Using the Creative Arts to Develop Critical Thinking Skills: Examining the Qualitative Method of Ethnography

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In this mini-chapter she translates the thinking processes she has learned to do when painting watercolors to help her health sciences students develop their critical thinking skills. This lesson is highly creative and yet it calls for the critical thinking skills of analysis, inference, explanation and evaluation. We particularly like this technique for its ability to expose biases behind our clinical judgments in a way that might be more easily remembered because of the visual depiction and might perhaps be more easily transferred to other analysis and critique contexts.

Background

The use of creative arts as a tool in teaching and practicing critical thinking provides an alternative to more traditional discussion or written exercises. Creative artists use critical thinking when they paint. Eight years ago, after taking watercolor lessons, I found that the challenge of completing a painting well required the use of many of the critical thinking skills I was trying to develop in my students. For example, I had to analyze my ideas or concepts to develop a painting, I had to interpret the significant parts of the painting and use them to convey my meaning in the painting to others. This caused me to explore other creative arts for use with my students. I began asking my students to practice their critical thinking skills by painting and drawing.
Class Session and Students
The creative arts activities described below fit well into many courses and while I use the activities with graduate students, I believe undergraduate students in any of the health sciences could benefit from this type of exercise. Although I usually lead this session, I work as part of a team of four instructors from four different professions (occupational therapy, social work, nursing and health education) and we typically have students from three of these health science professions in the course at any one time. The course is taught as a seminar where the faculty model analytical discussion of the material. There is no specialty knowledge required of the students other than that which is provided in ahead of time the reading material for the class session. It helps if the students are familiar and comfortable with self-reflection. I am presenting the activities for this mini chapter in the context of a qualitative research analysis course that is inter-professional in nature. The specific example in this lesson is a class where ethnography is the method being discussed.

The goal of the class session
This class session introduces ethnography as a way of analyzing ideas and so one clear goal of the course is that students will increase their ability to see the influence of culture on interpersonal interactions. I help them to do this through their critical reflection on the readings assigned for the course, and particularly the session at hand, and through their portrayal of the lesson content through three creative arts activities. They interpret, analyze draw inferences about, and evaluate the material (critical thinking skills in action). I want them to develop these skills so they can better develop research proposals and conduct qualitative research. I believe the activity of viewing and discussing another student’s creative activities also fosters the critical thinking skills of analysis and inference.

The material used for the class session
Students are asked to read a chapter on ethnography and also an assigned research article that provides an example of this research methodology. Any excellent text on qualitative research that clearly communicates the method in question will serve equally well to provide the methods content. In many cases one would want to find an example of excellent research design. But for this lesson that involves critique, I have found that more is learned if the published study that I assign states it is “ethnography” (or phenomenology, grounded theory, etc) but demonstrates methods or results that somehow do not conform to the principles of research design that is described in the book. In this case I will be expecting the students to identify the methodological weaknesses in the published article. This conflict promotes questioning and helps students feel more comfortable in critiquing published research.

I also spend a bit of time before class thinking about specific questions that I might ask during the discussions. The classroom environment is critical to the success of this activity. I arrive at the room early so I can set up the tables in a rectangle and leave an open area for the statues activity. I have blank paper and pencils for the drawing activity.

Learning Objectives
Students will be able to:

1. Accurately evaluate the research article using the criteria for good ethnographic research described in the text.
2. Interpret for their classmates the concepts of quality for good ethnographic research using a creative arts activity.
3. Defend their portrayal to their peers and verbally justify their interpretation of the ideas presented in the text.
4. Examine their own biases about qualitative research and make them observable using a creative arts activity.
How I Teach this Lesson

The week before this session, I remind students to critically read the article and the book chapter. By this, I mean that they should be attentive to interpreting what is being communicated in the chapter and article, and carefully analyze, evaluate and compare any claims being made by the authors of each reading. I suggest they record “jottings” of their ideas on a piece of paper and I talk about the concept of jotting versus taking narrative notes, underlining or highlighting.

I explain that jottings are ways to remember the essence of the information in the reading—not complete sentences and not extracting quotes from the reading. They are a way for the student to remember the reading and are often done in a type of shorthand, using abbreviations and even symbols.

I open the seminar by asking each student to draw a picture of what their inner self looks like as they reflect on the chapter content. They can use the jottings about the chapter as a reflective tool. I ask them not to talk, but to work silently and thoughtfully. I also tell them it is ok to use stick figures and to draw the picture like a cartoon. The cartoon may convey humor, may be satirical, or may be serious in nature. It tells a story and is meant to evoke an emotional response. Sometimes I tell them to draw the first two frames of a four-frame cartoon. The first two frames are drawn based on their original perspective on the reading and the last two on their perspective after we have discussed the reading in class.

In the course of creating the drawing, I want my students to examine their feelings about the material. I am hoping that they will assess their confidence in their own interpretation of the material, and be honest about what they feel they know and don't know. Faculty also do this activity and they share their drawings as well. This is important because many students respond to the activity by saying “I can’t draw”. They need to see that faculty also struggle with creative activities and that the purpose here is not to be an artist, but to identify each person’s interpretation and analysis of the text and examine the accuracy of the interpretations. This activity takes 10 minutes.

After the drawings are complete, I and my colleague faculty ask each student to pass his or her drawing to the student sitting next to them and to talk about the drawing. After they discuss their drawing, the other student (the reviewer) writes comments underneath the drawing. The comments are meant to clarify any questions that were identified in the discussion of the drawing.

- What the main idea/point of…?
- How does …effect/influence the outcome?
- What if …happened?
- How does that relate to ….?
- Can you explain why….?”
- What conclusions can you draw about…?
- What is the difference between…and…?
- How are….and….similar?
- How would I use….to….?
- What is the best…and why?”

Figure 1: Question frames that put the emphasis on critical thinking

The next step is to share the drawings with the class. The class itself is set up as a seminar and the tables and chairs form a large square. Typically a faculty member sets the stage by sharing their drawing first, unless a student is comfortable beginning. As faculty, our job is asking questions that will promote higher level thinking skills. As a
guide, I use King’s (1991) guided reciprocal peer questioning technique. Examples of question frames that work in this activity are shown in Figure 1.

As faculty, I intentionally model the use of these questions. In addition, at the beginning of the course I talk about the use of questioning and the patterns of interaction in a graduate level class. I intentionally reward interaction between students and try to redirect interaction and questions posed to faculty by students. Often times, I answer a question with a question.

The discussion takes 40 minutes. In the course of this discussion, all of the important content about the research methodology comes into the discussion, offered by the students themselves as it is relevant to their critique of the research article. There is never a need for didactic presentation of the chapter material. If they miss anything important about the critique of the study, one of the faculty can add these comments.

After I use the drawings as a focus for the chapter analysis, I ask students and faculty to review their jottings on the methodology, as well as the results and the discussion of the research article. Then I ask them to work in groups of three to create a statue that portrays a part of the research article. There are two variations I have used in this respect. If I have chosen a study for the seminar where the methodology of the study violates the principles of ethnography (contradicts the book chapter’s description of ethnography), then I ask them to create a statue about the method actually used in the article. If the study’s results do not represent the outcomes of ethnography, then I ask them to portray the results. In this case, one person is the sculptor and two are the “clay.” Again, the faculty participate in the entire activity as a way of putting students at ease with the creative process. After 3 or 4 minutes, I ask the statue to freeze. I then tap the shoulders of some statue groups and ask them to walk around and view the other statues. They take turns as viewers and statues.

We discuss the statues and each sculptor explains her statue. We ask the students to explain why they believe the study does not conform to the concepts in the book, and each group provides their analysis and evaluation of the article as it is depicted in their statue. Sometimes I ask the sculptors to change the statue so that the statue is even more representative of the description of ethnography in the book. This part of the discussion is a particularly important piece because it challenges students to reexamine their interpretation of ethnography and to evaluate their prior critical thinking about the research article. In attempting to change the statue they go a bit deeper with their evaluation of the article based on the book. This activity takes 25 minutes.

Finally, at the end of every class students are required to reflect on the classroom experience. I provided guided activities to build their ability to reflect and the one I use for this class session is to have students write a haiku. Figure 2 displays the directions that are given. This activity takes 15 minutes.
Write a haiku. Haiku is a form of poetry through which you express yourself and your impressions of the world. Haiku has a specific meter that is created by a set number of syllables in the poem. Here is one way to create an haiku.

- Begin by naming ethnography in your own words.
- Now, describe it.
- Name a setting where ethnographies occur, and describe the setting.
- Describe the feelings that you have about the image you made about ethnography.
- Now, go back through what you’ve written and underline the key words and phrases that really describe the essence of ethnographies.
- Move these around and play with them in your mind until there are only 17 syllables: one line of five syllables, one of seven syllables, and another line of five syllables.

Figure 2: Haiku exercise

What I Expect from the Class Participants

All four faculty in our teaching team are strong believers in active learning strategies and all are comfortable challenging each other during class time, modeling the value of peer questioning. Because we take turns each week as the course leader, we collaborate on the types of activities used. I expect all students to participate both verbally and physically in the activities of this session. I modify the physical environment so they are safe, and we close the door so the classroom is private and to reduce their discomfort during the statue activity. Because everyone participates there is less a sense of an audience. The creative activities provide an alternative way to express questions.

This session is part of a course that is available for students at the masters or doctoral level as an elective. There are no examinations, but students complete a portfolio that includes classroom activities, reading and class reflections, a photography project, a research proposal, and a field observation. The portfolio is graded by all four instructors using a rubric that incorporates critical thinking cognitive skills that we expect throughout the portfolio. Figures 3 is an example of a drawing from a seminar where the chapter reading was on the topic of ‘bracketing’ and the research article was (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005).
The following is an excerpt of the artist’s explanation of her drawing.

"The readings helped me understand that to really hear someone’s story I need to identify my own beliefs and my sense of privilege. I think people choose their research topic because it resonates for them in their own way. That makes them especially vulnerable to assuming their research participants will feel and describe experiences in the same way they do. …They are at risk for ignoring the data….and vulnerable to only seeing similarities in the data. The readings made me think about how I would recognize my biases and assumptions that come from my own culture and realize this type of self-reflection and analysis is very hard. …My own culture is hidden to me. I had to really think about the differences between a bias and an assumption.

"My drawing shows me the first time I interviewed. I was the one in control so I am seated and everyone else is standing. I dominate the drawing. The others are talking but nothing is coming out of their mouths because I can only hear what is in my head. The cultural elements of a desk and a chair separate me from my participants. The second panel shows what happened to the interview, the others have turned their backs on me, they know I don't want to listen."
“The third panel is my research director talking with me, reflecting my stance and my sense of privilege. I think about what she says, I write about it, I take pictures that represents what I know, I keep a diary. The last panel is me with a research participant again. I am listening, I am standing just like my participant. My culture’s symbols of power—the desk, is gone. My participant is the dominant person and I am trying to keep my biases in check.”

Feedback from the Students

Students comment on two areas. The first is the manner in which the course is conducted, when they see the faculty as active participants, not just the “sage on the stage”. On occasion, when faculty disagree with each other, we have had students indicate they don’t know “who to believe.” As we know our students are still striving to advance their cognitive development, we model respectfully voicing disagreements and potentially conflicting points of view, demonstrating how to assess these opposing arguments. By the end of the course, students identify this as a true strength of the course.

The second area is the emphasis on active learning and critical thinking. While we occasionally post Microsoft PowerPoint™ presentations to call attention to some key areas in readings, our course style is reflected in the description of the session above. Students are required to be interactive and to express their learning using more than one sensory system. Again, by the end of the course students express their appreciation for the holistic manner of presentation and their own efficacy in being researchers.

Reference


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