Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Nurse Education Today

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/nedt

Nursing students' experiences of a challenging course: A photo-elicitation study

Vibeke Oestergaard Steenfeldt*, Minna Therkildsen, Jette Lind

University College Absalon, Trekroner Forskerpark 4, DK-4000 Roskilde, Denmark

A B S T R A C T

Background: The balance between lessons prepared to challenge the talented students and students who find the courses difficult is a recurrent dilemma in the Danish nurse education.

Challenging talented students while pitching the learning appropriately for less able students is a recurring dilemma in education. In Danish nursing courses, the gap between these two kinds of student becomes particularly obvious in fifth semester theoretical courses.

Method: To provide knowledge of students' experiences of challenging courses a phenomenological approach was adopted. Nine fifth semester nursing students participated. Data were generated through photo-elicitation, which proceeded in two steps. Firstly, nursing students were invited to take photos of NO-situations, i.e. situations they considered to be boring, difficult, annoying or confusing, and YES-situations, which they considered to be cool, awesome, interesting, exciting, encouraging, etc. Secondly, the students presented their photos at a workshop, where they described the background of the photos. In reflecting teams, they reflected on the stories and discussed whether they recognised the situations and could relate them to their own experiences. The stories, reflections and discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

Findings: A phenomenological analysis revealed three themes. The first theme *It is hard to crack the code* was characterised by a feeling of insecurity in facing unknown words and concepts that were far from what they normally associated with nursing. The second theme *When the students succeeded in cracking the code* was characterised by the feeling of joy and relief when they grasped the meaning and understood the links to nursing practice. The third theme *Sources of irritation and frustration* was characterised by various disturbances, lack of mutual respect and practical challenges.

The paper also adds to the field of elicitation methods the combination of photo-elicitation and reflecting teams.

1. Introduction

In the fifth semester of the nursing educational programme in Denmark, some courses seem to be quite challenging for the students. When students find a course challenging, the teachers can also feel challenged. During the fifth semester, the students have courses in nursing theory, nursing history and spiritual care, ethics, philosophy and religion, theory of science and research methodology. In Denmark, the first four semesters' courses are given at the nursing school and in clinical training. The entire fifth semester takes place at the nursing school. It is our experience that the courses mentioned above seemed to be far away from what – especially the practically minded students – associated with the nursing profession.

As a mandatory task, the fifth semester featured a study of a clinical nursing problem using systematic research methods. Besides the research methodology, the students were expected to integrate knowledge from the theoretical courses into their projects. During the project process, small groups of students met and discussed the structure and the methods in project seminars. At the seminars, the students were organised into reflecting teams. They discussed each other's manuscripts which had been uploaded to their IT platform, to help each other improve their work. The studies were presented in the form of a project report that served as a basis for their oral examination.

In running this semester, we encountered very different groups of students. There were students who found the courses boring or difficult, students who found it interesting, students who had to work hard to complete the semester, or students who worked hard because they were propelled by a great motivation. We also encountered students who

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: vst@pha.dk (V.O. Steenfeldt), mth@pha.dk (M. Therkildsen), jeli@pha.dk (J. Lind).

found some of the courses unnecessary to their future career in nursing. We experienced a didactic challenge in organising the semester in a way that met the expectations of the highly motivated and clever students, while considering how to enable the struggling or less motivated students to reach their learning goals.

According to research on didactics, student nurses often face challenges in the form of stressors during their education. In their initial review, Burnard et al. (2007) listed a variety of both clinical and academic stressors. They described academic stressors as pressure to achieve high grades, intense amount of work, lack of free time, finding the academic work difficult, etc. In their grounded theory study among student nurses, they found academic stress and paperwork to be stressors experienced by the students. Edwards et al. (2010) investigated British nursing students' experiences of stress and levels of self-esteem and found that the stress level was at the highest in the beginning of the third year and that the self-esteem decreased during the educational programme. The highest ranked stressors related to the following situations: examinations, not knowing how deeply to study a subject, assessment deadlines, difficulty in finding literature and when given too little direction as to what was expected of the student. An Irish study showed that, besides the educational challenges in general, the majority of stressors related to exams and assignments (Timmins et al., 2011), which was also the case among Pakistani nursing students (Sikander and Aziz, 2012). In addition, Sikander & Aziz found excessive workload to be a major stressor.

Based on the research literature, exams and assignments seem to present general academic challenges to nursing students. It seems possible that uncertainty about what was expected for the examination pushed the nursing students to impose a lot of work on themselves. In addition, the possibility of failure (Sikander and Aziz, 2012) could be considered to enhance the urge to work hard.

A recurring challenge in both nursing educational programmes and nursing practice is the gap between theory and practice (Holtslander et al., 2013; Factor et al., 2017) which Evans and Kelly (2004) described as conflicts between what is taught in school and the real situation on the ward. The theory-practice gap, which we while running the fifth semester recognised in some of our students' reluctance towards studying theoretical subjects, was also at play among Norwegian nursing students (Pedersen and Einarsen, 2013). The students found subjects, such as theory of science, nursing theory and ethics less useful than natural science theories such as anatomy, physiology, pathology and microbiology. This was also the case among Danish newly qualified nurses (Danbjørg and Birkelund, 2011). The studies referred to revealed that the theory-practice gap is an issue both in the clinical settings and in the classroom.

2. Aim

The research presented above points at a variety of stressors that pose teaching and learning challenges in nursing educational programmes. There is a shortage of knowledge on students' lived experiences. To strengthen our knowledge on lived experiences – as a basis for preparing challenging courses – the aim of this study was to describe nursing students' lived experiences during challenging courses in the Danish nursing educational programme.

3. Photo-elicitation as a data-generating method

To generate data, we used photo-elicitation, which has been described as using photographs to prompt interviews and discussions (Noland, 2006; Rasmussen, 2014). We created a two-step approach, consisting of taking photos of learning situations followed by presentations in workshops.

An American identity researcher, Carey Noland (2006) pointed out that using photos as a method offers an opportunity to see challenges and successes through students' eyes. A photo embodies a way of

seeing. The taking of the photo requires thoughts and choices. In a study of Indian women's identity, Noland asked her participants to take photos that would represent "this is me" and "this is not me" (Noland, 2006). In a Danish study, Christrup (1993) asked people to choose one of the best and one of the worst situations they had experienced. She suggested that growth and new development could transpire by way of positive experiences, if a person looks at negative experiences in a new way.

4. Photos of learning situations

Inspired by the tensions embedded in the extremes, described in Nolands' (2006) and Christrup's (1993) studies we invited the nursing students to take photos of learning situations experienced as YES-situations, meaning situations experienced as cool, awesome, wow etc., and NO-situations, meaning situations experienced as annoying, strenuous, boring and the like. The photos were taken with their smartphones. Nine students responded to an invitation to take part in the study that we posted on their digital learning platform. In total, they submitted 49 photos that illustrated various situations, such as classroom teaching, group sessions and homework, buildings and surroundings as well as artefacts such as books, blackboards, power cables, coffee machine, PowerPoint slides, et cetera.

5. Workshops conducted as reflecting teams

The photos served as a point of departure to elicit descriptions of the students' lived experiences. In two workshops, in the form of reflecting teams, the students were encouraged to unfold their experiences by presenting narratives related to their photos. Reflective thinking offers a way of developing one's experiences (Dewey, 2005). The purpose of reflecting teams is to create a catalysing process between an individual, who is receiving help, and the team, who provides helpful reflections. The method was developed in Norway within the family therapy field (Pender and Stinchfield, 2012). In 2013–2014, the university college at which the authors are based, set up reflecting teams as a way of developing research projects and papers. The two researchers who conducted the workshops in this study were members of these reflecting teams, as described by Andersen (2016). Based on our former experiences, we found reflecting teams to be fruitful as an approach to unfolding reflections about personal lived experiences. Furthermore, the nursing students were familiar with this method from the project seminars earlier in the semester. In the workshops under investigation in this study, the students one by one picked up one of their photos and presented their story about the situation that had led them to decide to take the photo. Then, the other participants formed a reflecting team by discussing their associations and experiences of similar or different situations. The researcher facilitated the reflections and discussions by asking questions related to the presentations and reflections; for example, "Well, Anne told us about the seminars that she found very fruitful for her learning experiences. Have you experienced seminars, which have been fruitful too, or maybe the opposite, that have been boring or even a waste of time? … Okay, please tell about this situation." Or: "Both of you nodded and smiled when Paula told about her photo. Have you experienced similar situations? … Please tell us about them." The questions served the purpose of evoking memories about learning situations and encouraged the students to unfold their experiences. The students' stories and reflective discussions were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim.

6. Ethical considerations

As an educational institution, University College Absalon has made a mutual notification agreement with the Danish Data Protection Agency. Thereby, authorisation to initiate this research was implicit. The participants gave their consent to participate. They were informed

that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Obviously, the participants could not participate anonymously in the workshops, but their confidentiality was ensured in the following ways. 1) They entered into an agreement to remain silent about what was going on during workshops; 2) data was stored on a secured research drive, and 3) no identifiable information was to be revealed during presentations or publications. Furthermore, the researchers were not to supervise or examine the participants in the future, to eliminate dependency relationships between the students and teachers.

7. Analysis

Inspired by Dahlberg et al. (2011), we conducted a phenomenological analysis of the transcriptions. The analysis aimed to describe the essences of the nursing students' learning experiences during a challenging semester, while being cognisant that such descriptions could not be exhaustive. The analysing process involved a dialogue with the text by "…questioning the text about what is said, how it is said and what the content and, especially, the meaning is" (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 253). Dahlberg et al. do not recommend a certain method but rather the adoption of a phenomenological attitude. As a metaphor, the term "bridling" means "an open and alert attitude of actively waiting for the phenomenon to show up and display itself within the relationship with the researcher as a hunter of meanings" (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 130). To adopt this attitude, we firstly read the whole set of data to get an overall impression, before identifying meaning units. The meaning units were organised into clusters – meaning "to put together meanings that seem to belong to each other" (Dahlberg et al., 2011, p. 244). Each cluster was then organised into sub-clusters that seemed to be even more closely related to each other. During the analysis, imaginative variations of the meaning units were made. The imaginative variations represented in different ways in which the meanings were embedded in the original text. Gradually, these variations took the form of creative non-fiction, which is a story that "is fiction in form but factual in content" (Sparkes, 2002, p. 155). They were made up of the participants' wordings and phrases, and rewritten into coherent descriptions of their learning experiences. In the following paragraphs, we present what characterised the learning experiences as illustrated by some of these stories.

8. Results

A thematic structure of three themes and six subthemes appeared (Fig. 1), which is elaborated in the following.

8.1. Hard to crack the code

The first theme *it is hard to crack the code* represents how the students find it hard to find out what is expected from them during the course. Inspired by the phrase "a tough nut to crack", we found the term "cracking the code" useful as a metaphor to grasp the difficulties the students experienced. They faced a lot of unknown words and concepts, almost like a foreign language. Likewise, in their written tasks, they were expected to use unfamiliar criteria. They found it hard to figure out how to decode the expectations that the educators had of them. The challenges experienced by the students will be further unfolded in relation to the learning subjects and the written tasks.

8.1.1. Challenges related to the learning subjects

The students had difficulty in understanding several of the subjects. There was a lot of learning material, and besides being unfamiliar to the students, the content was also experienced as rather tough – as described in this story:

> I think the semester was overwhelming. The subjects were very difficult. Theory of science is quite boring, and the textbooks were written in a philosophical language. In addition, I didn't understand the purpose of theory of science. I still can't imagine how to use this subject in the nursing practice! What is the big idea? When I think about how to take care of the patients, I wonder how to apply the theory of science. During this semester, I have been frustrated and confused, because there was so much new theory stuff to learn, and it was too difficult.

In particular, theory of science was a subject in which some of the students hardly understood what they read and where they seldom – if ever – discovered how they might make use of the knowledge they gained. Other subjects like research methodology and nursing theory were also experienced as difficult. Common to the subjects was that the theoretical content seemed to be very remote from what the students found necessary for their future careers as nurses. The students who struggled to crack the code, experienced the course as difficult and irrelevant. In addition, they had to manage the group project, which is unfolded in the next subtheme.

8.1.2. Challenges related to the written tasks

The students struggled to crack the code in accomplishing the group project:

> Related to our group project, supervisors challenged us in different ways. They had different ideas on how to start a project. We were confused! Everything was unfamiliar – the subjects, the project, and the way we had to cooperate with each other. It was a huge challenge. It was time-consuming, and we were very frustrated.

Some of the lessons was organised as seminars, where the students presented their group projects and responded to each other's projects. The seminars were helpful but also caused frustrations. The elements in the projects, such as literature search, data collection, and the analysis were experienced as quite challenging. Furthermore, the teachers' intention to challenge the students and encourage them in their theoretical and methodological development were not necessarily experienced as helpful. The teachers pushed the students, encouraged them,
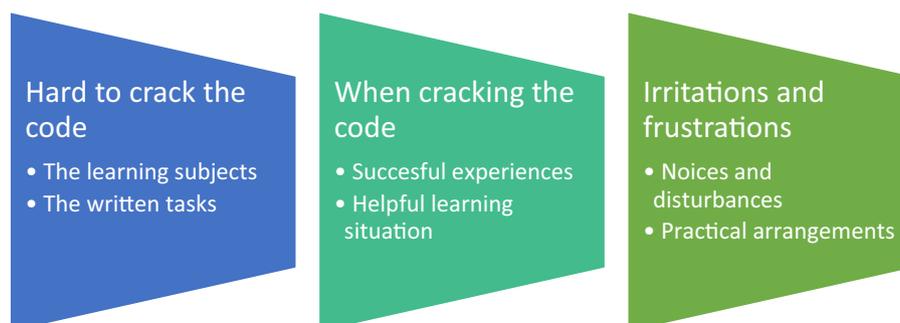

Fig. 1. A thematic structure.

and generously offered them ideas of how to go on. In some cases, these efforts seemed to lead to additional burdens. Common to the students' experiences of the project was the need for clear guidelines and precise guidance. When the enthusiastic teachers unfolded a variety of aspects, the students seemed to feel more confused rather than helped.

8.2. When the students succeeded in cracking the code

Something happened when the students succeeded in cracking the code. A typical remark from a student was: *"Oh, this is the way to do it"*. The students imagined the project as "a ghost" hanging over their heads until the very moment when they realised what to do and how to do it. Some students suddenly found cohesion between the subjects and the project, and the way they were guided. They gradually understood how to tackle the project.

Together with the theme *it is hard to crack the code*, this theme represents a gradual process of understanding where the students at first considered the seminars to be difficult and inaccessible and gradually found them helpful. The theme consists of two subthemes: successful experiences and helpful learning situations.

8.2.1. Successful experiences

Successful experiences are related to the experienced challenges. Nevertheless, when the students succeeded in cracking the code, they experienced a moment of happiness – an AHA-experience. This subtheme relates partly to the students' understanding of the usefulness of each individual subject and partly to the understanding of how to accomplish the project.

The students were reluctant to learn about religion, ethics, and philosophy. Until they had lessons on these subjects, they didn't find them relevant to nursing practice, as described in the following story:

> Studying religion, ethics, and philosophy can in fact be very exciting. It makes me think: "What is it to be a nurse?" The lessons added new aspects of the nursing profession, which gave rise to new reflections on questions like: "How do we nurses meet our patients?" and "What is right and what is wrong in my way of practising nursing?" I spent a lot of time thinking about questions such as: "Why did I react in such a way? Did I really care about the patient? Did he feel comfortable?" Through the knowledge of these subjects, I got a varied view on nursing. We learned in our early training much about communication and psychology, but sometimes I forgot perhaps that the patient might have a belief, a religion, and an outlook on life, which I should take into consideration.

8.2.2. Helpful learning situations

This subtheme is characterised by the experiences the students had, partly in connection with seminars in small groups or in classrooms, and partly in the meeting with competent and engaged supervisors. The following story originated from a student's presentation of a photo during a seminar in a small group:

> Those seminars – they had a marvellous effect. One of the reasons was that the members of the various groups came together and reported what we had achieved since last seminar. We discussed and asked questions, thus getting various points of view. While listening to my fellow students' reflections and to the comments and questions from our supervisor, I suddenly understood the depth of the guidance about the analysis method. That is why I wrote COOL on this photo. We discussed details of the supervision compared to other supervising sessions we have had. The form where we described what we have done and present our ideas of how to proceed, was brilliant. It was very useful to listen to the criticism or praise from our fellow students, followed by comments, questions, and advice from our supervisor. Generally, I would say that these seminars were very helpful.

Some students experienced the seminars to be helpful, both in getting critique on their own papers, and in providing reflections and critical comments to their fellow students. The students discovered that some basic elements were common to all their projects. Despite the expressed benefits, not all students found the seminars helpful. Some students found it frustrating that other groups presented their projects in different ways. For example, one group held a PowerPoint presentation, another group just talked about their project, and others wrote some keynotes and headlines on the blackboard. There were also students who did not see the purpose of listening to other groups. The continuity regarding both the participating groups and the supervisors seemed to be important to feel secure in the seminars.

As to the class teaching, the students experienced a range of helpful learning situations. The use of relevant and meaningful PowerPoints was described as an essential aid to understanding. The following story represents a student's experience of how to benefit from good PowerPoints:

> It was really a good PowerPoint, which gave an excellent description of the project process. Yes, it offered a comprehensive view of the project and we became in some way more secure – it was COOL. When we were stuck on the project, we just looked at the slides once again. The slides outlined what each section was expected to contain.

Another student underlined this point by using another photo of a PowerPoint:

> Yes, the triangle – it is a COOL photo. The PowerPoint with the triangle offered a visual picture of how to do it. The triangle illustrated the question-method-conclusion relation. It was presented in a very simple form, which made it easier to navigate in the research process. Without this, I think I would have messed it all up.

Not only did the learning situation per se matter, it was also essential for the students' positive experiences of learning that they had access to learning sources when they get stuck. In this respect, PowerPoints were helpful, as described in the story above. The two stories represent how illustrations that helped the students to visualise theoretical concepts and methods constitute helpful learnings situations.

The supervisors were also a kind of learning resource. They were the creators of the learning situations and the providers of knowledge. Both during the seminars and in the class teaching, the students found it important to be have competent and highly motivated supervisors. The supervisors were sometimes considered experts who gave additional input to those students who were in a position to take in this information. Not only were they perceived by the students to be competent – they were also aware of the fact that their subjects such as theory of science and theory of nursing might be heavy stuff, as described in this way:

> We had highly motivated supervisors. I really felt encouraged by their engagement. Moreover, it was almost crazy how knowledgeable they were. Not only were they competent. They were also aware of how hard the theoretical stuff might be for us.

The supervisors met the students' uncertainty. They saw them, listened to them and noticed when they were stuck. Then the students were offered extra breaks, which made them feel more comfortable. But, there is a tension here. As indicated in the first theme, if the supervisors' motivation and engagement resulted in too much additional input, this could be experienced as demotivating and burdensome. It seemed to be significant for the experiences of helpful learning situations that the supervisors were aware of the students' various reactions to challenges and pressures. However, the students experienced that the supervisors showed their willingness to comply with the various attitudes.

8.3. Irritations and frustrations

Besides the academic issues, there were also some indications of other sources of irritation and frustration, which influenced the students' daily study experiences. These are described below in the sub-themes noises and disturbances, and practical arrangements.

8.3.1. Noises and disturbances

The students were disturbed when other students came and left as they pleased, which was described in this way:

> I found it irritating when people came and left as they pleased. Well, you can decide for yourself if you like to be here, but it caused disturbance when someone was late and when they left the lessons. I lost focus, thinking about what they were doing. Of course, I am a bit curious. It is a culture to feel free to come and go.

There is a paradox in feeling quite annoyed and at the same time realising that it could have been oneself, as another student said:

> Nevertheless, I will not make myself an arbiter of his or her behaviour. If I could take the next bus and be 10 min late instead of arriving half an hour before, or leave earlier to reach a train home, maybe I would do the same. Anyway, I lost my temper when they asked the teacher to repeat what was covered yesterday after they left.

However, it is obvious that noises and disturbances had implications for the learning environment in the form of losing focus. No matter how understanding the students were, they experienced a feeling of frustration when they were disturbed by their fellow students. In addition, they found it disrespectful when someone left the classroom after receiving comments on their own work, but without staying to provide comments on others'. Being the last group left led to a feeling of being let down.

8.3.2. Practical arrangements

Another source of irritation concerned practical arrangements. The lack of parking spaces and power cables was very frustrating for the students. One of the photos illustrated a moment of joy when the students managed to get a cable, but the story about the photo represents the frustrations the students felt every day in their efforts to get a cable:

> When we were in the other building, we had to walk quite a long distance to get a power cable. Often we tossed a coin to decide who would have to go to get it. In fact, I was surprised how much time we spent on these stupid cable. It shouldn't be a problem at a modern educational institution.

In addition, the students described other experiences related to IT, such as sitting in a classroom without internet access, which entailed that the students were unable to do some of their tasks. The students also found it frustrating when schedules, lesson plans, and other documents were made available too late to appropriately plan their study.

Even though the data were sparse in this respect, the analysis revealed that sources of frustrations and irritations had some impact on the students' learning experiences.

9. Discussion

Our analysis showed that it could be hard for the nursing students to crack the code of how to understand the difficult theories and how to apply the research methods. Some of the challenges they faced were quite similar to what Burnard et al. (2007) described as academic stressors. Their study showed that the students found what they called academic paperwork more stressful than the clinical work. Our analysis did not provide evidence of academic work and clinical work being compared, but it seemed that the feeling of lack of clinical relevance

had an impact on the inclination to study the theories and research methods. Clinical relevance in the research literature is referred to as a major factor regarding the theory-practice gap. According to Factor et al. (2017) nursing students experience a feeling of uncertainty during their clinical training when theories taught in the classroom prove not to be applicable in the clinical setting. They found that it caused uncertainty when the nursing students experienced that the theoretical-based directions were not followed and they were told to do something contrary to the theories (Factor et al., 2017). In our study the participants verbalised their frustrations about not seeing the relevance of theories for their next clinical training or their future practice. It seemed that the courses deemed by the students to be irrelevant for clinical practice were more challenging than courses featuring natural science theories, such as pathology, pharmacology, skills training and the like. Hence, the theory-practice gap seems to be a two-way challenge in nursing education. In the classroom, it caused frustrations when theories seemed to be irrelevant to the students' expectations of being a nurse or not comparable to what they experienced during their previous clinical training. Even though the study projects our participants dealt with were directed to clinical nursing topics, it might not be enough to bridge the theory-practice gap.

Frustrations seemed to play a role in the way the students had trouble cracking the code when dealing with the theoretical subjects and doing the project. Something happened when the students succeeded in cracking the code: they found themselves forever changed. That moment entailed something special, which was described as AHA-moments, expressed like *"suddenly I understood the depth of the guidance"*. These moments of understanding often took place during helpful learning situations. The significant role of the teacher was to build a kind of scaffolding to support the students' work. Helpful learning situations featured a kind of scaffolding support, which took place during class teaching, by, e.g., a proper review of text materials, an explanation of helpful models, an outline of key points, etc. It took also place during seminars, where the students were encouraged to play the most active role by presenting their work in small groups. They found it helpful to learn from the other groups, even though it could be time consuming to relate to other projects.

Whether in class teaching or seminars, the teachers' engagement was important for the students' learning experiences. The analysis indicated an importance of expressing understanding and interest regarding the students' experiences, e.g., when the theoretical content was too heavy and the students needed an extra break. Our study does not add very much knowledge on this issue, but a Swedish study pointed to the importance of dealing with the students' emotions and difficulties (Berglund et al., 2012). It also pointed to the importance of taking a break when dissatisfaction, irritation or other kinds of negative expressions arose in the learning situation. Maybe a parallel can be drawn to being sensitive to the students' life world and emotional reactions in the classroom during a challenging course. Jordal and Heggens (2015) found that nursing students brought their life experiences into the nursing education. When our participants entered the fifth semester their life experiences already consisted of clinical experiences from their periods of clinical training, from student jobs or from former jobs within the health care sector. Of course, other stressors could stem from health conditions or family due to marital status, responsibility towards older family members or whatever characterises the students' life world. Our analysis did not provide evidence regarding these issues. Nevertheless, it showed that the teachers' awareness of the students' emotions and reactions in the classroom had an impact on their learning experiences.

An American study of faculty members' experiences of challenges and successes in project-based learning showed that students demonstrated both resistance and motivation during project work (Lee et al., 2014). Students demonstrated resistance to talk to each other to solve problems together or to find answers themselves and preferred to have the answers served up by the teacher, as usual. We see a parallel in our

current study. The resistance shown in the American study was directed to the academic stressors, which were similar to the challenges our students faced when they find it hard to crack the code. When the semester featured a recurring project, the students faced an unknown learning model at the same time. In a study on resilience, Reyes et al. (2015) found that the students faced both academic and personal obstacles and challenges during their training. In unfolding their experiences of resilience, the nursing students described their efforts to withstand the challenges as "pushing through", which was an ongoing dynamic process to achieve their goals. In our study, in struggling with a great amount of work and in their efforts to crack the code, it could be seen as a resilience expressed as strategies to manage the academic stressors. These could be challenging theories, the pressure of completing the project or passing the exam. Their struggles with "pushing through" led to hard work, but, in the end, their endeavours were rewarded in the form of cracking the code. Lee et al.'s (2014) study showed that the students' motivation increased during project work. Similarly, as our participants experienced how to crack the code, it seemed like the feeling of frustration was replaced by greater motivation.

The final theme, concerning irritations and frustrations, was not as comprehensive as the two previous themes. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored. Moments of irritation caused by lack of resources, lack of parking spaces, late announcement of lesson plans and the like at first glance seemed to be minor issues. However, the significance of such practical issues should not be underestimated. Abushaikha et al. (2014) described practical issues – such as the distance between two classrooms and the like – as academic difficulties. Maybe practical issues should be considered in line with pedagogical issues. Some of these practical problems that appeared in our study were out of the students' control. They could do nothing about the availability of IT cables or books in the library, or the late announcement of lesson plans. With regard to parking spaces, they could choose to arrive earlier to get one, but then the problem would turn to a fellow student instead. In respect of noises and disturbances, the students were dependent on their fellow students. The students present in the classroom were those who experienced the disturbances, but those who could act on that issue were the students who chose to come and go as they pleased. These issues could also be categorised as academic difficulties outside the students' control.

Regarding the methodological approach, we found photo-elicitation to be an appropriate method to get access to the nursing students' lived learning experiences. The photos per se were not considered to be data, but they served as an entry point into the students' experiences. The workshops were necessary to get rich descriptions of the situations represented by the photos. By way of reflections and interviews, we obtained descriptions not just from the one who presented the photo but also from the fellow students. Furthermore, the workshops displayed that photos with the same motif could represent different experiences. For example, two photos from the same textbook represented both a YES-experience, where the student was totally engrossed in the theory described in the book, and a NO-experience for another student, because the book was not available in the library. The rich descriptions and the thorough phenomenological analysis contributed to strengthening our results.

The major limitation of the study is the recruitment of participants. The students were recruited from two locations. Three students from one location and six from the other responded to the invitation and submitted photos. The question is what characterised these students. The participants who agreed to take part could have had stronger internal resources than the students who did not, which might imply that some perspectives were missing. Even though the participants provided positive as well as negative descriptions, data saturation may not have been achieved.

10. Conclusion

We can conclude that, even though nursing students found some of the courses in the fifth semester very difficult, some of the students realised that it was not as difficult as they had expected. The students' experienced academic stressors or academic challenges, such as a high amount of work, paperwork, challenging theories, methods, etc. Some students struggled to find the course meaningful, while others got an experience of how the subjects and methods were relevant to their education and to reflect on their nursing practice.

The teachers were experienced as engaged and highly devoted, which was helpful to some of the students. However, when students struggled very hard to crack the code, the teachers' engagements could be experienced as a burden more than a help. As for the sources of irritation, practical issues, which in another study (Abushaikha et al., 2014) were termed as academic difficulties, occupied the students. Our study indicates that such troubles seemed to disrupt the learning experiences.

Since no demographic data was registered about the participants, our study did not reveal differences in learning experiences related to the students' backgrounds, e.g. age, gender, family background, primary school vs high school, work experience, et cetera. We recommend further research to provide knowledge about potential relations between learning experiences and students' background.

11. Implications for nursing education

The study showed that something happened when the students succeeded in cracking the code and that some learning situations seemed to be conducive to manage to crack the code. Two main academic challenges appeared in that respect: understanding the clinical relevance of the theory of science, nursing theories, ethics and the like, and uncertainty in conducting their study project. As for the theories, it was not the teachers' responsibility to deem these topics relevant or not relevant to clinical practice, but rather to help the students to reach a deeper understanding of how to use these theories to reflect on nursing practice. Based on our study, we suggest that theories be related to clinical issues and nursing students' own clinical experiences be drawn upon in the effort to bridge the theory-practice gap. As for cracking the code to complete the project, the nursing students found it helpful when the elements in the research process were visualised by figures. Furthermore, the project seminars were particularly conducive to understanding the project process. Based on this finding, we suggest organising groups of students into reflecting teams to benefit from the learning process while reading and commenting on other groups' work. However, in their efforts to enhance the nursing students' academic competencies, the teachers must be cognisant of the students' emotional expressions and offer a break or a talk when needed.

Finally, our study provided little evidence of the meaning of practical issues. But, considering our findings and in accordance with other studies (Tharani et al., 2017; Abushaikha et al., 2014), we suggest nursing teachers and education institutions take these issues into consideration. No matter how trivial it may seem in an academic context, practical things such as access to IT resources, learning materials or even parking lots may have an impact on the nursing students' overall experiences of the learning environment.

Funding

References

Abushaikha, L., Mahadeen, A., Abdelkader, R., Nabolski, M., 2014. Academic challenges and positive aspects: perceptions of male nursing students. Int. Nurs. Rev. 61 (2), 263–269. https://doi.org/10.1111/inr.12098.

Andersen, R., 2016. Forskningsværksteder - kompetenceudvikling og kapacitetsopbygning (Research workshops - competency development and capacity building). In: Sprogøe, J., Jagd, K. (Eds.), Samarbejdsdrevet innovation i uddannelse (Collaboration driven innovation in education). Frydenlund Academic, Frederiksberg, pp. 38–48.

Berglund, M., Sjögren, R., Ekebergh, M., 2012. Reflect and learn together – when two supervisors interact in the learning support process of nurse education. J. Nurs. Manag. 20, 152–158. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2834.2011.01368.x.

Burnard, P., Binti, H.T., Rahim, H.A., Hayes, D., 2007. A descriptive study of Bruneian student nurses' perceptions of stress. Nurse Educ. Today 27, 808–818. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2006.11.002.

Christrup, H., 1993. Konflikt og kærlighed i adhocratiet. [Conflict and Love in the Adhocracy]. Samfundslitteratur, Frederiksberg.

Dahlberg, K., Dahlberg, H., Nyström, M., 2011. Reflective Lifeworld Research, 2nd ed. Studentlitteratur, Lund.

Danbjørg, D.B., Birkelund, R., 2011. The practical skills of newly qualified nurses. Nurse Educ. Today 31, 168–172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2010.05.013.

Dewey, J., 2005. Demokrati og uddannelse [Democracy and Education]. Klim, Aarhus.

Edwards, D., Burnard, P., Bennett, K., Hebden, U., 2010. A longitudinal study of stress and self-esteem in student nurses. Nurse Educ. Today 30, 78–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2009.06.008.

Evans, W., Kelly, B., 2004. Pre-registration diploma student nurse stress and coping measures. Nurse Educ. Today 24, 473–482. https://doi.org/10.3928/00220124-20091119-06.

Factor, E.M.R., Matienzo, E.T., de Guzman, A.B., 2017. A square peg in a round hole: theory-practice gap from the lens of Filipino student nurses. Nurse Educ. Today 57, 82–87. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.07.004.

Holtslander, L., Solar, J., Smith, N.R., 2013. The 15-minute family interview as a learning strategy for senior undergraduate nursing students. J. Fam. Nurs. 19 (2), 230–248. https://doi.org/10.1177/1074840712472554.

Jordal, K., Heggens, K., 2015. When life experience matters: a narrative exploration of students' learning in nursing education. Nordic Psychol. 67 (2), 104–116.

Lee, J.S., Blackwell, S., Drake, J., Moran, K.A., 2014. Taking a leap of faith: redefining teaching and learning in higher education through project-based learning. Interdiscip. J. Problem-Based Learn. 8 (2). https://doi.org/10.7771/1541-5015.1426.

Noland, C.M., 2006. Auto-photography as research practice: identity and self-esteem research. Journal of Research Practice 2 (1), M1.

Pedersen, K.L., Einarsen, K.A., 2013. Sykepleierstudenters erfaring med relevansen av vitenskapsteori i praksisstudiene. (Nursing students' experiences of the relevance of the theory of science in clinical practice). Nordisk Tidsskrift for Helseforskning 9 (1), 35–49.

Pender, R.L., Stinchfield, T., 2012. A reflective look at reflecting teams. Fam. J. 20 (2), 117–122. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480712438526.

Rasmussen, K., 2014. Children taking photos and photographs: a route to children's involvement and participation and a "bridge" to Exploring children's everyday lifes. In: Melton, G.B., Ben-Arieh, A., Cashmore, J., Goodman, G.S., Worley, N.K. (Eds.), The Sage Handbook of Child Research. Sage Publications, Los Angeles, pp. 443–469.

Reyes, A.T., Andrusyszyn, M.-A., Iwasiw, C., Forchuk, C., Babenko-Mould, Y., 2015. Nursing students' understanding and enactment of resilience: a grounded theory study. J. Adv. Nurs. 71 (11), 2622–2633. https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.12730.

Sikander, S., Aziz, F., 2012. Stressors and coping strategies among baccalaureate nursing students at Shifa College of Nursing Islamabad, Pakistan. Int. J. Nurs. Educ. 4 (2), 193–197.

Sparkes, A.C., 2002. Telling Tales in Sport and Physical Activity. A Qualitative Journey. Human Kinetics, Leeds.

Tharani, A., Husain, Y., Warwick, I., 2017. Learning environment and emotional well-being: a qualitative study of undergraduate nursing students. Nurse Educ. Today 59, 82–87. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.09.008.

Timmins, F., Corroon, A.M., Byrne, G., Mooney, B., 2011. The challenge of contemporary nurse education programmes. Perceived stressors of nursing students: mental health and related lifestyle issues. J. Psychiatr. Ment. Health Nurs. 18, 758–766. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2850.2011.01780.x.