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REFLECTING THROUGH LETTER WRITING
AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS: NURSING
EDUCATORS' JOURNEY IN EXPLORING
COMPASSION, RELATIONAL PRACTICE, AND
TRANSITIONING

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REFLECTING THROUGH LETTER WRITING AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS: NURSING EDUCATORS' JOURNEY IN EXPLORING COMPASSION, RELATIONAL PRACTICE, AND TRANSITIONING

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Abstract

Teaching is a journey that draws upon an educator's creativity to meet the emerging challenges of the undulating waves of experiences. Like sailors, navigating the sea, we as nursing educators engage in a journey of introspection to create a shared reflective space that fosters dialogue. Using letter writing as a reflective device, we wrote letters to each other and shared our thoughts and ideas on the nature of compassion, relational practice, and transitioning from nursing student to nurse in our teaching practice. We used the metaphor of sailing to make sense of our experience. Our old photos became a way to re-present our reflective insights. For us, compassion emerges from helping students experience their relational connection to their patients. As students become competent in their way to nurse, the intentionality of their care becomes focused, triggering their compassionate practice and opening the path to their transition into being a nurse.

Résumé

L'enseignement est un parcours qui fait appel à la créativité personnelle pour répondre aux défis qui émergent des vagues ondulantes des expériences. Comme les matelots qui naviguent sur la mer, le personnel infirmier enseignant entame un voyage d'introspection pour créer un espace de réflexion partagé favorisant le dialogue. En mobilisant la rédaction de lettres comme outil de réflexion, nous avons partagé nos pensées et nos perspectives sur la nature de la compassion, de la pratique relationnelle et de la transition entre vie étudiante et vie professionnelle en soins infirmiers dans notre pratique d'enseignement. Nous avons utilisé la métaphore de la navigation marine pour faire sens de notre expérience. Nos vieilles photos sont devenues une manière de re-présenter nos réflexions. Pour nous, la compassion émerge en aidant les étudiantes et étudiants à vivre une expérience relationnelle avec

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les personnes patientes. En gagnant en confiance dans sa manière de fournir les soins, l'intentionnalité se focalise, ce qui mène à une pratique compatissante et ouvre la voie à la transition pour devenir une infirmière ou un infirmier.

Introduction

Teaching in many ways is a journey. Like navigators, we are learning in a sea of experiences. Every day that we set sail with our students we find ourselves caught up in the riptides of knowing and unknowing, in a world of knowledge overload and information saturation. We are learning from making our way with students and seeing up close and from afar how students *and teachers* transition to new understandings of the 'how' of becoming compassionate nurses, ready to connect with patients and families. In this article, we offer an exploration of our experiences as educators through the aesthetic approach of letter writing to become aware of the meaningful practice activities we undertake when supporting learners in becoming and being nurses. Aesthetic knowing in nursing involves knowing that is deeply personal and intentionally intersubjective, rooted in human experiences of birth, illness, suffering, recovery, and death, and not fully expressed in words (Chinn, Maeve, & Bostick, 1997). We are interested in the interplay of metaphor, storied life, aesthetics, lived experience and reflection in relation to the process of transitioning to becoming a nurse. We begin by exploring the meaning of transitioning and relationality. In particular, we reflect on the work of Doane & Varcoe (2015) on relationality to help make sense of our experience. We use the metaphor of sailing as a way to provide the structure of our unfolding narrative. We map out the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of navigating transitions. We used letter-writing as a reflective practice device to unpack our experiences and learn from them. We end with what we have learned about transitioning.

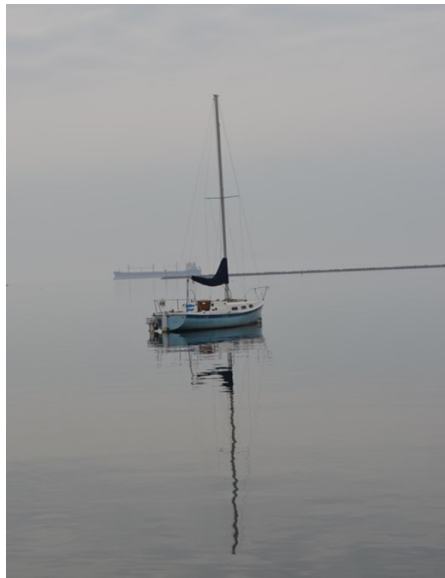


Figure 1. Sea of Experience. Photo: Spadoni, 2015.

Momentum of the Wind and Adjusting the Sails

As we interact with learners and colleagues, we are reminded of the intense and intimate struggle of transitioning that happens through the back and forth momentum of personal growth and development. In nursing, the term “transition” has been associated with transitioning to practice (Boychuk Duscher, 2008). Boychuk Duscher (2008) defines transition as an active and dynamic movement from “one state, condition, or place to another” that provokes a deep change in the person (p. 442). In nursing, work-role transition is described as a human experience associated with encountering a new community of practice (Anderson, 2009). The literature on transition highlights movement, interiority, and change as key elements in the process (Kralik et al., 2006). Movement through the phases of transition is self-propelled and born out of adapting or reconstructing disruptive situations that lead to a re-definition of identity (Kralik et al., 2006). It is this process that we problematize as educators. It is a focus on interiority, the internal process of negotiation that propels a change to a new state. We begin our journey with the following reflective question: How do we as educators’ support students in navigating the ebbs and flows of their journey to becoming nurses?

We used letter writing over a two-year period as a reflective device to understand how we experience the concepts of transitioning from nursing students to new graduates, compassion, and relational practice. The literary device of a letter is purposeful in two ways. It provides an opportunity to reveal practical knowledge embedded in our experience that affirms the transactional relationship between experience and the process of telling a story (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2011). It is also a way to reveal our voices to each other in an organic way (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This device allowed us to make explicit the implicit elements of our thinking as we dialogue with each other towards understanding.

Metaphor of Sailing

Michelle is a teacher from a University in Northern Ontario and teaches in both the undergraduate four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing program and the graduate program. Louela teaches in a Bachelor of Science in Nursing undergraduate program with second degree-accelerated learners. Each of us enjoys sailing. Metaphorically, sailing is about navigating, moving with the wind, adjusting, and being aware of the multiple dynamics it entails. In letters, we discuss supporting students to navigate storms. We facilitate their understanding of a) connecting pathophysiology with illness manifestations and b) how assessment extends beyond the physical body to include the social and the spiritual. We support students when they are unable to move forward because they have difficulty in clinical practice. We explore how organizational structures, ethics, and professional practice shape nurse-patient outcomes and student learning. We wonder with our students about the impact of managerial technologies on nursing and patient care. We reflect on the practice of optimizing hospital bed utilization on surgical units, where three patients can literally be booked into the same surgical unit ‘bed’ in a 24-hour period, impacting directly how nurses are (or not) able to meet patient discharge needs (Rankin & Campbell, 2009). Managerial technologies have the potential to put nurses at odds with their ethical obligations by prioritizing the needs of the organization over the patient’s care needs. What sorts of tools do students require, like mariners, to navigate and learn from storms; make sense of the unknown while learning to capitalize on this sort of knowing?

Michelle's letter to Louela

What is it about the art of letter writing? I think the power of letter writing has something to do with being in 'relation' with another across time and space. It is a gift of connection, memory, and dwelling. It reminds me of Richard Wagamese's (2011) articulation of "introspection" (Medicine Wheel)—a space for 'looking within'. In letter writing there is a space for looking in and looking out. I can hear and appreciate 'within' you the essence of your life as a practitioner and in your thinking through and about being a nurse. I heard something more in your understanding of 'relational being'. An alternative space of 'co-creation,' 'creativity,' 'mindfulness and presence,' it bubbled up as you thought through the 'what, how, and why' of what you are as a teacher. I am reminded as Doane and Varcoe (2015) suggest that embracing obligation in our lives as nurses, "both expands your views and possibilities for action" (p. 102). It reminded me of Charon's (2006) articulation of compassion as a relationship established through the recognition of a shared humanity. I am intrigued by the idea of 'shared humanity' and believe that 'shared humanity' is not 'fixed,' but rather continuous moments toward 'something' [we] crave/need.

Relational Currents

Relational inquiry consists of two elements: relational consciousness and inquiry (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). *Relational consciousness* premises that if people are relational beings, they are situated and formed socially (friends, significant others, community), culturally, and by political and historical processes. Relational consciousness (Doane & Varcoe, 2015) extends our attention (focus) beyond the personal, to the 'relational inter-play' of:

- i) *intrapersonal* (self-awareness of beliefs, values, norms, customs, cultural/social/historical landscape of one's life);
- ii) *interpersonal* (personhood: what it means to be a human being shaped by our relationships with others and the environment);
- iii) *contextual* (how personal, sociohistorical/political location and processes shape one's life experiences).

Inquiry is active. It is our ability as nurses to be inquirers and to purposefully explore, question; interpret lived experiences. Inquiry is a path to understand and question our nursing actions, obligations and responsibilities and the forces that shape them in relation to our nursing actions and inactions (Doane & Varcoe, 2015).

Louela's letter to Michelle

I appreciate your thoughts on a 'shared humanity'. We both navigate similar waters. Our aims as teachers are the same, driven from our desire to facilitate the growth of our learners into beginning nurses.

...Sometimes words are not enough to describe my desire to spread what it means to be a relationally focused nurse. This is

why I love reflecting with art. They convey something different to me. Schwind, Cameron, Franks, Graham, and Robinson (2011) remind me that there are many things within ourselves that we cannot express in words and that art is a way to allow for creative self-expression.

I think of our students and I wonder if you think that they comprehend what we mean by compassion when we lecture at them or whether it is through the unpacking of experience that they gain an understanding of its nuances?

Learning to Sail

Sailors throughout history have captured their discoveries in a variety of ways, from the science of cartography (map making), journals (chip logs), and letters. Letter writing requires space and time to clear the mind of the immediate pressures of marking, administrative duties, classroom management, grant writing, to be able to mentally, physically and spiritually visualize what surfaces in teaching practice. It requires introspection, humility, and curiosity about the ways we are navigating uncharted waters with our students. In the process, we reconsider how we think about compassion in relation to inquiry. What does compassion look like, how do we recognize it in practice?

Michelle's letter to Louela

Working alongside our students, we observe the momentum of transitioning. We see it more pronounced at particular turning points in their learning trajectory. I see it when they first realize that they are 'responsible' for what they do, think and say in clinical practice. It appears the first time they experience an event that 'goes terribly wrong' (journey to making a medication error) and/or a time when they experience loss in their practice (not securing the clinical placement they wanted, or more significant practice moments—a patient's passing). Some moments of growth may go unnoticed, like when they realize that they no longer struggle to remember what a particular drug does. In this moment, they have transitioned to a different developmental level of 'becoming a nurse.' In moments of success and uncertainty, it seems that compassion surfaces. The question is, how do we support students to appreciate inquiry as constructive? Reciprocally, how do they learn to explore how to think about how they make decisions, consider their habits, and approaches? I wonder whether they consider the organizational, professional and societal structures that are at play in their decision-making. Do they think about the connection between hallway nursing and medication errors, their own nursing commitments, the ways in which they connect and correspond with patients/families, and colleagues?

Early in their final year, I witness students grasping the wholeness of their practice. A sense of embodied knowing emerges as they move

beyond skill performance. Their hands moving their stethoscope across the patient's chest, ears picking up the sound, eyes scanning the patient's complexion, while simultaneously interacting with the patient and family, explaining quietly what they are doing. Not so long ago, they would have had difficulty with the sequence of their actions (i.e. learning the route steps of assessment, their ears and eyes not yet fully observant of the human body, their mind struggling with the words to describe an incision, or heart sounds, changes in pulse). Add conversing with the patient while completing the assessment; this would have caused them to lose track of what they were doing. Just talking, would have challenged their ability to concentrate on what they were seeing and hearing. In moments like this, I glimpse the student becoming a compassionate practitioner as they gain competency in assessment skills, and in turn begin to intentionally focus on the patient, and the patient's needs, to 'be' with them in that moment, in that situation.

Transitioning is also notable in the recollection of events that provoke uncertainty, manifested in words, actions, or inactions. From post-conference discussions, to whispered half-spoken utterances in the hallway; in unspoken facial expressions, the evidence of their transitioning surfaces. The worried and sometimes frustrated lines around their eyes and forehead as they listen to peers and realize they don't understand how their colleague came to a particular decision, as they are unsure of the manifestation of illness resembles their engagement with transitioning into becoming a nurse. They experience frustration at their colleague's explanation of being "concerned about patient output, in relation to peripheral edema, shortness of breath, dropping Oxygen levels and irregular pulse and for not having a strong grasp of congestive heart failure." Worry breaks the surface, fear of not connecting the 'dots,' inability to make decisions or act.

As a teacher, I see it in their eyes, in their body tension; in their silence. In these moments, our students share a state of angst that needs to be processed. These moments are another aspect of compassion for both student and teacher, compassion is what "we do together". It brings "reason, emotion, and sentiment together and simultaneously demands that we act" (Doane & Varcoe, 2015, p. 107). How we as teachers engage students in these moments can either open them up to personal critique and reflection of learning needs and gaps, or shut them down. The challenge is learning to be attentive to these moments, and enlist them as teachable moments. How can I support them when they are worried, frustrated, feeling unable to move forward?

At Sea...

Nautically the expression 'all at sea' describes the condition of a vessel lost out of sight of land. This sense of being out of sight of land is like being lost in unfamiliar space with corresponding expressions of confusion. This feeling is something we experience with our undergraduate and graduate nursing students as they progress through their program of study to grow and develop as practitioners. Preparing them theoretically is only part of our learning experience with them, as they are the captains of their own vessels. Soon enough they will be out of sight of land, from our tutelage. How can we prepare them for being out of sight?

Louela's letter to Michelle

I think of my own practice and I realize that what I do is transition to new states. I let go of old habits and I take on new ones that lead me to new experiences. Taking hold of a new state requires that I embrace new processes. These do not come as readily without having to face the storm and think very carefully about the essential elements that made my teaching successful or not.

It is in reflecting on experience and linking this to the literature that enables me to try new strategies. I need to sail differently as my students are sailing in different boats in terms of their needs and styles of learning. I still have to explore the extent to which I have let go but I am certainly compelled to take hold of something different in my practice in order to engage deeply with them. This new order in my practice helps me to sail better with the wind when it blows. The wind consistently changes. We learn to adapt and make decisions based on these changes, but we always know that what we want is to return to calmer waters having learned to manage the strong winds.

The concept of letting go takes me to the work of Bridges (2001) on transitions who makes a distinction between the concepts of change and transition. "Change is a situational shift while transition is a process of letting go of the ways things used to be and taking hold of the way they subsequently become" (p. 2). It involves three phases that begin with an 'ending' then proceeds to a 'neutral zone' that finally arrives at 'beginning again' (p. 2). The three phases have a distinct role to play in moving individuals forward into new chapters of their lives. The 'ending' is recognizable when a person experiences a loss that requires letting go. This awareness is important for moving forward. Bridges (2001) describes the neutral zone as the phase that provides the groundwork for the internal work of reorientation, personal growth, authentication, creativity,

spiritual understanding, and renewal; while beginning again, a phase that refers to taking hold of a new reality, opens the door to a new self or identity.

Becoming...



Figure 2. Navigating the Sea and Wind. Photo: Manankil-Rankin, 2019.

Developmental psychologists focus on how people cope with the changes encountered in life transitions, with an eye on the psychological work of adapting one's identity in relation to role change (Anderson, 2009; Fenwick, 2012). Life-course sociologists study the social aspects of transitioning, with attention to how people establish themselves in new roles (Anderson, 2009; Fenwick, 2012). Career studies researchers explore the significant passages people undertake when they move from one career stage to another, for example from school to work, from practitioner to leader (Fenwick, 2012). Nursing researchers focus on health status and/or developmental states in relation to people's experience of illness; how transition theory can be applied to transitioning into the nurse role in relation to employment setting, and the context of nursing practice (Anderson, 2009). Can life transition points be predicted and prepared for? What can be learned about people's decision-making responses during transitions? (Anderson, 2009; Fenwick, 2012).

Oftentimes, the need for slowness during transitioning tugs, but the business of moving forward calls, so the focus becomes "surviving in the moment." Reflecting on practice is left to a different time but by-passing the step of reflection along the cycle of learning limits the

learning potential. As Kolb (1984) claims, before the stage of conceptualization, reflection is necessary for unpacking experience. Without this stage, making sense of an experience is limited. Reflection allows for reconstruction and the opportunity to live anew and engage in different horizons (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Manankil-Rankin, 2016). In essence, it facilitates the engagement of the connection in the in-between space where learning and decision-making responses embrace, and perhaps take hold, of a new way of being in the context of nursing practice. This process alerts us to the need to focus reflection towards the in-between spaces and to recognize that learning and decision-making are important connected cognitive activities that may possibly help us take hold of new horizons.

The challenge we face as educators is *how to prepare learners* to become aware of their interiority and not collapse in situations of difficulty. As Sawchuk and Taylor (2010) suggest, navigating from school to work, from practitioner to leader, and/or practitioner to researcher, is not a normalized and homogenised linear pathway. It is a complex and layered, non-linear voyage, that the sailor learns to tac in response to intra/inter personal and contextual tides encountered in moving back and forth through time and space in response to encountering different organizational priorities, power structures, ruling relations, social groups, regulatory mechanisms, ethical and moral winds, political and cultural currents (Doane & Varcoe, 2005, 2015). This process alerts us to the need to focus reflection towards the in-between spaces and to recognize that learning and decision-making are important connected cognitive activities that may possibly help us take hold of new horizons.

Windrose...

A ‘*Windrose alternatively known as a Rose of the Winds*’ can be found on compasses, old maps, and nautical charts. It illustrates the cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west) and points in between. Linguistic anthropologists find that for many human communities, cardinal directions stem from locally-specific geographic features or landmarks (like hills, rock formations, water), and/or celestial bodies (sun, moon, stars), and atmospheric features like winds and temperature (Dempsey, 2013). These historically and contemporary features of navigating have been useful in our re-thinking of transitioning when events surface that are important in the learner’s mind and have a contextual, linguistic, cultural, and geographical nature.

For many, just the idea of setting sail in uncharted waters brings forth a flood of emotions, from excitement to fear (Anderson, 2009). Change brings a sense of anticipation, sometimes an envisioning of what might be out there, and an acute awareness of what is familiar and what is unknown (Anderson, 2009; Ellis & Chater, 2012). An awaking of sorts can occur in part because of new “seascapes” that require particular types of knowledge and skills, new responsibilities and commitments; a getting-to-know how things are done, organized and accounted for (Anderson, 2009; Ellis & Chater, 2012; Leong & Crossman, 2014). For some, setting sail in uncharted waters can leave them feeling “dislocated” (Ellis & Chater, 2012), “ambiguous” (Anderson, 2009; Owens, 2018a), and/or “disillusioned” (Spehar et al., 2015). Finding one’s way requires learning the power of prevailing winds, how to adjust, grasp new priorities, develop new knowledge(s) and skills specific to a particular place and people, as well as integrate previous understandings with what is unfolding (Anderson, 2009; Bull et al., 2018; Leong & Crossman, 2014). To transition is not static, it requires reacting, responding; ‘thinking about one’s thinking’ both in the moment and later during reflection.

The key to teaching is supporting learners to develop the capacities and sensibilities for critical thinking (Walker et al., 2014). It is about learning to harness experiential learning (Owens, 2018a, 2018b) in order to fine tune skills and knowledge that can be carried from one event to the next, and developing new perspectives and understandings (Owen, 2018a). Transitioning requires creating safe harbours to reflect and re-imagine events, and appreciate the shift in one’s identity (Schoening, 2013). This space is the in-between action and response—the liminal dimension where the cognitive, emotional, and other ways of knowing converge to help a student conceptualize elements of the action/event to develop an informed response (Lindsay, 2001; Manankil-Rankin, 2015). It is a space of pausing, slowing down and taking a step back, creating the opportunity for reconstruction. It is where we begin to appreciate our nursing obligations and allow ourselves to face difficulty and respond with humility (Doane & Varcoe, 2007).

As teachers, our aims are multi-dimensional. Our focus is in part, to facilitate identity formation linked to creating a sense of mastery and belonging while also making it about optimism, resilience and confidence in the face of new and emerging knowledge, professional, institutional, and social/cultural perspectives, as well as the constant adjustment to technological changes [i.e., robotics and artificial intelligence] (Leong & Crossman, 2014). Today’s teachers cannot merely be concerned with content but need to prepare students in active ways toward ‘being’ curious, creative, reflective, compassionate, and connected relational practitioners, who develop intra/inter and contextual capacities and sensibilities (Doane & Varcoe, 2015).

Michelle’s letter to Louela

Windrose—relational inquiry

I think the philosophical and theoretical heart of our compass is relational inquiry. Relational inquiry appreciates lived experience and critical perspectives that provide insight into power, gender, culture, history, society, politics and economics. Doane and Varcoe (2015) emphasize that at the heart of relational inquiry is compassion, the ability to be with and walk alongside another in the process of finding wholeness that embraces our human limitations, fragility, rawness, and brokenness. The theoretical and philosophical bearings of our compass reflect Doane and Varcoe’s perspective:



Figure 3. Finding Home.
Photo: Spadoni, 2018.

- ❖ *True North: Hermeneutic and Phenomenological*—draws our attention to how people’s experiences are shaped by their interpretations; suggesting that people do not merely live in an environment, but they are in a variety of ways constituted by the environment (Doane & Varcoe, 2005, 2015).
- ❖ *South: Critical Feminism*—draws explicit attention to the gendered contexts of our lives, providing a means to explore the power of gender roles (Doane & Varcoe, 2005, 2015).

- ❖ *East: Anti-Colonial*—“draws our attention to the social conditions occasioned by colonialism and its constant companion racism” (Doane & Varcoe, 2015, p. 66). Anti-colonial theory takes us back and forth between ideas of the past to solutions in the present and the structures that create them, including history and economics, local and global cultures (Doane & Varcoe, 2015).
- ❖ *West: Post Structural*—pays attention to how language is being used and the effects language has on peoples’ experiences and expression of experience.

True north offers the deep appreciation of experiential knowing, while the south appreciates the historical and contemporary issues of gender and power, east and west explore power through colonial and historical lenses, and the significance of how language is used and language’s impact on peoples’ experiences and expressions of experience. However, our compass actually is a reflection of a 32-point rose, where gradients are required in order to better capture details within a 360-degree circle.

Louela’s letter to Michelle

You provided a sailor’s map by which to think about interactions and relationships. Doane and Varcoe (2015) claim that the two lenses to look at relationships are through the hermeneutic and critical lenses. As students explore the lived experience of their patients they are reminded about their own story. The creation of stories is personal. Lindsay (2001) and Lindsay and Schwind (2016) suggest that in understanding the narratives of another, we ourselves are engaged in the process as our memories are triggered where both our personal and professional stories emerge to find resonance with our patients’ stories. It is in thinking more deeply about these stories in the way that you support—calling forth the south, the east, and the west that we gain a thorough understanding of the patient’s position and health issues.

Doane and Varcoe (2015) suggest five capacities that enable a sense of being in the world: curiosity, commitment, compassion, competence, and corresponding. These are proficiencies that we must cultivate in our students. We asked earlier of where our students need to transition to? I think it is to gain an ontological perspective to commit and live by. This ontological stance emerges from our experiences in the world and what we come to in terms of values as nurses, teachers, and human beings in relationship with each other. In undergraduate

nursing education, we help our students discover their identity as nurses so that they can take a stance in the world. In graduate nursing education, we ask them to think broadly about their experiences so that they may challenge them and improve their land/seascape. I have come to understand that as a nurse educator, I am in the lives of my students to help them cultivate who they are both personally and professionally so that they can discover for themselves the core of their being and how this directs their action. Their journey of transitioning to different phases in their professional journey is then given meaning from knowing who they are and what drives their actions. Taking our students to this point will give them the navigational tools to weather the storms of changes.

Storms Blow In

Being in relation with "the other" (a patient, colleague, student) involves enacting an embodied understanding of Doane and Varcoe's (2015) five relational capacities. This requires a shift from an epistemological lens of knowing to an ontological turn toward being a relational practitioner. The movement toward "being" requires intentional activities that promote embodied experiences gained through partaking at the experiential level (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). Patricia Benner (1984) characterized embodied knowledge as acquired through experience, when the body knows what to do without forethought, for example, when the hands know how to locate a vein when starting an intravenous. Nurses experience nursing practice through their body; it is an important aspect of nursing identity. For example, the ability to start IVs comes naturally to some nurses and is difficult for others (Wright & Brajtman, 2011). The aim of growth is to transition to new states of understanding and to allow the experience of the in-between (uncertainty) to evolve, exploring what is unknown. Reflecting and reconstructing as intentional cognitive activities are key strategies for fostering the process of transition. The ontological stance is a compass for knowing where to go and how to navigate the waters of the profession. Competence emerges from comprehending the waters of the landscape and having the knowledge, skill, and attitude to manage its ebb and flow. Students need to be guided on the journey of becoming nurses with their eye on the ontology. This stance will lead the way toward the uptake of knowledge.

Letters Home

Like McAllister (2007), we consider letter writing to be a practice, a ritual with "deep and long-standing social connective function" (p. 173). When engaged in purposefully, it is as Wagemese (2011) suggests, an introspective practice of looking inward with humility. And, as Manankil-Rankin (2016) articulates, letter writing is a reflective tool for unpacking lived experiences by deconstructing and reconstructing meaning. Writers and recipients of letters view the process of letter writing as one of critiquing, questioning, imagining, and creating, and ultimately giving and receiving. Purposefully engaging in letter writing as a process of relational consciousness and inquiry has the potential to shine a light on and make sense of



Figure 4. Storms Blow In. Photo: Spadoni, 2018.

lived experience of the intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual dimensions of teaching life. To write letters to each other as teachers opens up the possibility of creating deeper meaning beyond that of verbal communication, because time and space are enacted. We are not talking on the phone or texting back and forth: there is no immediacy.

Letters are created over time, words are chosen, thought about, read and re-read, and troubled with, creating meaning and order; a sort of sensibility. With courage, we send our letter off, we mail it as an act of giving. Once received and read, ideas are considered and thought about and the process of responding begins again (act of receiving). Collegial letter writing as a form of reflective practice is a means for examining the relational self, context, and history while providing the opportunity for sharing the challenges, difficulties, and achievements of everyday professional life allowing for making sense of difficult situations within practice moments (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). We used the art of letter writing, metaphor, and literature (aesthetic perspective) to break open our ideas about transition as essential to the development of a compassionate practitioner. This paper was an invitation to our readers to join us in the 'introspective and reflective space' of letter writing to unpack lived experiences and explore the concepts of compassion, transition and relational being in their own practice in the classroom or care environment. The metaphor of sailing was a way for us to explore our journey from certainty to uncertainty, and back again. Relational Inquiry is the compass that guides our way of imparting principles, which both students and teachers can commit to and live by.

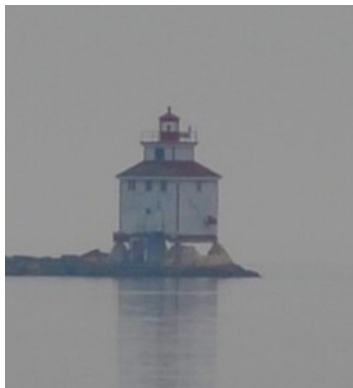


Figure 5. Safe Harbour. Photo: Spadoni, 2015.

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