An Action Research Study Engaging in the Use of Storyboarding as Research-based Approach to Teaching to Identify Issues Faced when Working with People with Dementia from Minority Ethnic Communities

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Abstract

The common view that research informs teaching assumes a linear approach whereby teaching is considered an output of research. This paper reports the findings of an action research project that identified the issues and challenges faced by those working across health and social care when working with people with dementia from minority ethnic communities. It explored the research-teaching nexus by using an approach to teaching that was research-based as opposed to research-led.

A storyboarding technique was used which involved identifying and dissecting real life experiences for discussion. The realisation that each story was unique to the individual demonstrated the benefits and importance of education and training for applying a person-centred approach to dementia care.

This project also revealed the benefits of actively engaging course participants with research moving them from being recipients of research, to research- active. Such a process not only encouraged their intrinsic motivations but, also, critical thinking and reflective practice to support deep learning. Such findings demonstrate the benefits of linking teaching with research.

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Introduction

The common view that research informs teaching assumes a linear approach whereby teaching is considered an output of research. Due to such common practice the latter is quite often considered as a separate entity to the research atmosphere. In 2001, Elton noted that discussion of, and research into, the question of a link between research and teaching had proliferated for the last decade. However one decade later such discussions continue, particularly in regards to higher education curriculum and the conditions for a positive link between research and teaching. Although there is a strongly held belief among academics that teaching in higher education should take place in what they refer to as 'a research atmosphere' (Jensen, 1988; Millar, 1991; Smeby, 1998), Elton (2001), noted that the opposite is rarely stressed partly due to the organisational structures of universities having teaching and research as two separate entities. This, he suggests, is evidenced by teachers and researchers being separately funded posts. Nonetheless, scholars such as Boyer (1990), Elton (2001) and Healey (2005) consider teaching as an integral part of the research atmosphere because it not only supports the transmission of new knowledge (from research), but also the application and synthesis of knowledge into practice.

This study therefore aimed to bring these two activities together through an action research approach whereby students, undertaking a twelve day bespoke programme 'Dementia Champions' for health and social care practitioners, and the course teachers' work together to identify current issues and challenges for those living with dementia from minority ethnic communities. As health care practitioners, these students are working across health and social care have a wealth of experience of working with people with dementia from such communities which often remained unreported. Using a storyboarding technique, first introduced by Leonardo Da Vinci and promoted for classroom use by Lottier (1986), the researcher was able explore the students' issues and challenges of working with people with dementia and their families from minority communities and strategies identified for practice. Critically reviewing and exploring these experiences not only adds to this body of literature, but also identified areas worthy of further exploration that not only inform the research agenda, policy and practice initiatives for such communities, but also the education and training needs of the students in this area of work. As noted by Boyer (1990) teaching, at its best, can shape both research and practice.

Theories and models for linking research and teaching

There is a general consensus that academics 'conduct research, publish, and then perhaps convey their knowledge to students or apply what they have learned' (Boyer, 1990: 15).

However, as argued by Boyer (1990) the production of knowledge is not necessarily developed in such a linear manner, but that '[T]he arrow of causality can, and frequently does, point in both directions. Theory surely leads to practice. But practice also leads to theory. And teaching, at its best, shapes both research and practice' (Boyer, 1990: 15-16).

His challenge to higher education caused many to consider the research-teaching nexus within colleges and universities. Particularly due to his suggestion that teachers should have four separate, yet overlapping, functions to: discover, integrate, apply and teach. The latter resulting in an approach to teaching that both educates and entices future students and teachers. Boyer suggests that in order to achieve this, pedagogical procedures must be carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate directly to the subject taught. According to Boyer, a good teacher is someone who stimulates active, not passive, learning and encourages students to be critical and creative thinkers through reading and classroom discussions that transform and extend knowledge.

Echoing the work of Boyer, Elton (2001) suggests that there is a possible link between pedagogic research and disciplinary teaching where: teaching is evidenced-based; teaching is improved through evaluatory research; teachers are also pedagogic researchers and finally, academics combine the roles of researcher and teacher by researching into their own teaching – also known as 'action research' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Coghlan and Brannick (2005: xii) describe action research as:

> [A]n approach to research which aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action. The outcomes are both an action and a research outcome. It is collaborative, in that the members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the process.

Elton (2001) considers action research as having great value for it defines teaching as a researchable and researched activity. Indeed creating a link between research and teaching has great value and benefits because it considers all those involved as one entity – that is, part of the same learning environment or, what Brew (2012) terms as 'academic communities of practice.' However, when put into practice, the conditions for a positive link can become complex and for some, an audacious process.

The complexities of linking research and teaching can arise from differing beliefs about the nature and purpose of higher education at a strategic level (Locke, 2004; Brew 2012). The integration of teaching and research has implications for management and leadership in

departments. The conduct of research and teaching approaches can also differ between disciplines – making the discipline an important mediator for constructing such links (Healey and Jenkins, 2003).

Griffiths (2004) distinguished three approaches to teaching that were either: research-led, research-orientated, or research-based. Building on from the work of Griffiths, Healey (2005) extended these definitions and developed a model for how curriculum design can be linked to the research-teaching nexus. In order to develop effective links between research and teaching, one must firstly consider their current position within the research-teaching nexus. As Healey (2005) notes, departments concerned with professional education, such as medicine and social work, (should) focus their teaching on inquiry based learning so that it is research-based and student-focused rather than teacher-focused. Student-focused approaches emphasise students constructing their own knowledge through active participation in class (Healey, 2005). Evidence suggests that students involved in research-based inquires develop more sophisticated levels of intellectual development (Blakemore and Cousin, 2003). Trowler and Trowler (2010) reported a number of case studies that involved different aspects of engagement in action - one of which explored research-informed teaching at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK. Inspired by Healey's model, this case study promoted inquiry based learning and identified ways of actively engaging students in research. This case study concluded that student engagement is key for optimal learning through pedagogic research, exploratory and reflective practice. The benefits of engaging students in 'real life' evaluation research in sports development were too highlighted by Allin (2010) who promotes the importance of student engagement in such highly vocational subject areas.

Student engagement with research occurs in a number of forms and at many levels of learning. However, Zamorski (2002: 426) makes the important point that 'students do not always recognise this engagement, fully welcome it or find it to be sufficiently well taught to consider it a useful or pleasurable learning experience.' At this level, the condition for a positive and effective link between teaching and research through student engagement depends heavily on the activity in which students are engaging with. To promote a research-based approach to teaching, activities must be inquiry based. The storyboarding technique is a classroom activity which promotes inquiry based learning.

Methodology

An action research approach was used as a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by the students as, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986), this can help them to improve the rationality and justice and understanding of their own practice. The process used was that of storyboarding to identify the practice and experience of the students, using the same process adopted by Lillyman et al. (2011), to discuss some of the challenges of working with people with dementia from minority ethnic communities.

The storyboarding activity was used with 16 students who were working across health and social care and were undertaking a 12 day 'Dementia Champion' course. The activity comprised of a full study day. After being informed of the current research findings in relation to dementia in minority ethnic communities, in groups of four they were asked to create a storyboard to show examples of these in their own practice following clear instructions of the activity.

Once the student had produced their storyboards these were placed around the room for all to see. Each storyboard was then discussed in turn together as a large group so as to identify any common themes and engage in discussions that were fundamental for understanding the challenges and issues faced by the students – especially as it is during this process that the students were able to link theory to practice. To ensure that any points raised did not go unmissed, the large group discussion was audio recorded solely for the purpose of analysis.

Data analysis

Recurring themes were identified from the storyboards and the large group discussion using a qualitative content analysis process (Holloway, 2008). Whilst qualitative content analysis is commonly used in nursing studies, little has been published on the analysis process (Elo and Kynas, 2007). As with most qualitative methodologies, researchers' use of content analysis has depended on their use of concepts, procedures and interpretation leading to conflicting opinions about the use of this process of analysis. Taking into consideration the process of analysis adopted by Lillyman et al. (2011) in the evaluation of the storyboards produced from their study, the process of analysis which involved applying initial codes to the storyboards and key points raised from the large group discussion.

The initial coding was based on the work of Charmaz (2006) which requires the researcher to remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities they can discern in the data

thus having few preconceived categories. Codes represent initial thoughts in the form of words and (or) phrases usually noted in the margins of the transcript to represent a specific part of the text (Atkinson, 2002). As Charmaz (2006) notes, they are the initial step towards identifying the key themes from the data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was gained from the university ethics committee and the university procedures followed throughout. As the study involved an action based approach the researcher was aware of the dual role as researcher and course leader and the roles they played. Permission was sought from the students prior to sessions and for publication of work. Students were safeguarded through maintaining confidentially of their work.

Findings

This included taking into account the cultural, social and other influences within the behaviour of the students seeking to understand the world in which they live and work (Parahoo, 2006). The self-reflective enquiry and analysis of the experiences shared allowed the study to be context related and collaborative in nature between the researcher/teacher and the students. Therefore the prejudices played out throughout the study were not erroneous or distortions of the truth but attempted to provide evidence from actual practice. While the storyboarding technique revealed the positives of inquiry based learning, it too allowed for examination of the issues and challenges for the students at an appropriate depth and generated research level findings.

Analyses of the storyboards and the large group discussion revealed three key themes that are important and valuable for the students working with people with dementia from minority ethnic communities:

Education and training: Wanting to understand and meet the needs of the service-user. Negative feelings of guilt and helplessness were associated with students being unable to meet the needs of the service-user. Initially, basic language skills training were deemed helpful however; a need for more in depth education and training around meeting the needs of the person with dementia by applying a person-centred approach was identified.

Differentiating between barriers that are different to those associated with their own personal practice. There were some challenges that students had no control over which are largely concerned with the organisations that they work within. For example, not having appropriate

cultural foods or clothing available. Included in this were also the lack of understanding about dementia and cultural differences from other staff members in the student's organisation.

Importance of building relationships and trust with family members of the service-user. The family were considered a key resource for helping the person with dementia to live well. The lack of communication and trust with family members not only resulted in limited information about the needs and wants of the service-user, but also caused students to feel marginalised and excluded. Such feelings quite often led to a lack of motivation and self-worth for staff working with such people, particularly as it created an additional barrier for the student when caring for the person with dementia. The students, like most people, want to feel acknowledged and appreciated. This is a key area that needs addressing by creating innovative ways of improving communication and rapport between a health care practitioner and family members.

Evaluations of the storyboards and group discussion reported findings that can inform the research agenda, policy and practice in this area. Much of the problems experienced by students working with such individuals were related to their inability to meet the person with dementia's needs due to cultural and language barriers. This was, in part, due to their (lack of) understanding of what constitutes culture. Evidenced in the large group discussion were examples of how each story is unique to the individual and that cultural norms are both cross-cutting and accumulative depending upon the individual's attributes and personal history. What was also evident was that many of the challenges faced by the students were similar to those faced by other health care practitioners caring for a person with dementia regardless of ethnic origin. Such findings demonstrate the benefits and importance of education and training for applying a person-centred approach to dementia care for all who work with such individuals.

Whilst such findings are extremely useful for developments in this research discipline, this action research project also adds to the body of literature that explores the research-teaching nexus.

Discussion: the case for a positive link between research and teaching

The aim of this action research project was not just to identify the current issues and challenges for the students who were working with people with dementia for minority ethnic communities, but to explore the research-teaching nexus. Boyer (1990) suggested that a good teacher is someone who stimulates active, not passive, learning and encourages

students to be critical and creative thinkers through reading and classroom discussions that transform and extend knowledge. In support of this, Healey (2005) suggested that education, particularly for the health care practitioners, should be research-based with a student-focused approach. Trowler and Trowler (2010) highlighted the benefits of student engagement to encourage deep learning through various case examples. Indeed the use of the storyboarding technique in the classroom supports such findings.

Similar to the work of Lillyman et al. (2011), the storyboarding technique with students encouraged critical thinking and reflective practice whereby they identified gaps in their knowledge. It was during the process of the large group discussions, that they were able to conclude that person-centred care was the key link for providing culturally competent care. However, beyond this was also the idea that students felt valued and appreciated – that the challenges they face in practice would be utilised to inform the research agenda, policy and practice. They weren't just 'taking in' but 'giving out' knowledge and experiences – making them part of the same learning environment as academics in the subject discipline. The becoming of one entity indeed has great value as Elton (2001) suggested. For it provides an environment that extends and transforms knowledge, as opposed to merely transmitting it. Similar to Boyer (1990), Trowler and Trowler (2010) also argued that learning as the co-construction of knowledge is fully exemplified in situations where students are engaged as partners where all are creating knowledge and all are learning. Sharing and discussing real life activities are what students found to be the most useful according to their feedback with comments such *as 'made you think about a situation in many different perspectives – gave alternative points of view: feelings of carers, service users, family and community'.* Whilst there were some criticisms of the activity, they were waived by the positive outcomes of this research.

Inspired by the work of Healey (2005) the key difference between the research-led session and this research-based session was that the students reached that conclusion through a process of working through and thinking reflectively and critically about their own experiences in practice. The very process of sharing stories about narratives involves a person living, and working through, their experience as opposed to having knowledge about a subject and then applying it to case scenarios as originally was the case during the sessions.

As highlighted in the literature, the benefits of actively engaging the students with research, moving them from being recipients of research to research- active, were evident. Such a process not only encouraged their intrinsic motivations but also, critical thinking and

reflective practice to support deep learning. The evidence of their deep learning was from observations of their involvement in this activity and, in particular, the discussions that took place. Having identified the gaps in their knowledge, students were 'filling in the blanks' through a process of sharing and raising their thoughts and opinions into conceptual ideas. The realisation that they are already equipped with a model of practice to meet the needs of people with dementia from minority ethnic communities brought a sense of relief and confidence to this group for working with such individuals. In addition to learning about the students experiences, the teachers discovered the very different teaching approach required for this activity. As pointed out by Healey (2005) research-led sessions are indeed teacher-focused with little student engagement. Using the storyboarding technique shifted the balance of engagement from the teacher to the students, encouraging both to work together to problem-solve as one community with the same purpose – to improve and maintain the quality of care for people with dementia.

Based on such findings, this research adds value to the body of literature that supports the case for a positive link between teaching and research. It highlights the benefits of inquiry based learning using real life experiences, particularly for those dealing with complex situations on a day-to-day basis. This action research supports evidence that suggests that students involved in research-based inquiries develop more sophisticated levels of intellectual development (Blakemore and Cousin, 2003). A positive link between teaching and research for higher education for the health professionals is beneficial for both the research discipline and student learning.

Conclusion

This action research project has shown the benefits of linking research and teaching through student engagement through the use of a storyboarding technique in the classroom. The benefits of linking research and teaching through student engagement are that teaching for the health care practitioners should be research-based and student-focused. It needs to inform the research agenda, policy and practice in the subject discipline. Student engagement encourages intrinsic motivations, critical thinking and reflective practice to support deep learning. The storyboarding technique is not only an effective way of engaging students in critical thinking and inquiry based learning, but also allows for examination of the issues raised as a result of the activity. Using a qualitative content analysis, the issues can be examined to an appropriate depth to produce research level findings. Linking research and teaching in higher education for the health professionals is beneficial for both the research discipline and student learning. Finally teachers must be willing to adapt their

approach to learning and teaching: effective student engagement requires the teacher to consider themselves as part of the same community as their students.

Key points:

- The benefits of linking research and teaching through student engagement are that it should be research-based and student-focused.
- Effective student engagement requires the teacher to consider themselves as part of the same community as their students.
- The storyboarding technique is not only an effective way of engaging students in critical thinking and inquiry based learning, but also allows for examination of the issues raised as a result of the activity.

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Biographies

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Sue Lillyman is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Health and Society and is a Course Leader for the BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies top up degree and Masters in Nursing Studies for international students. She has worked in Nurse and Health Education since 1989 with a three year gap working in Peru with street children and running medical clinics on the Amazon River. Sue is seconded one-day a week to the Association for Dementia

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