TRYING SOMETHING NEW:
Implementing and Evaluating Narrative Pedagogy
Using a Multimethod Approach

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TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF RAPIDLY CHANGING HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS (1-2), teacher-scholars are rethinking conventional approaches to education (3-5) and developing new pedagogies (6-11). These pedagogies offer new ways of thinking about and using current approaches such that practices, strategies, and assumptions of teaching and learning, now taken for granted, are challenged, critiqued, and deconstructed. Very few studies in nursing education, or higher education in general, have evaluated these pedagogies in actual classroom situations. Thus, to develop a science for nursing education, multimethod studies are needed that systematically evaluate new pedagogies in the context of contemporary nursing education. • This pilot study was developed to reflect the National League for Nursing Blue Ribbon Panel Priorities for Research in Nursing Education (2) by documenting 1) how to implement an alternative pedagogy to develop new partnerships among teachers and students, 2) how this implementation is experienced by the teacher and students, and 3) how Narrative Pedagogy influences students’ perceptions of the classroom learning climate. This article focuses on explicating how a teacher and students experienced the implementation and evaluation of Narrative Pedagogy in an introductory nursing course.

ABSTRACT To meet the challenges of rapidly changing health care systems, teacher-scholars are rethinking conventional approaches to education and developing new pedagogies that offer new ways of thinking about and using current approaches. The practices, strategies, and assumptions of teaching and learning that are now taken for granted are being challenged, critiqued, and deconstructed with these new approaches. There are very few studies in the higher education or nursing literature that evaluate these pedagogies in actual classroom situations. This article reports the findings of a multimethod study that was developed to document how to implement an alternative pedagogy to develop new partnerships among teachers and students, how implementation is experienced by the teacher and students, and how Narrative Pedagogy influenced students’ perceptions of the classroom learning climate.
Background  Research in nursing and higher education has demonstrated that the legacy of a generation of teacher-centered pedagogies is the proliferation of learning climates that are competitive, confrontational, isolating, and anxiety-provoking (12-16). Given this legacy, faculty members are increasingly implementing alternative pedagogies that emphasize community building and the improvement of relationships between and among teachers and students (9). For instance, nursing scholars have reported how the use of critical, feminist, and phenomenological pedagogies have been helpful in creating more egalitarian and cooperative learning environments in nursing education (8,17-19).

Despite the continued interest in using alternative pedagogies, little research has been done to systematically evaluate these approaches in the context of nursing education. When testing does exist, it is conducted predominantly with methods developed within the conventional paradigm, such as the measurement of cognitive gain or skill acquisition (20). Such studies, while helpful, are insufficient to evaluate the influence of alternative pedagogies because the approach to evaluation is incongruent with the pedagogical emphasis. In other words, measuring cognitive gain does not provide teachers with information related to how students experience the learning environment. Similarly, studies analyzing the influence of various pedagogies are needed that do not perpetuate the dichotomy between evaluating conventional pedagogy using quantitative approaches and the alternative using qualitative approaches. This dichotomy thwarts the opportunity for teacher-scholars to compile longitudinal, comprehensive, and multifaceted evidence to guide teaching practice and build a science of nursing education.

Narrative Pedagogy was developed by N. Diekelmann from an extensive analysis of the experiences of teachers and students within the discipline of nursing, and it has been shown to be helpful in reforming the climate in nursing classrooms (6-7,9,21). This pilot study was designed using a multimethod approach to evaluate the implementation of Narrative Pedagogy in an introductory nursing course. By analyzing qualitative and quantitative findings, the pilot also speaks to the pitfalls and dilemmas of striving to evaluate “trying something new.”

The Redesigned Course  The project began with the redesign and implementation of a one-credit introductory nursing course offered to first-semester freshmen. The course, Perspectives on Nursing, used Narrative Pedagogy to describe basic principles of nursing and address issues such as entry into practice, employment opportunities, and nursing roles.

Narrative Pedagogy is an approach to schooling, learning, and teaching and a way of thinking about community practices that emerges when teachers and students publicly share and interpret stories of their lived experiences (3). Thus, the course began with the students and teacher writing and sharing stories of caring for another person — or being cared for. The process of interpreting these stories allowed for an exploration of caring practices, in general, and nursing practice, specifically. Questions were asked and considered — e.g., Are the concerns of caregivers the same as the concerns of those receiving care? Did where the care was provided (or received) matter? Collectively interpreting each story and thinking about these questions led the class to consider what is known and what is assumed, what each person brings into nursing as well as what one needs to know or to learn in order to care for another.

Sharing and interpreting oral and written narratives of experiences in class continued through the semester. Reflecting on classroom experiences and what happens between classes, as well as observations of nurses in practice, led to further exploration, such as, “The thing that surprised me most about my experience today was...” or “It was exciting for me to realize that nurses...”. Each class followed the path to thinking created by the students and teacher together. The next class was collaboratively planned at the end of each class meeting.

Study Design  Institutional Review Board approval was obtained and the study was explained in detail to students during the first class meeting. All 14 students enrolled in the course — 13 females and 1 male — were invited to participate and provided informed consent. Eleven students completed the pretest (79 percent) and nine completed the posttest (64 percent). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, a faculty colleague distributed and collected questionnaires and an experienced interpretive nursing researcher from an outside institution conducted the interpretive interviews. Students received no remuneration or extra credit for participation, nor penalties for not participating in the project. The teacher of the course, the principal investigator for the study, did not know which students participated and which did not.

On the first day of class, quantitative data were collected using the College Classroom Environment Scale (CCES). Students rated how they anticipated the learning environment in the course. The data provided a baseline for later comparisons with the posttest scores in which students indicated how they actually experienced the course. The CCES was developed to assess the influence of
teaching strategies on student perceptions of classroom learning climates (22-23) and has been shown to be psychometrically credible in studies in higher education (23). It consists of 62 statements to which students respond using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true) to 5 (always or almost always true).

Qualitative data were collected for analysis via nonstructured interviews. The goal was to document how students experienced participating in a course that used Narrative Pedagogy. Participants were asked to “reflect on the course you have just taken and describe a time that stands out for you because it reflects what it meant to you to be a student in [this course]. Consider telling a story of what worked for you as a student in this course and what did not work.”

A transcriptionist experienced in interpretive research transcribed the audiotaped interviews into a written text for hermeneutic analysis by the principal investigator. A research team composed of an experienced interpretive researcher/teacher and a doctoral student was used to challenge, extend, or overcome themes that were identified in the analysis.

**Findings** Pre- and posttest data were analyzed using SPSS. Because the pretest and posttest groups were unequal and no identifying marks were requested on the response sheets, data could not be paired and were treated as two independent samples. The Mann Whitney U was used because the data were considered ordinal.

Findings indicate that on 84 percent of the items, there was no statistically significant difference in the pre- and posttest scores. That is, statistically, there was no difference between what students anticipated and what they actually experienced.

Ten of the 62 items showed a significant change, a decrease in student perceptions of the learning climate. On these items, students indicated that they found the learning climate to be worse than expected. These findings were disappointing to the researcher/teacher; they were incongruent with her experiences, with students’ statements during the course, and with students’ comments on the standard course evaluation used at the college.

Clearly some of the decreases were appropriate given the use of Narrative Pedagogy. For instance, ratings of the item “Students take a lot of notes in this class” significantly decreased. This was to be expected since the class format did not call for taking and reviewing notes. In fact, students in Narrative Pedagogy classrooms commonly say, “The course was compelling, but I hardly took a note to show it,” or “The course makes you think rather than taking dictation from the teacher or being bored with a discussion and taking notes to stay awake” (N. Diekelmann, personal communication, September 4, 2001).

However, ratings on other items were surprising. For instance, “The students in this class have gotten to know each other well” showed a decrease that was highly significant (p = 0.01). This finding led to several questions: Did the teacher/researcher misread student comments in class? Did this tool fail to measure the changes in the classroom climate? Does Narrative Pedagogy fail to improve classroom climate?

It is clear that the data must be interpreted cautiously because of the small sample size used in this pilot. In addition, some important threats to the internal validity of the design became apparent over the course of the study. First, the design was based upon observing a change from pre- to posttest, but no change was detected on 84 percent of the items. This could be attributed, in part, to how high the students’ ratings were on the pretest. If students come into a course with very high expectations, as they should, having no change might indicate a very positive perception of the learning environment.

Because there are no normative data for comparison, whether the congruence between what was anticipated and what was experienced occurred because of the pedagogy used remains unclear. It may also be possible that comparing what students anticipate — or wish for — in a course with their evaluation of the course is not helpful, and a posttest-only design would be more informative.

It also became apparent that teachers rarely discuss with students how they test new pedagogies or what such testing reveals. To do so would, in fact, compromise some of the tools used in the evaluation. Perhaps, as a part of contemporary reform in nursing education, teachers and students need to talk more about their experiences as partners in “trying something new.”

Nonetheless, the measures of central tendency indicate that the majority of responses were lower on the posttest. Although caution is again warranted, this raises the question of whether the instrumentation was appropriate to the type of changes being instituted with Narrative Pedagogy, or whether the learning environment was generally worse than the students anticipated. For instance, the criterion “Lectures in this class keep students’ interest” showed a significant decrease. Did students read this as, “The discussions in this class are boring,” or, because lectures were not a feature of this class, did they rate this question as “never or almost never true,” lowering the overall mean score? One might ask whether there are appropriate tools for providing quantitative data to evaluate the new pedagogies.
IT ALSO BECAME APPARENT that teachers rarely discuss with students how they test new pedagogies or what such testing reveals. TO DO SO WOULD, in fact, compromise some of the tools used in the evaluation. PERHAPS, as a part of contemporary reform in nursing education, teachers and students need to talk more about their experiences as partners in “TRYING SOMETHING NEW.”

What is particularly interesting is how often the mean score on the CCES was directly opposite the experiences students shared during their interviews. For instance, the item “Students in this class have gotten to know each other well” showed a highly significant decrease. Yet, in their interviews, students often talked on the class and made comments such as the following:

Oh, [the students in this class] are awesome! We get along so well. We all have like, 8:00 class together and we have a 9:00 class together and we have 2:00 class together, and we all have the same ideas about nursing....We love our nursing, and we’re so excited. Like we just had a conversation the other day how excited we all are to be in nursing.

If teacher-scholars are to use tools such as the CCES, further psychometric work is needed to document validity for particular classroom environments. In addition, studies with more power are needed to determine if changes do, indeed, occur and under what conditions. Qualitative analysis will augment this project by providing descriptions of how the learning environment was experienced by teachers and students in practical and utilitarian ways that can guide instrument development.

Themes that emerged from the hermeneutical analyses of the student interviews reveal what worked and what did not work in this introductory course, as well as the complexity inherent in evaluating the influence of alternative pedagogies. That is, the qualitative analysis made some of the difficulties students had evaluating new pedagogies through quantitative methods more visible.

**Theme: Describing Difference by Making Comparisons** Students consistently described this course in relation to other courses as a way of delineating to the interviewer how — for better or worse — this course was “different.” Differences often revolved around a comparison of the strategies or methods teachers used in their courses. For instance, Idun contrasted the teaching methods in this introductory course to a general science course she was taking in which the teacher used a lecture format. Idun described how she valued “going over like three chapters and then having a test,” stating, “That’s how I’m used to being taught. And that’s how I like to be taught.” She continued:

Well, my favorite teacher right now is my [science] teacher, and that is just because...we come into class and he...lectures...and yet he still tries to get us involved, like he’ll ask us questions here and there. And...if you have any questions, he’s real informative. He doesn’t...I was going to say that he doesn’t make you feel stupid if you ask him a question, but [my nursing teacher] didn’t make me feel stupid either, so, I don’t know. I think she has the same standards as a teacher. Just I don’t like the way she teaches...I can’t really think of like tons of differences between her and my favorite teacher, but just the teaching. I like how he lectures and he tries to get people involved while he’s lecturing...instead of just trying to get all of the group discussion.

Idun speaks to the differences in these courses by describing differences in the way the teachers teach. As she relates her story, however, she acknowledges how both teachers have the same “standards,” and, as she thinks further, she is unable to “really think of a ton of differences.” It might be that Idun connected more with the science teacher than with the nursing teacher, and her comparison reveals the influence of knowing and connecting on tool responses and reflections. Or, perhaps for Idun, it is not an issue of the teacher or the pedagogy but simply the teaching methods — lecture versus discussion — that are paramount in her mind. Other than comparing her preference for particular teach-
ing methods, she “doesn’t know” what constitutes the differences she experiences or that they matter.

**Theme: Evaluating New Pedagogies as Evaluating the Structure of Teaching** The evaluation tools commonly used in schools of nursing consist of questions that define for students the indicators of having been well taught. But how do students know if they have been well taught? What is the relationship between the student’s experiences in evaluating conventional pedagogies and the student’s sense of being well taught with new pedagogies?

MacLeod (19) contends that being well taught is experienced by students as the structure of the course rather than as an indicator of how one was taught or what was learned. This difference may be inadvertently reinforced when course evaluations commonly ask students to simply evaluate, for example, whether the course objectives were clear or whether class expectations were clearly delineated in the course syllabus. Whether such criteria are responded to affirmatively or negatively, teachers are left with little information about how well they are teaching and students are learning. Put more simply, how meaningful are “clear objectives” or having expectations spelled out in the syllabus, to being well taught, or to learning for that matter? The new pedagogies challenge some of the assumptions of conventional pedagogy and seek to develop in students the ability to reflect upon learning and to ask questions such as, “What is the meaning and significance of this experience (or topic) to me as a nursing student?”

The difficulty in students believing that teaching only “counts” or is “good teaching” when it is structured in a certain way is particularly problematic when teachers use pedagogies, like Narrative Pedagogy or feminist pedagogy, that are committed to giving students a voice in how the class is taught and to letting the course evolve as the students grow throughout the semester. The issue, in these cases, is not that the course has been poorly structured or is structureless, but that the structure has changed. Students commonly attribute this change merely to style or teaching effectiveness. Perhaps the issue is that teachers and students do not talk enough about the pedagogy being used and what that means to both students and teachers. How often do teachers and students talk about teaching and learning beyond issues of how the course is organized and structured? Can evaluating course organization or structure provide teachers and students with the evidence needed to judge whether classrooms have become more egalitarian, empowering, and cooperative?

As teacher-scholars increasingly develop and use new pedagogies, commensurate scholarship focused on evaluation is warranted. That is, can teacher-scholars overcome evaluating new pedagogies with the tools of conventional pedagogy? To develop new approaches to evaluation, teachers and students will have to consider questions such as: What is it that differs in a classroom in which students and teacher use a new pedagogy? Throughout the course the students struggled, along with the teacher, to find a language that would reflect common experiences in the classroom.

Students frequently told stories of meaningful aspects of the course, what they had learned, and how they had come to understand nursing differently. Often they were enthusiastic during their interview, sharing how this course made them even more excited to become a nurse or helped them think about things they had never thought about before. Kalad tries to describe the difference she experienced in this course:

*I think it was the way that [she] talked to us. The way she acted towards us. I’ve had other teachers do the same thing, but I’ve also been really inhibited to talk. But I didn’t feel that way with [her]. And I don’t know exactly why it was. I think some of it has to do with the people that are in your class. Not so much how the teacher teaches, but a lot with the people that are in your class, like are these people the same age as you? Are these people in the same boat as you? Do they have the same major as you? I think it was easier for me to talk in my nursing classes because I knew that everybody knew the same thing that I did. And we were all at the same level... I wasn’t afraid that anyone was going to laugh at me or anything, or think I was dumb. But in other classes... we...sat in a circle, and we would have discussions, and I don’t like to talk, because, you know, I understand [the content]... and I knew what I was doing and I could have answered all the questions, but I just didn’t because I felt scared that I would say something dumb and all the [students with other majors] would think I was stupid. Kalad’s experience provides evidence of how Narrative Pedagogy provided an environment conducive to learning in that the students freely participated in class without fear of being “laughed at” or made to “feel stupid.” Yet, embedded in Kalad’s account is her struggle to describe the nature of the difference. She has experienced similar teaching strategies, such as sitting in a circle and having class discussions, in classes where she neither participated nor felt confident her responses would not be considered stupid. Kalad recognizes that something important was different but does not know “exactly what it was.”

Kalad begins by attributing the difference to the way the teacher talked to and acted toward the students. She then quickly moves to describing not how the teacher teaches, but the “people that are in your class.” What Kalad’s account reveals is the diffi-
WHETHER CRITERIA ARE RESPONDED TO affirmatively or negatively, teachers are left with little information about how well they are teaching and students are learning. PUT MORE SIMPLY, how meaningful are “CLEAR OBJECTIVES,” or having expectations spelled out in the syllabus, to being well taught, or to learning for that matter? THE NEW PEDAGOGIES CHALLENGE some of the assumptions of conventional pedagogy and seek to DEVELOP IN STUDENTS THE ABILITY TO REFLECT UPON LEARNING.

culty students have evaluating pedagogies that attempt to overcome teacher-centered classrooms in ways that are not teacher centered. That is, how frequently are students asked to evaluate courses in terms of what the teacher does, or does not do, without being asked to consider issues of the learning climate created collaboratively by students and teachers?

Perhaps some of the difficulty teacher-scholars face in rethinking their approaches to evaluation stems from not knowing the questions to ask. For instance, if Narrative Pedagogy is not a strategy to be implemented but a practice of learning in communities (3,9), then questions of the structure and organization of the course provide data that are ambiguous at best. In this case, Kalad relates how other teachers used the same teaching methods, but these strategies did not capture the differences she experienced. Perhaps both teachers and students have relied too heavily on evaluating course organization and the structure of teaching as a reflection of the usefulness or the meaningfulness of what occurs in classrooms.

Is it possible for teachers and students to talk about the learning climate in our classrooms without using terms of conventional pedagogies? This is how Jayden describes the course at the start of her interview:

Well, I went into the class not really knowing much about it, and when we got there the first day, it was just, we were really at ease, and she [said], “This is a class for you guys to find out more about nursing and for us to explore the different aspects of nursing.” And throughout the whole class, we just would bring up subjects, like stories of nursing, and we would just look at everything you had to think about. And the thing for me was, there was a lot of things I never even thought about that have to do with nursing, that she had brought up, and they just made me think, and made me think about everything that I'm going to be doing in my future...Like, she brought up...like if a mother came [into the clinic] and she was pregnant and did not have the resources to take care of the child — Like, I never thought about it before, but being a nurse, I would have to be able to tell her that she could go to...agencies out there that can help her. And just be able to like give her numbers and just help her out in that way. I never thought of it that way.

As Jayden describes her experience, the teaching method of using “stories of nursing” is evident but largely transparent to the experience. The emphasis seems to be the things that “made me think.” Embedded in the narrative is the seamlessness of teaching and learning. For instance, rather than describing what the teacher did, Jayden tells how “we would bring up subjects” and “we would just look at everything you had to think about” [emphasis added]. Teacher and students are rarely referred to separately.

It is not that the teacher’s expertise was abandoned in helping these students learn nursing — Jayden states how the teacher would “bring up” different perspectives or different situations — but the emphasis never shifts to the teacher teaching. Rather, it stays on what was being collectively thought about and learned. Perhaps the new pedagogies are heralding a shift away from an emphasis on teaching and teaching methods to learning and thinking together with students.

Implications The challenge for teacher-scholars is to change the landscape of evaluation in nursing education by developing a science of nursing education that attends to the ways in which new pedagogies are used and experienced. It is no longer sufficient for a teacher to “just know” that a new pedagogy works — or does not work — based on conversations with students, student achievement in the course, and end-of-course evaluations. Conscientious
teacher-scholars seek evidence to guide, enhance, or reform their teaching practice such that the problems of the past are not persistently reinvented. In order to build a science of nursing education, research in needed that provides empirical evidence of the efficacy and effectiveness of diverse approaches to teaching and learning. To that end, the findings of this study suggest that further research is needed to develop evaluation tools that are congruent with the pedagogy being used.

For teacher-scholars to develop a science of nursing education, continued scholarship is required to develop greater insight into and experience in thinking about and describing the changes being made in our classrooms on a day-to-day basis, along with the language used to describe these changes. What is it that is different about courses that use a new pedagogy? How are the new pedagogies encouraging new partnerships between and among students and teachers, and how can teachers and students work together to develop new insights about the meaning of "being well taught?" These insights will assist us to continue the converging conversations of innovation and evaluation to ensure that our approaches to evaluation keep pace with the substantive reform in our practice.

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