of the medical course;
- a sense of connectedness and solidarity (with fellow students); and
- a sense of marginality (within the hospital system).

In addition to the above course-related themes, students' evaluative comments on the nature of the creative activity itself were collated into a separate theme of Student Reactions.

Conclusions

The in-verse reflection approach appears to offer a feasible and stimulating opportunity to engage students with reflection about their learning while providing a sense of connectedness and an invaluable opportunity to share and discuss their clinical experiences and the process of professional identity formation. It does so through short, enjoyable, and structured creative exercises. The highly relevant and insightful nature of the creative outputs produced by the students point to the potential value of indirectness and playfulness when utilizing humanities approaches in medical education contexts. The described method adds to the repertoire of techniques to facilitate genuine reflection in medical students and can potentially assist medical schools in finding the necessary space in the curriculum for such activities.

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