Redescribing reflective practice and evidence-based practice discourses

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This paper provides an analysis on the discourses of reflective practice and evidence-based practice. It commences by examining the role of discourse in describing and defining our beliefs and attitudes. Consequently, it argues that each discourse is based on a certain epistemology, which in effect are language constructs that create realities and like all language constructs, the epistemology of each discourse is open to the possibility of being restructured. Sequentially, any discourse can (re)describe a different type of reality by providing a set of different words, values and beliefs. Eventually, by exposing the language play and the engineered binary of the reflective practice and the evidence-based practice discourses it is concluded that these discourses are not mutually exclusive as they have been portrayed by most of the literature, but complementary ones. Finally, reflective practice and evidence-based practice are re-described as supplementary discourses and practitioners can simultaneously utilize both through the process of critical reflexivity.

Key words: Epistemology, evidence-based practice, discourse, professional practice, reflective practice.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to analyse the discourses of reflective practice (RP) and evidence-based practice (EBP). Discourses, on one hand, are mechanisms for describing daily reality and, on the other hand, are techniques for defining the words, acts, values, beliefs and attitudes that are appropriate for the individuals that are part of a specific discourse. Furthermore, it is argued that although discourses are responsible for forging personal and social identities of individuals, they are based on epistemological stances that are not fixed entities but constructed by language and in specific by the use of binary opposites. Therefore, like all language constructs, discourses are open to the possibility of being restructured and sequentially able to (re)describe a different type of reality by providing a set of different words, acts, values, beliefs and attitudes.

It will be argued that the above assumption relates very much to the discourses of RP and EBP. The current paper will analyse the words and play of language of both discourses and sequentially demonstrate how they have been engineered as to describe a specific reality that makes the two discourses incompatible. Consequently, the indeterminacy of this language play will be exposed and eventually a redescription of RP and EBP will be offered making the two discourses complementary through the use of critical reflexivity.
DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE

Discourses are described as ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities. Learners are introduced to many discourses as part of the learning process and their enculturation into education and practice. Discourse is also referred to as the mouthpiece of ideology. It describes the way language is used, the way its components are organized to create knowledge and relationships. It allows things to be said but also contains what can be said: it enables the kinds of meanings we can make about the world.

To this extent, individuals are constrained by the need for consensus within the ideology. When individuals hold an attitude or opinion about something, they are both indicating something personal about themselves and at the same time locating themselves within a wider controversy. Individual opinions are dual expressions which owe as much to current debate as to their own thinking.

Furthermore, discourse can be situated within an epistemological debate. For instance, the Newtonian view of reality can be compared with that of analytical psychology. These two epistemological approaches differ in terms of their locative systems, entities and their relations. The Newtonian view focuses on space and time, things, events and causality. This might be said to represent a positivist view. The analytical psychology view focuses on arrays of people, speech acts, rules and story lines. Thus, the emphasis in analytical psychology is on people and what they say, and its meaning can be grasped by the rules they follow and the stories they tell. This might be said to represent an interpretive view.

FORGING PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY BY DISCOURSE LEARNING

In the process of learning a discipline, individuals have to be able to differentiate themselves from others while remaining part of a social context. This involves learning to speak and be heard in a particular discourse. Learners are not simply located but become located. Individuals do not come to learning discourse-free, but must manage transitions between discourses, that is, learning ‘ground rules’—appropriate ways of speaking, writing, reading and thinking. At the same time, learners must also be able to develop their professional learning through the process of individualization and independent thinking.

The personal and social identity model of discourse learning is constructed on two intersecting axes—public/private and individual/collective, and describes four operations by which the individual moves between the quadrants beginning with the public/collective. Appropriation is the operation whereby the individual takes on what is collective and public; this is the area of technical training, learning methods, procedures, facts and information. Transformation is where the individual begins to develop his own angle or insights, and makes a personal contribution. Learners are generally not taught ways in which they can begin to make material their own, because the emphasis often falls on covering material, rather than transforming it. Publication signals the completion of the process of differentiation. Idiosyncratic transformations can be brought out into the public arena to be assessed against public criteria. Conventionalization is the fourth operation in which personal innovation is taken up into the conventions and accepted body of knowledge of the discipline in which it has been publicized.

DISCOURSE, EPISTEMOLOGY AND LANGUAGE

Each discourse is based on a specific epistemology that provides the foundations for the development of words, values and beliefs that forge the personal and social identity of individuals belonging to a certain discourse. Epistemology refers to the nature of the relationship that exists between the knower (inquirer) and the would-be knower and eventually, determines what can be known. The epistemological stance determines the duality of self and world and overall defines the means of knowledge production. In simpler terms, a certain epistemology legitimizes individuals to identify certain problems as important or worthwhile knowing or solving and defines the techniques by which to acquire the knowledge as to solve these problems.

The philosophy of science has identified a variety of epistemological stances, which if summarized can loosely be grouped under two broad categories. The first category considers that the relationship between the individual knower and the subject (object) to be known can be free from the individual’s values and biases, and the acquired knowledge can accurately describe reality, hence providing a final and ‘correct’ answer to problems. The knowledge produced by this epistemology is acontextual, generalized, unbiased and predictive in nature. The second broad epistemological stance considers that the
relationship between the individual knower and the subject (object) to be known cannot in any sincere manner be free from the individual’s biases and the acquired knowledge is nothing more than mere subjective descriptions of the individual’s anticipation of reality, which might be very different from the reality anticipated by other individuals or even by the same individual in different points in time or in a different context, but which nevertheless offers an in-depth and sophisticated understanding of the unique. The knowledge produced by this epistemology is contextual, subjective and explanatory.\(^7,10–13\)

There are at least two intriguing aspects relating to the above epistemological stances. The first one is that the language an epistemology uses in essence defines its core concepts. Our ideas are not in a sense the origin of language, but the reverse is the case. Ideas are the effect of the meanings that we learn and reproduce by language. In simpler terms, the language of a certain epistemology promotes certain words as legitimate, justifiable and warrantable in defining knowledge. Moreover, this is achieved by what is defined as binary oppositions, whereby the legitimation of specific words is achieved by comparing them with their opposites and suggesting an implicit hierarchy between the two where the one is valued and the other is found wanting.\(^14,15\)

For example, in the first epistemological stance the words of ‘unbiased’ and ‘objective’ are implicitly contrasted to the words ‘biased’ and ‘subjective’, suggesting that there is a definitive reality that once we get rid of bias and subjectivity we can fully explain. On the other hand, in the second epistemological stance the words ‘biased’ and ‘subjective’ are implicitly contrasted to the words ‘unbiased’ and ‘objective’, suggesting that in order to understand the unique and specific we need to get rid of the pretence of unbiased and objective approaches to knowledge production.

The second aspect, which in effect is a consequence of this language play, relates to the way Kuhn\(^8\) conceptualizes scientific revolutions, where different ways of knowing (epistemological stances) are continuously elbowing for legitimization. According to Kuhn, this in large is achieved by working upon the language used by different epistemological stances and by distilling the stability in the hierarchy that the binary has developed, thus shifting what is legitimate and therefore what is worthwhile knowing.\(^8,14,15\) This is clearly demonstrated in the above two broad epistemological stances. They both use the same words and they both contrast them with their opposites, but in each case the hierarchy is shifted in such a way as to legitimize very different, if not opposite, types of knowledge.

**THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE DISCOURSE**

If what can be known by any discipline depends on the language play of legitimizing meanings by developing hierarchies among certain words and their opposites, then this raises some serious complications for knowledge production mechanisms, such as EBP and RP. To start, EBP is portrayed as a rational, moral, right and superior decision-making framework that prevents clinical errors or the provision of suboptimal care.\(^16–20\) Hence, in this language play anything other than EBP is irrational, immoral, wrong and inferior practice that leads to erroneous or suboptimal care.

Furthermore, the first core concept that is privileged by EBP is that of evidence, suggesting that any practice not being based on evidence to be invalid, unwarrantable or unsafe. However, what is equally important is that the word ‘evidence’ in EBP remains controversial with a manifold of conceptual variations existing all vying with one another for legitimation. Hence, just like in any discourse, EBP uses language and binary oppositions as to define what constitutes evidence. A group of nursing writers anticipate as valid evidence those emanating from quantitative research and primarily from systematic reviews of randomized control trials (RCTs). Qualitative studies, professional experience and personal preferences are contrasted to systematic reviews, RCTs and quantitative researches, where the later are privileged as legitimate types of evidence and the prior are found wanting or invalid types of evidence.\(^21–25\)

However, as we have already suggested, the epistemology of any discourse is in essence a language play and as such is open to constant shuffling of the binary opposites as to promote or demote certain words, hence shifting the legitimation of meanings. In this manner, another group of nursing authors have waged a polemic against what they proclaim as a fascist attitude of RCTs and the mythology of RCTs being the only warrantable type of evidence for EBP.\(^26–28\) It is suggested that we ought to liberate our conceptualization of what constitutes evidence and debunk the idea of RCTs being the most effective or suitable type evidence for nursing.\(^24,29–32\) Instead, personal and professional judgements, experiences and preferences
of practitioner and patients are considered to be the quintessential components of evidence in EBP. These later types of evidence are privileged as the ones capable of acquiring unique understandings and satisfying individual needs in a holistic manner, when contrasted with RCTs and quantitative studies that are ineffective for specific and unique cases.

**THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE DISCOURSE**

The language play of the RP discourse has from its conception contrasted itself to the positivist epistemology of technical rationality. A binary opposition has been developed, where subjective understandings, feelings and unconscious knowledge gained through repetition (espoused theories) are valued as more practical and functional in practice, when contrasted to formal theories taught at universities. Hence, RP privileges knowledge emerging from practice rather than from formal theories, legitimizing the practicum and coaching strategies of knowledge creation, rather than the lecturing theatre and traditional lecturing styles of knowledge dissemination.36,37

However, as already noted the epistemology of any discourse is a language play that constructs, rather than explains reality and that by tweaking certain words the implicit or explicit hierarchy of the binary can be modified as to privilege each time very different meanings. Hence, a set of writers by tweaking certain words have related RP with intuition, wisdom, artistry, craftsmanship and personal development privileging these modes of thinking and practice over science, research and theories.38–42 Other writers by tweaking again certain words have related RP with the demystification of intuitive practice, with a form of research, with attentive consideration, with enquiry-based learning and with clinical supervision privileging knowledge that is systematically developed through conscious-analytical processes that resemble in many ways those of science and research, rather than those of intuition, artistry and self-development.43–47

**REDESCRIBING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE DISCOURSES THROUGH CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY**

The nursing literature considers the discourses of both RP and EBP to be knowledge frameworks that can guide the practice of nursing. Equally important is the assumption that RP and EBP are frequently viewed as unrelated or ill-related frameworks and that the contemporary use of both is not feasible. From the hereto analysis, this assumption is based on the fact that the language play of EBP and RP constitutes two distinct and very different epistemologies, where reflection represents the contextual, subjective and explanatory type of knowledge and EBP the acontextual, generalized, unbiased and predictive type of knowledge.

However, the fact that the epistemology of discourses is based on artificial hierarchies developed by binary oppositions, where certain modes of knowing and doing are privileged at the expense of their opposites, makes the incompatibility of RP and EBP not an unalterable fact, but rather a result of an artificial language play. In other words, what is important is that RP and EBP are not fixed entities, somehow mirroring some superimposed reality. Instead, as it has been demonstrated, the epistemology of both RP and EBP is a result of the language used to describe RP and EBP, which is continuously tweaked and meaning constantly shifted as to produce multiple (re)descriptions. Furthermore, this suggests that such a mutual exclusion is merely one description and that if EBP and RP are (re)described in a different way this mutual exclusion might not exist at all.

The notion of multiple descriptions or continuous redescriptions is one of Rorty’s typical strategies of analysing knowledge.48,49 Rorty’s usual strategy is to set up an opposition between different sides of some key philosophical debate and then demonstrate why the core problem that divides them is not a problem at all, if described in a different way.

The incompatibility of the RP and EBP discourses is based on the binary opposition of contextual, subjective and explanatory knowledge, versus acontextual, generalized and unbiased knowledge. However, this incompatibility, as Rorty suggests, does not exist at all if RP and EBP are redescribed. The redescription of RP and EBP can take place if the binary opposition between the two types of knowledge is interrupted. This implies that the types of knowledge produced by RP and EBP should not be viewed as opposites, but complimentary ones, where the practitioner must continuously shift between contextual and acontextual knowledge, between subjective and objective knowledge and between explanatory and predictive knowledge.

This redescription of EBP and RP resitutes the problem from trying to define the type of knowledge that
is more valuable or warrantable in solving daily problems to one where the practitioner must effectively shift from one type of knowledge to the other. In such a redescription, the problem is situated on the efficient and adequate movement of the practitioner between different types of knowledge. This process of continuous shifting among different types of knowledge is most efficiently achieved by the use of critical reflexivity.

In short, critical reflexivity is understood as the rational, relational, critical and coherent argument put forwards by practitioners as to why the practitioner is using a specific type of knowledge emerging either from EBP or from RP. The more critical, coherent and rational the argument put forwards by the practitioner, the more valid, valuable and warrantable the evidence becomes. In other words, if both RP and EBP are described as complimentary discourses and ways of knowing for nursing, then both need to become part of the practitioners’ repertoire, but for these to happen the notion of critical reflexivity needs to become an integral component of nurse education and practice.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, RP and EBP are not mutually exclusive discourses. In contrast, they are necessary and complementary knowledge frameworks for the nursing discipline as long as we become aware of the epistemological underpinnings of both discourses and how they have affected the way we think of them. This paper proposes the notion that the epistemologies of both discourses have engineered an intentional binary opposition that portrays RP and EBP as mutually exclusive discourses. However, by interrupting this binary opposition and offering a redescription of RP and EBP, the problem of incompatibility between the two discourses becomes non-existing and the focus shifts on how best the practitioner can utilize both discourses in practice. Finally, the new problem of the contemporary use of the two discourses can be solved by the use of critical reflexivity, which is understood as the rational, relational, critical and coherent argument as to why the practitioner is using a specific type of knowledge emerging either from EBP or from RP. The more critical, coherent and rational the argument is, the more valid, valuable and warrantable the implemented practice becomes, hence making the two discourses supplementary, rather contradictory.

**REFERENCES**


