Producing Reflective Practice Capability: a Textual Analysis of Practice learning and Assessment Portfolios

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Abstract

Within portfolios used by nurse education programmes of higher education for practice learning and assessment, reflective narrative accounts are considered evidence of practice learning outcomes. Evaluation research of portfolios used in nurse education programmes is for the most part based on student perceptions, which show that students are conflicted on the inclusion of reflective accounts in the portfolio. This paper examines how structural influences of the practice learning milieu shape the reflective practice capability of the learner based on an analysis of 15 reflective narrative accounts from five practice learning and assessment portfolios of an undergraduate professional development programme for specialist community nursing in the United Kingdom. Ethnomethodology provided an orientation for single case textual analysis of related interactional sequences. Findings from a case comparison take the form of a local practice learning scene showing two structural patterns of orientation: *a learning practice* and the *formal programme*. These orientations can be differentiated by the accomplishment of reflective thinking-for-action, reflective thinking-for-evaluation and reflective thinking-for-critical enquiry. Reflective practice capability as an accomplishment of how the local practice learning milieu constitutes the portfolio approach to practice learning and assessment is presented through a case comparison of some interactions, roles and outcomes. The analysis draws attention to theoretical sensitivity to client outcomes for enhancing the portfolio as an enquiry-based approach for the accomplishment of reflective practice capability and the need for further investigation into the role of the academic nurse tutor in the portfolio approach.

Keywords: learning milieu, portfolios, reflective practice capability, textual analysis, theoretical sensitivity

Background

Portfolios have been and continue to be advocated and used within nursing programmes of higher education (HE) for assessment of practice-based professional learning (McMullan *et al.* 2003, McCready 2007, Ryan 2011). The purpose of the paper is to explore

how structural influences of the learning milieu within the workplace shape reflective practice capability using findings from a textual analysis of narrative accounts from five portfolios. The portfolios were produced by students during a post registration undergraduate 'top up' nursing degree programme. These portfolios were large, typically A4 lever arch files with a range of 200–360 pages. They contained learning agreements, student narrative accounts of practice, including reflective writings of patient/client situations, descriptions of critical incidents, case studies, student self-assessment forms, and academic tutor and practice teacher assessment and feedback forms. Although the research setting was professional development of nurses in the United Kingdom (UK), the portfolio as described is likely to be recognised by educators and practitioners involved with or considering the use of portfolios as a method of learning and assessment within practice-based learning higher education programmes.

Introduction

Eraut (2004, p247) makes an insightful statement about 'the workplace bring[ing] new perspectives to research on learning because it encompasses a wide range of more or less structured environments, which are only rarely structured with learning in mind'. This is the case for student learning when as part of their programme they are placed in health and social care institutions, where learning is secondary to health and social care services provision. Baud (2010, p6) emphasises the 'possibilities for interactions with the people and materials available' for the learner in the workplace and separates out the event activity of the workplace from the local learning milieu of learning from experience (Boud & Walker 1990). During the process of producing a portfolio, the interactions of the learning milieu constitute a particular learning experience for the learner.

From evaluations of the use of portfolios for practice learning and assessment in nurse education, a portfolio appears to function as an expression of what the student learns and understands and turns into professional practice knowledge throughout the duration of the programme (Scholes *et al*. 2004). Advice and guidance are advocated for formative learning whereby the practice teacher and academic tutor directs the student as to what constitutes appropriate evidence to demonstrate the achievement of practice learning outcomes (Williams 2003, Scholes *et al*. 2004, Joyce 2005). Where portfolios contribute to formal assessment, through dialogue assessors and students reinterpret prescribed learning outcomes in the context of actual practice opportunities and subsequent learning experiences are reconstructed to meet the portfolio structure (Scholes *et al*. 2004). At key points in the programme the material evidence of students' professional knowledge gathered within the portfolios is assessed for the purpose of making judgements about the student's achievements (Webb *et al*. 2003, Williams 2003, Spence & El-Ansari 2004). The academic tutor appears to validate that outcomes have been achieved as expected by the HE institution (Scholes *et al*. 2004, Nairn *et al*. 2006, Ryan 2011). At the formal assessment point with the expected evidence base contained within the portfolio, the practice teacher/assessor and academic tutor can make the appropriate judgement that opens the gateway to a future professional life (Webb *et al*. 2003).

The evaluations of Endacott *et al*. (2004) and Timmins & Dunne (2009) show the portfolio as an emergent document constructed primarily to meet specific purposes of audiences of the public domain: the academic tutor representing the HE institution and the professional body, the practice teacher/assessor representing the professional body and the employer. The private domain of the student as their own audience and what they might wish to record as meaningful learning appears to be masked by the influences of these public contexts and purposes in determining what is legitimate evidence in order to validate fitness for purpose, fitness for practice and fitness for award (Corcoran & Nicholson 2004,

McMullan 2006, Taylor *et al*. 2009). Whilst institutional structures shape curricula and portfolio designs, enactment of the portfolio approach occurs locally in the practice or workplace setting. Interactions in the practice learning environment constitute a local learning milieu in which these wider institutional structures may or may not dominate.

Literature reviews of a portfolio approach to practice learning and assessment (McMullan *et al*. 2003, McCready 2007) tend towards an acceptance of what and how professional practice knowledge, and practice learning outcomes, are represented by types of material evidence within portfolios. A theme running through both literature-based studies and evaluation research of a portfolio approach is the inclusion of reflective narrative accounts as material evidence of practice learning and outcomes (Webb *et al*. 2003, Spence & El-ansari 2004, Ryan 2011). Although McMullan *et al*. (2003, p289) identify that portfolios provide 'evidence of the product of student's accomplishments', a conversation connecting reflective accounts with what these accomplishments might be is yet to develop in the nurse education literature.

Evaluation research highlights that students are conflicted in their views as to the inclusion of reflective accounts of practice learning in the portfolio. Where the portfolio has been used for assessment, students hold the view that the accounts should not be assessed since the formal assessment processes impact upon what is written (McMullan 2006, McMullan 2008, Timmins & Dunne 2009). Where the portfolio is not formally assessed an alternative view is proffered: producing reflective narratives of practice takes a lot of effort on the part of the student and these accounts should be assessed (Corcoran & Nicholson 2004).

From extensive qualitative data analysis of a three-phase illuminative evaluation of the use of portfolios for assessment purposes, Scholes *et al*. (2004) identified that 'writing for the portfolio remained a task [for students] rather than a reflective tool to facilitate learning' (p600) with a subsequent lack of understanding of portfolio creation as a process enabling them to build their own theory of practice for ongoing testing and refinement through dialogue with the practice teacher and academic tutor (Nairn *et al*. 2006). A finding across evaluation studies is the request by students for more guidelines on portfolio completion linked with reflection. What reflective accounts evidence and how students understand this aspect of a portfolio are left unexplored for the most part in these studies that are grounded in adult learning theory and use data of student perceptions (Nairn *et al*. 2006, McMullan 2008, Timmins & Dunne 2009). It is perhaps a conflation of trying to understand how to complete the portfolio and lack of understanding of the portfolio as an enquiry based process for the development of a personal theory of nursing practice that lead students to identify their need for more advice and guidance. Other literature makes clear that students want further help with the portfolio as a task in contrast to how to enquire (see Taylor *et al.* 2009, Clarke *et al*. 2011). Ryan's (2011) evaluation using faculty and student focus groups identified the need for clarification of intent, guidelines and roles and for enabling self-reflection by students. Guidance on how to complete the portfolio is not the same as understanding the intent which lies behind a portfolio as an enquiry-based collective sense-making strategy for development of the necessary knowledge and understanding of reflective thinking as a basis of nursing action. A small-scale evaluation by Coffey (2005) shows how a portfolio is used as a sense-making tool when it includes an examination of a particular aspect of practice. The approach generated student understanding of reflective accounts as material evidence of evidence-based practice development.

Teekman (2000) investigated reflective thinking of 10 qualified nurses in medical and surgical hospital settings using a 'Sense-Making' approach to analyse narratives of non-routine nursing situations. Data took the form of a set of questions generated by the nurses to make sense of the situation. Synthesising an analysis of the questions with the literature on sense making Teekman (2000) formed a typology of reflective thinking

(Table 1). The research illuminates reflective thinking as a process of enquiry that entails asking questions of the situation. A possible limitation of the data is similarity and difference of questions that occur during reflective thinking on situations requiring long-term management. What Teekman (2000) does show is how the use of levels of reflective thinking occurs within nursing practice and can be captured in narratives of practice.

Table 1 Typology of reflective thinking (Teekman 2000)

Level	Focus
Reflective thinking-for-action	Knowledge seeking to make sense of the immediate situation and to select the appropriate intervention for professional action
Reflective thinking-for-evaluation of self	Self in monitoring and evaluating professional actions
Reflective thinking-for-evaluation of situation	Evaluation of the situation in totality
Reflective thinking-for-critical enquiry	Influence of context and power in health care delivery

In summary, evaluation research of the portfolio approach is limited in terms of providing critical understandings for curriculum developers of how the students' reflective practice capability is influenced by the local learning milieu's mediating effects. There is also a need for innovative evaluation research designs to investigate the portfolio as an enquiry-based learning tool in the production of reflective practice capability.

Methods

Ethnomethodology is concerned with social interaction and how it is organised and produced by actors in order to provide insights into reality structured through everyday conversations and communications of the social context (Flick 2006). Ethnomethodologists examine *'if and how interactants themselves reveal an orientation to institutional or other contexts'* (Maynard & Clayman 1991, p407) where context is treated as an emerging product of interaction through the actions and activities or local practices of the participants (Silverman 2001, Heath & Hindmarsh 2002). By taking an ethnomethodological perspective, structures constituting the local learning milieu may be understood and serve to inform curriculum developers of how the portfolio approach might be done differently for the enhancement of reflective practice capability (ten Have 2006).

Taking a broad view of communication within social practice, documents can be treated by researchers for what they accomplish rather than as background information (Silverman 2001). By treating the portfolio as a documentary reality of the interactions involved in its production, an analysis of the situated character of the portfolio method and accomplishments of reflective practice capability is afforded. The decision as to what to include in the portfolio is an outcome of the student's interactions within the constituted local learning milieu. The interactions produce particular material evidence which can be aligned with dominant structures or more local constructions. By treating documentary products of learning as texts of accomplishment and by using textual analysis, the constitutive realities of the local learning milieu residing within the text of the portfolio are revealed.

Out of the sample of nine specialist practice nurses who consented to participate in the wider research programme, five agreed to give me access to their portfolio (Volante 2005). I was a lecturer at the HE provider where these students had studied for a 'top up' specialist practice degree. The institutional research committee gave me permission to access and use the student records system to create a sampling frame after the students had

graduated. A favourable ethical opinion was received from the university supervising the research programme. Confidentiality and anonymity of data and findings was maintained through the use of case pseudonyms.

Whilst I contributed to the curriculum development and implementation of the degree programme I was not involved in the development, implementation or assessment of the portfolio. The portfolio can therefore be considered to fall into the category of a naturally occurring document existing independently of the researcher (Silverman 2001). Stanfield & Katerndahl (1994) emphasise that documents are adequate for interpreting the reality of the people who produced the record. Thus data extraction was of students' writings only and based on the differing types of content in the portfolio: presentation (portfolio length, acknowledgements, signposting, conclusion, visual imagery), process of production (learning agreements, formative and summative self-assessment sheets), and narrative accounts of practice (anonymised reflective writings of patient/client situations, critical incidents, case studies).

Ethnomethodology provides for a methodological orientation rather than clear methods of procedure, process or technique (Heath & Hindmarsh 2002). To reveal how students in the production of the portfolio are orientated to a particular local learning milieu, the interpretive analysis was based on extracts of interaction sequences contained within the narrative accounts of practice. These were taken to be indicative of the orientation of participants' in the making of the local learning milieu. How the local learning milieu is understood is determinate of the work of the participants in co-producing and shaping the interaction and any ongoing development of the context (Lynch 2001, Silverman 2001).

The method of textual analysis of the extracted narrative accounts of practice was derived from Silverman's (2001) guide on how to do conversational analysis. The approach permitted an analysis of the narrative accounts using sequences of related interaction (see right-hand column, Table 2): what participants use to characterise and therefore contextualise what they are doing. Ethnomethodology examines the constitutive properties of these sequences of related interaction (Maynard & Clayman 1991). A worked example of a student–client interactional sequence is provided in Table 3. Focusing on the realities constructed in the text meant that the analysis was undertaken from a different perspective to that of my role as a lecturer assessing a portfolio. Therefore, together with my distance to the portfolio development, the criticism that the emergent categorisation of narrative analysis reflects the analyst's perspective rather than those of the [member] participants was to some extent overcome (Silverman 2001).

Table 2 Method of textual analysis of narrative accounts of practice

Conversational analysis (from Silverman 2001)	Textual analysis of narrative accounts (from Volante 2005)
Identify sequences of related talk	Identified sequences of related interaction within the text
Examine how speakers take on certain roles or identity through their talk	Examined how interactants are positioned as having a certain role or identity in the text (e.g. learner, reflector) including institutionally defined (e.g. practice teacher, tutor)
Look for particular outcomes in the talk	Looked for outcomes of the interaction
Work backwards to trace trajectory through which the particular outcome was produced	Worked backwards to trace trajectory through which the particular outcome was produced

The method was refined following pilot work which showed that each narrative account could contain more than one type of context related interactional sequence: student–client,

Table 3 Textual analysis of related interactional sequences

Related interactional sequence (student–client)	Role, identity and outcome	Trajectory (student–client)
p156 home visit critical incident November *I arrived at the home of Ms Jones alone as arranged the previous week to follow up the new birth visit which my CPT and I had done jointly…*	Caroline role of learner health visitor, advisor to mother, taking on identity of health visitor, CPT institutional defined role of Practice Teacher, Mrs J role of mother, parent, recipient of services	The outcome associated with the interactional sequence is that Caroline takes on the identity of a guest at the afternoon tea party. How was this produced? Caroline telephones Mrs J to confirm the previously planned professional visit. Mrs J agrees to time of visit.
Mrs Jones was very welcoming and ushered me into her sitting room where I was horrified to find a room with people sitting in it. I was expecting Mrs Jones and I to be alone…	Mrs J host, Caroline confidante, information provider, respecter of individuals, professional visitor **Outcome** Caroline in unexpected situation	Caroline in her role as a learner health visitor visits Mrs J, a mother with a new baby, on her own. Mrs J in role of host invites Caroline into the same room as her guests and to have a cup of tea. Caroline accepts the offer of tea and joins the guest party.
and prior to the visit I had phoned to check it was a convenient time and she had made no mention of her visitors… *She offered me a cup of tea which I accepted.*	Caroline planner, organiser, concerned professional Mrs J withholder of information **Outcome** Caroline is a guest at afternoon tea party	

student–practice teacher, and student–literature. A context noticeable by its absence from any of the narrative accounts was an interactional sequence of student–academic tutor. Three accounts were selected from the extracted narrative data from each of the five portfolios. The interactional sequences and associated outcomes were synthesised into an overall trajectory for each narrative account and a synthesis of the three overall trajectories generated a single case description. Through maintaining the coherence of the details and parts within the whole, the analytic framework has phenomenological validity (Maynard & Clayman 1991, Flick 2006). Unanalysed narrative accounts were used to test out the textual analysis and provide additional detail for the case description. Data extracted from the portfolio on the content of presentation and process of production illuminated the practices of institutional structures on the findings. To test whether the analyses evoked 'commonly understood perceptions and beliefs about the phenomena in question' (Denzin 1997, p112) an experienced community specialist practice nurse lecturer read the case descriptions. Feedback confirmed the case descriptions were plausible and realistic, demonstrating the analysis had verisimilitude.

Findings

The findings from a comparison of the roles and outcomes of the five cases take the form of a local practice learning scene which shows two structural patterns of orientation of the portfolio method to practice learning and assessment: *a learning practice* and *the formal programme* with associated accomplishments of reflective thinking-for-action, reflective thinking-for-evaluation (self and situation) and reflective thinking-for-critical enquiry (Teekman 2000). The comparison differentiates methodological resources of practices, procedures and reasoning of the two orientations (Heath & Hindmarsh 2002). Within *a learning practice* the context constituted through client-centred practice and client outcomes contrasts with *the formal programme* constituted through the prescribed portfolio template and learning outcomes. *A learning practice* appears to be constitutive of a local learning milieu within which learning needs are identified from a learner perspective and met through enquiry into the everyday professional work of a client-centred practice. Institutional programme assessment requirements are met by way of reflective learning processes that evaluate client outcomes and from which material evidence is subsequently generated for inclusion in the portfolio. In *the formal programme* wider institutional structures dominate constitutive of a local learning milieu of support and surveillance that produces material evidence of professional actions to meet institutional assessment requirements to progress the portfolio. A case comparison of some interactions, roles and outcomes is presented to differentiate between the two orientations in the production of reflective practice capability.

A learning practice

> Mary: I …can now do more than just give injections, support and contain people (portfolio p58)… I have made a difference to this lady's life and hope it increases the chance of her getting her children back. (portfolio p77).

Mary takes on the role of reflective practitioner, evaluating her professional actions and self against client outcomes. This has come about through a practice learning process of enquiry and reflection gained through reading academic literature about reflection and interactions with her clinical supervisor.

> reflection before action might be more valuable to nurses and improve client care as it might prevent the chance of mistakes being made and reduce less than satisfactory interventions (Mary portfolio, p61).

She shares with her supervisor a plan for action based on her reading of the literature and her concerns around client safety that lead her to identify the need to learn about her use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). In turn the supervisor refers her to more research literature relevant to the client situation and Mary compares her client assessment with what is written in the research literature. After implementing her plan Mary reflects on her practice interventions and evaluates these against the client outcome from which she recognises the growth in her knowledge of how to do CBT. Interactions with the literature, client and clinical supervisor produce an iterative cycle of roles: enquirer, reflector, reader, planner, implementer, evaluator, and critical reflector.

> The new knowledge I have acquired has complemented and extended previous knowledge and also helped clarify some of the difficulties I was having with the concepts of CBT. I now see the importance of putting someone's voices and related symptoms in the context of their own life experiences. (Mary portfolio, p67).

Practice in the role of student is a process of enquiry to meet learning needs which contribute to the development of an experiential resource for client-centred practice. The nurse–client interactions form a new context of client outcomes for reflective learning about professional actions and self in the role of evaluator. The reflective thinking-for-evaluation after the action encompasses the totality of the situation including the new context produced through the interactions and the nurse and client context brought to the situation (Teekman 2000). While clinical practice per se is a necessary aspect for the role of evaluator other resources from the learning milieu in the form of academic and research literature and specialist supervision are brought to bear on potential actions and actual practice interventions. Interactions with these resources within a learning practice produce a critical reflector and accomplish reflective thinking-for-critical enquiry defined as going 'beyond questions of technical proficiency to thoughtful reflection as to how contexts influence health and nursing' (Teekman 2000, p1127).

In the case of Caroline, the accomplishment of reflective thinking-for-critical enquiry is produced through the roles of reader of the academic literature and critical reflector of the social context on professional interventions. Alongside reading the literature to develop a technical evidence base to inform action, Caroline makes use of literature on

> [r]eflection [as] a method with which I can look back at my practice with a
> view to critically analysing why I did what I did and could I do it better?
> It can also expand my vision of any potential effects of the action I take.
> (Caroline portfolio, p186).

Reading the literature also leads Caroline to question whether the practice behind a health promotion event is in response to expressed needs of the community and concludes that because of the low turnout of parents in the evening, it possibly is not. 'In future... I would want it to be a result of expressed needs of the community or at least part involvement by it to ensure success' (Caroline portfolio, p118). The role of critical reflector is taken on through the interaction with the literature related to the 'theory learnt at college' (Caroline portfolio, p358).

The orientation of *a learning practice* is constituted through making practice a learning process of enquiry. In the role of learner, with interactions of a client-centred practice and other resources at hand, the student becomes a producer of their own personal theory of a client-centred practice. From the cases of Mary and Caroline, it appears that local learning milieus with an orientation of *a learning practice* have the potential to accomplish a reflective practice capability inclusive of all levels of Teekman's (2000) typology of reflective thinking.

The formal programme

> The reason for this reflective account is allowing my standards to slip...
> allowing my attitude towards Miss D to be coloured by the GP's [General
> Practitioner] derogatory remarks... When I discussed Miss D with my [practice
> teacher], who knew her well... I realised I had been less than understanding.
> (Patricia portfolio, p129).

In the interaction with the practice teacher Patricia takes on the role of monitor, a surveyor of professional action. In turn the practice teacher takes on the role of patient advocate and a new context of surveillance of the self in professional action is produced. The outcome for Patricia is self understanding with the accomplishment of reflective thinking-for-evaluation of self.

In interaction with the academic literature Patricia takes on the role of justifier of actions: 'In assessing [his] needs I was very aware of his desire for self determination... I felt that the

use of Peplau's 1952 models of nursing would be appropriate' (Patricia portfolio, p52). The account continues with an outline of the model and how it explains the episode of care and includes 'care plans showing how the nursing process was applied' (Patricia portfolio, p56). The interactions with the literature produce a rationale for technical professional actions. The analysis is supported by Patricia's learning agreement, a list of what is to be learned 'management of syringe drivers, suprapubic catheterisation, and examination of assessment tools' (Patricia portfolio, p13). The outcome of the application of Peplau's model is the production of a narrative account as evidence of achievement of 'examination of assessment tools'. Learning is structured as sitting outside a client-centred practice and directed towards technical proficiency required to deliver health services.

In the final formative assessment with the practice teacher and academic tutor, Patricia records: 'Constructive feedback from both tutors was extremely helpful in making me aware of how the portfolio could be extended further' (Patricia portfolio, p20). In the conclusion she writes 'The portfolio has been a working document all along' (Patricia portfolio, p345). The production of the portfolio constitutes the learning process of *the formal learning programme*.

The orientation of *the formal learning programme* constitutes a context of surveillance for producing the necessary material evidence of professional judgement and action and for showing that institutional portfolio procedures and outcomes have been met. In so doing *the formal learning programme* accomplishes reflective thinking-for-action and reflective thinking-for-evaluation of self. The absence of client outcomes and learning as enquiry within the practices, procedures and reasoning of the local learning milieu possibly restricts the development of the accomplishments of reflective thinking-for-evaluation of the situation and reflective thinking-for-critical enquiry.

Discussion

The method of textual analysis, whilst limited to extracts from five portfolios of a specific portfolio approach, illuminates differences in the development and accomplishment of reflective practice capability. The analysis adds to the work of Scholes *et al.* (2004) which identified a process of deconstruction and reconstruction by practice teachers and students in building the portfolio. Judgements made as to what is pertinent or not to include in the portfolio are situated in the interactions of the local learning milieu. Depending on the predominant structural influence and the practices, procedures and reasoning of the learning milieu, local orientations may bring about different levels of reflective practice capability. By using ethnomethodology to ask 'what is going on here' an analysis of the less explored structural influence of local learning milieus on the production of reflective practice capability has been possible. This analytic approach helps us to notice what did not happen (Lynch 2001) in the development of reflective practice capability where the orientation of the local learning milieu is towards the institutional programme structure embedded in the portfolio documentation. Understanding the development of reflective practice capability through how the local learning milieu is constituted illuminates the learning and assessment practices of the local learning milieu. The analysis shows what reflective practice capability is accomplished and how by the orientation of these practices rather than being located solely in the individual student. How the event / activity is used in the approach to the portfolio by the practices of the local learning milieu, socially constructs both what reflective practice capability is produced and how.

None of the 15 narrative accounts used in the textual analysis contained descriptions of the interactions between the student and academic tutor. Interactions with the academic tutor were documented in the record of the formative assessment meetings which relate to progression of the portfolio towards the achievement of the predetermined practice

learning outcomes. In these interactions the role of the academic is one of advisor. This raises the question of how students, when out in the practice setting, interact with the clinical and theoretical knowledge and understandings of the academic tutor to refine their knowledge and understandings in the development of their personal theory of nursing practice. The role of the academic tutor appears to sit outside the local learning milieu of the practice setting. Ryan (2011) identifies that clarification is needed about the academic role in the portfolio process.

The orientations of *the formal programme* and *a learning practice* constitute two different lenses: one through the dominance of the portfolio template, the other giving primacy to an everyday client-centred practice. These two orientations provide different analytic tools for students to make sense of their experience to build their theory of practice and develop reflective practice capability. Curriculum developers are invited to consider how the local learning milieu constitutes a portfolio approach to practice learning and assessment as a process of enquiry. Using a portfolio approach to practice learning and assessment has the potential to develop a student's personal theory of practice. This necessitates that the local practice learning milieu enables the student to learn how to ask client centred questions of practice situations they encounter. Answers from a range of sources, e.g. practice teacher and literature to client-centred questions can both inform and evaluate the situation and the technical intervention in terms of client outcomes. Learning about practice in this way is generally referred to as critical reflection and reflective practice (McCready 2007).

This learning journey of the student nurse shares features of the development of a grounded theory researcher. The orientations draw attention to how local learning milieus develop the theoretical sensitivity of the learner. How the enquiry process is constituted and mediated by the local learning milieu develops both a personal theory of practice and an understanding of how to do reflective practice. How theoretical sensitivity develops in the reflective practice of the student to client outcomes would therefore seem to be an important aspect of any portfolio approach for practice learning and assessment. Unlike the researcher who wishes to delay theoretical sensitivity during data analysis for theory development, the student nurse requires the supportive interaction of the learning milieu to differentiate what is theoretically pertinent from that which is not prior to action to ensure safe practice and effective client outcomes.

Strauss & Corbin (1990, p42) identify four sources of theoretical sensitivity: literature for sensitisation to the phenomenon under study; professional experience through which 'one acquires an understanding of how things work in that field, and why, and what will happen there under certain conditions'; personal experience that the analyst brings to the situation e.g. experience of illness; and the analytic process itself. The orientation of *a learning practice* shows more developed analytic theoretical sensitivity to the client context and client outcomes. Preparatory nurse students and practitioners entering new domains of practice have yet to gain understanding of how things work in the field of nursing practice, while continuing professional development students do have such a resource. Duignan *et al.* (2002) emphasise the leadership role of experienced practitioners to uncover the implicit theories of practice that learners bring with them to the analytic process of understanding their experiences. Experienced practitioners also help in separating what is relevant from what is not for understanding the field. However, Strauss & Corbin (1990) also warn of professional experience as a block to seeing practice differently.

Within *a learning practice* interactions with the literature contribute to development of a theoretical sensitivity to the client context. The interaction does not appear to be for justification, rather a deliberation of particular experience and related literature to create new practical knowledge as a basis for action. There may be a role for the academic tutor in the development of sensitisation to client outcomes by interacting with preparatory

and professional development nursing students through a client-centred dialogue based on research findings.

The formal programme highlights two aspects which potentially blunt the development of theoretical sensitivity: the portfolio template, and for the continuing professional development student their previous professional experience. Use of the predetermined outcomes of the portfolio template possibly shifts the phenomenon for enquiry from that of nursing practice to the production of relevant material evidence. In so doing the predetermined analytic framework of the portfolio template closes off other theoretical possibilities in the development of a theory of practice. Whilst Scholes *et al.* (2004) did identify a process of deconstruction and reconstruction by some students and practice teachers this was by no means the norm. The preconceived concepts embedded in the portfolio template may limit theoretical sensitivity to enquiry-based learning by the local learning milieu. Thus students possibly require the input of the academic tutor to encourage them to question what these concepts mean in light of their practice experience.

Conclusion

This evaluation of a portfolio approach for practice learning and assessment explored how structural influence shapes reflective practice capability. The textual analysis of narrative accounts revealed how differing accomplishments of reflective thinking can be produced by differences in the orientations of the local practice learning milieu. An exploration of theoretical sensitivity was offered as a critical implication of the study to support curriculum developers to consider how the portfolio approach might be done differently for the enhancement of reflective practice capability. The findings suggest that to use the workplace as a learning resource for development of reflective thinking the local learning milieu requires to develop theoretical sensitivity to client outcomes as a focus for enquiry by students. Client outcomes provide a context for the development and judgement of technical proficiency and for the production of the necessary level of reflective practice capability for safe and effective nursing practice. The role of the academic tutor when using a portfolio as an enquiry-based approach for practice learning requires further exploration.

Acknowledgements

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