To Prompt or Not to Prompt: Finding the Best Journaling Practice to Develop Cultural Competence

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Literature Review
There has not been adequate research regarding best practices for journaling. Qualitative research has looked at the effects of reflective journaling on students and education, improvement of journaling skills over semesters, and challenges of journaling as a data collection method. Quantitative research, however, has not been undertaken to discover why or what method is most beneficial for these ends.

Background
Reflective journaling has been widely used and accepted as an education tool to foster pedagogical reflection and as a data collection method. It is used in nursing education to aid students’ introspective thinking process: to improve self-reflection, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. Refining these skills enables nurses to make meaning out of experiences in order to broaden their worldview and self-awareness. There have been many different journaling formats suggested, including open reflective journaling, prompted journaling, and freestyle journaling. Despite many opinions, there has been minimal definitive research to distinguish which style of journaling is most beneficial for data collection or pedagogical reflection.

Purpose
This study aimed to monitor individual experiences, emotions, and reflections, to assess culture shock stages, coping, and change in worldview for nursing students over the span of a two-week trip to Ghana. The experience fulfilled a community health nursing rotation.

Theoretical Framework
The Transformative Learning Theory proposes that tools such as journaling be used for critical reflection. It helps the writer process new experiences and feelings. These in turn may expand the individual’s beliefs and worldview. The experience in Ghana thus becomes culturally transformative.

Method
This was a descriptive qualitative study. Reflective journaling was used as an educational and data collection tool for nursing students on three separate two-week trips to Ghana (2013 [N=8], 2014 [N=13], 2015 [N=12]). Journal entries first were read and coded for common topics using Atlas.ti by two researchers. Results were reviewed to obtain consensus.

Prompts with specific questions about experiences and feelings
- Shorter, flatter entries
- 2-3 word and incomplete sentence answers
- “N/A” entered for many questions
- Only 2-3 codes for some journal entries

Explanation about reflective journaling at beginning of trip with open-ended journaling format
- Richer, fuller entries
- Full paragraph journaling
- Average of 12-28 codes per journal entry

Results
An unexpected trend was discovered from varied journaling formats. The first and second year, students were assigned open reflective journaling. No prompt questions given, only requirements for number of entries. The third year, students were given questions to answer for every journal entry to help guide student reflections and ease data collection. The prompts created shorter entries with less rich and reflective substance. Some entries only allowed for two codes versus some with 28 codes in previous years. Entries were written in one word or one sentence format instead of full paragraph format as in the previous years.

Figure 1. Description of Findings

Conclusion
Prompted journaling, a commonly recommended from of reflective journaling, inspired shorter, less rich, and less introspective journal entries compared to unprompted, open journaling. Further research is needed regarding an informative and educational journaling format for cross-cultural experiences.

Continuing Research
A fourth group of students (2016, N=16) were instructed to write daily journals. The only prompt given was to include emotional responses. Coding of these journals is in the beginning stages. To date, researchers have noted that entries have been longer and fuller with more codes per entry than the prompted journals from the third year. This information will help nurse educators to understand and format appropriate introspective tools for cross-cultural educational journeys in the future in order to improve culturally competent nursing education.

References