

The Journey through Nursing Doctoral Education: An Inside Story

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Abstract:

Students who gain new knowledge by integrating scholarliness and stewardship for the nursing profession possess key ambitions for succeeding in nursing doctoral education. In this narrative inquiry, a student reflects on themes of scholarly integration, intellectual community, and stewardship that are embedded in the values and attitudes evidenced in the culture of a Doctor of Philosophy in nursing program. The doctoral student's personal reflection demonstrates professional growth during the experience of nursing doctoral education. This inquiry provides guidance for other students as they embark on their journey toward scholarly development and stewardship during their doctoral education experience.

Key Words:

Doctoral studies, nursing, narrative inquiry, attitudes, professional growth.

An Introduction to Presence in the World of a Nursing Doctoral Student

After eighteen years of nursing experience, the desire to provide and facilitate quality nursing care led me down a winding path into the world of doctoral education. At the beginning, I was looking forward to the personal and professional growth that doctoral education would provide for me in my current role as a nursing educator. Although working on a doctoral degree in nursing has been an enthralling experience, it has not been an easy journey. In discussions with others, it seems that doctoral students experience a multitude of opportunities during their scholarly endeavors. These opportunities guide them toward learning inquiry and new knowledge that are essential for attaining goals. On the other hand, overcoming struggles during the doctoral education journey can be burdensome for students.

These difficulties in progressing through a doctoral education have contributed to consistently low student enrollment in nursing doctoral programs during the past ten years (Schmidt Bunkers, 2002). As a result, only one-half of full-time nursing faculty

members are doctorally prepared (Berlin & Sechrist, 2002). It is concerning for the future of nursing education that the mean age of doctorally prepared faculty continues to increase (Berlin & Sechrist, 2002) and 37.5% of doctorally prepared nurses are approaching retirement (Minnick & Halstead, 2002). The lack of doctorally prepared faculty is comprehensible considering there is an approximate 50% attrition rate in overall doctoral programs (Walker, Golde, Jones, & Conklin-Bueschel, et al. 2008). This reflective inquiry was written from the perspective of a student enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) nursing program. The purpose of this inquiry is to identify themes of scholarly development and qualities of doctoral programs that promote student success in nursing doctoral education.

Background

Historically, nursing doctoral programs have faced many challenges that continue to exist today. One challenge for nursing doctoral programs has been to prepare leadership and advanced practice nurses to significantly impact society's healthcare outcomes (Institute of Medicine, 2003). The Institute of Medicine (IOM) asserts that the field of nursing possesses solutions to future healthcare dilemmas that include chronic illness, and the need for health promotion and disease prevention (IOM, 2003). A key component for society to conquer in healthcare dilemmas is to increase the numbers of doctorally prepared nurses who can design and implement programs that will impact healthcare outcomes (IOM, 2003).

Another challenge for nursing doctoral programs has been to seek clarity for how to define the multiple nursing doctoral program tracks for fulfilling these leadership and advanced practice roles (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2004; Schmidt-Bunkers, 2002; Edwardson, 2004; Kim, McKenna, & Ketefian, 2005; Kjellgren, Welin, & Danielson, 2005; & Whall, 2004). Although the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) established that the practice and research focused doctorates are final degrees in nursing, controversy between preferences of research and practice-focused disciplines has led to confusion. Leaders in higher education and students who pursue nursing doctoral education have found little difference in content and course requirements among the various doctoral degrees (AACN, 2002).

The concern about the growing shortage of nursing academicians to teach future generation doctoral nurses is an additional concern for nursing (Schmidt-Bunkers, 2002). The AACN (2001) expresses a dire need to increase the growth of doctorally prepared faculty. Without raising the number of qualified nursing faculty to teach doctoral education, limited quantities of doctoral enrollments in nursing will continue to be a problem.

One initiative that led colleges to improve quality in their doctoral programs was the American Association of College of Nursing's (AACN) identification of Quality Indicators for Doctoral Programs in Nursing. Since 1986, the AACN established quality indicators for leading directors and deans of nursing colleges to establish quality programs with a focus on research. Indicators of quality are represented by the: (a) faculty, (b) programs of study that reflect the mission and the discipline of nursing, (c) human, financial and institutional resources, (d) students' qualification and motivation, and (e) evaluation of the program's processes and goals (AACN, 2001). Numerous studies suggest that the

AACN indicators have provided guidance for doctoral programs to enhance their quality and advance the nursing discipline (AACN, 2004; Anderson, 2000; Kim, McKenna, Ketefian 2005; Kjellgren, Welin, & Danielson, 2005; & Whall 2004).

A second initiative that directed colleges to improve their doctoral programs was the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID). During the years of 2001-2005, the CID explored the purpose, vision, and quality of doctoral programs (Walker, et al., 2008). One goal of the initiative was to support universities in identifying the purpose of doctoral education in their programs. The CID affirmed that the purpose of doctoral education should be to educate students who demonstrate the ability and commitment to engender new knowledge with vigor, quality, and integrity within their discipline (Walker, et al., 2008). Additionally, the initiative encouraged universities to seek a new vision in their programs for advancing students toward becoming stewards of their disciplines. Golde and Walker (2006) describe stewards of the disciplines as those students who advance new knowledge and creativity in their fields. These students integrate intellectual and moral capacities in their scholarly work.

The Path to Formation of Stewardship

Students who identify themselves within the scope of their profession begin the process of formation for becoming a steward (Walker, et al., 2008). Being a steward of the discipline reflects their ability to share inquiry and new knowledge that expands them in their areas of expertise. Intellectual community is represented by partnerships among faculty and students who collaborate to form new ideas that stimulate the transformation of knowledge and learning. Stewards transform their knowledge through writing, teaching, and application. They create a means to engender new stewards according to Walker, et al. (2008).

The onset of formation of stewardship and scholarly development for me began with memorable experiences during my roles of a Director of Nursing in a nursing home and Nurse Educator. It was apparent to me that nurses working in the nursing home needed education about methods to improve quality of nursing care for residents. Nurses in the nursing home and nursing students were interested in learning methods to improve care too but lacked new knowledge about dealing with the complexity of chronic illness and disease prevention. I decided to pursue higher education with goals to gain new knowledge that could assist me to impact healthcare outcomes of residents in nursing homes, then share this new knowledge with nurses and nursing students.

Critical Events That Led to Inquiry and New Knowledge

Shulman (2002) provides a way understanding the process of achieving scholarliness in his metaphor of mirrors, lenses, and windows. The mirrors metaphor relates to a realization that there may be hidden images that a person or program can identify and grow upon. Lenses provide a capability of “sharpening the focus” and “magnifying the detail” that promote a desire for seeking change (Shullman, 2002, p. 43). Windows offer an opportunity to view others’ methods of practice. Scholarly spirit intensifies as students lean “over the windowsill” to exchange new knowledge according to Shulman (2002, p. 43).

Students begin the process of formation as they look into the mirror to determine a purpose and vision for pursuing doctoral education. Waldspurger-Robb (2005) claims that students should perform a self-assessment of their goals, choose research topics of interest for the dissertation, investigate the faculty and university, then select a doctoral program that best fits their personal goals and strategic vision. Students should seek a doctoral program that is the best fit for their personal and professional philosophy and goals (Carpenter & Hudacek, 1996).

It has been within my personal and professional philosophies that nurses render quality of nursing care that is described by the residents in nursing homes. I selected a program with a mission and vision that resonated with my goals to gain new knowledge about nursing care in nursing homes and enhance nursing education. In addition, I sought a program that was nationally ranked in nursing. The program and faculty's outstanding accomplishments of research and scholarship were evidenced by extramural grant awards and a vast number of publications evident in the literature. After my enrollment into the doctoral program, I met face to face with faculty. I felt assured by their enthusiasm to assist me in sharpening my focus on my dissertation topic.

Presence in sharing and learning with other students is essential for survival in doctoral education (Carpenter & Hudacek, 1996). Becoming acquainted with other students led to "leaning over the windowsill" to exchange new ideas and share scholarly spirit as described by Shulman (2002, p. 43). It was an exciting time as we shared aspirations for seeking inquiry and new knowledge about our various topics of interest for the dissertation. Faculty members demonstrated support of the AACN's indicator of quality (AACN, 2001) when they created an environment of mentorship and socialization. Faculty and advanced doctoral students represented stewards of their disciplines as they shared their accomplishments and commitment to support the new doctoral students. After I completed my coursework in the doctoral program, I found that continued contact with the cohort enhanced my scholarly spirit in moving forward with the actual dissertation work. Students may be more likely to complete their dissertation if they continue to network with other cohort in a culture of intellectual community throughout the program.

Presence in Scholarliness and Stewardship

Shulman's lenses metaphor (2002) reflects scholarly integration where doctoral students learn to assimilate teaching and research concepts. One of the AACN's indicators stipulates that core and related course content should support the student's area of focus (AACN, 2001). Early in the doctoral program, I completed a self-assessment that assisted me to identify personal strengths to build upon for planning my dissertation study. My eighteen years of nursing experience caring for older persons provided a sound basis for me to develop what was yet to be known about facilitating improved nursing care in nursing homes.

I analyzed historical perspectives, values, and ethics about research that provided insight for how linking teaching and research concepts advance the science of nursing. According to Williams (2004), it is essential that nurses are effectively trained to integrate current scientific knowledge into prevention and treatment actions in clinical

practice. I completed a scientific paper that helped me to assimilate conceptual and theoretical frameworks. I sought for the theory and methodology that best supported my study. My journey had led me in choosing a quantitative research study. Unbeknown to me at that time, there were future opportunities that would assist me to discover the best research method for my dissertation study.

Finding New Awareness

I soon learned that attaining grants and publishing new knowledge were processes that reflect scholarliness and stewardship. I discovered barriers to obtaining grants that could have potentially supported my study. After taking a look in the mirror at the "hidden images" as Shulman described (2002, p. 43), I realized that the grants that I pursued were either not in alignment with my dissertation topic or would have forced me to reduce my hours of work as a nursing educator because of the grant requirements. These options were not feasible for me. I discovered that it is essential to select the right grant that could best support the dissertation topic. In addition, I had written several course papers that needed revisions for manuscript submissions, but I lacked time to accomplish these revisions. Sternberg (1981) reports that a commonality among successful writers is to implement a consistent writing time each day for at least five days each week. It is essential that doctoral students schedule "dissertation office hours" when the priority in their life should be writing the dissertation (Sternberg, 1981, p. 45). Scheduling a specific time for writing each day assisted me to accomplish writing assignments. When time management became overwhelming, I rekindled my thoughts about my purpose for becoming a doctoral student. It was my aspiration to be a scholar and steward of the nursing profession that gave me strength to rise above the overwhelming times.

Discovering an Inside-the World Perspective

I continued studying research methodologies to determine how to improve nursing care in nursing homes and integrate new knowledge in nursing education. I remained engrossed in a quantitative methodology for the research study until I became exposed to qualitative research methods. Evaluation of qualitative research warranted different ways of assuring rigor and merit compared to what I had previously learned in the quantitative research methods courses. In the quantitative methods courses, I researched quality nursing care described by domains and measured variables. But questions evolved such as: What if the domains do not capture hidden variables such as factors that reflect quality of nursing care? I wondered if the domains and variables could represent rigor and precision specific to my dissertation study.

My dissertation committee iterated that quantitative and qualitative methods are essential to research, and that I should seek research methods that best fit my study. They directed me to capture the richness that could grow from the inside perspective with using a qualitative methodology. The qualitative method would be a better fit for exploring quality nursing care in nursing homes. I had much to learn about qualitative research though. I leaned over the windowsill that extended outside my comfort zone of quantitative methodologies. The AACN's indicator of quality that requires faculty to represent and value a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives (AACN, 2001)

surfaced once again. Faculty with expertise in qualitative research are leading me in the process of conducting a qualitative study that instills rigor and precision that are essential for scientific inquiry.

Reflection and Summary

The path to becoming a steward of the nursing discipline results in profound personal and professional growth. Themes of scholarly integration, intellectual community, and stewardship are embedded in the values and attitudes evidenced in the culture of the PhD in Nursing Science program that is leading me in this educational journey. A view through mirrors revealed “hidden images,” as described by Shulman (2002, p. 43). The hidden images assisted me to gain self-awareness about the fit of my expertise within my research focus. I identified my personal strengths and expanded on these strengths to learn new inquiry and knowledge. Lenses provided an opportunity for me to sharpen my focus on the dissertation topic and reach beyond my comfort zone for choosing the best fit research method. “Leaning over the windowsill” (Shulman, 2002, p. 43) has broadened my view of nursing and research. Sharing with other cohort members in the doctoral program has intensified my scholarly spirit. I plan to continue to engender new knowledge with vigor, quality, and integrity as described by Walker et al. (2008). I will transform new knowledge into my nursing research, teaching, and practice. I am grateful for the personal and professional growth that I have attained during this educational journey in the PhD in Nursing program. I feel that it has prepared me well for performing my life-long scholarly work..

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