

Effectiveness of Narrative Medicine Workshops in Enhancing Empathy and Reflective Practice Among Nursing Interns

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Abstract

Background: Empathy and reflective practice are critical components of effective and compassionate nursing care. However, these non-technical skills are often underdeveloped during traditional clinical training. Narrative medicine, an approach involving storytelling, reflective writing, and reading, offers a promising method to enhance these competencies among nursing students.

Aim: The study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of narrative medicine workshops in improving empathy and reflective practice among nursing interns.

Methods: A quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design was conducted among 60 nursing interns with no prior training in reflective practice. The intervention included structured narrative medicine workshops over two weeks, incorporating activities such as storytelling, reflective writing, and group discussions. Empathy was measured using the Jefferson Scale of Empathy–Health Professions Student Version (JSE-HPS), while reflective practice was assessed using the Reflective Practice Questionnaire (RPQ). Data were analyzed using paired sample t-tests to evaluate pre- and post-intervention differences.

Results: Post-intervention scores showed a statistically significant improvement in all domains. The total empathy score increased from 44.3 ± 5.4 to 58.3 ± 4.7 ($p < 0.001$), and the total reflective practice score rose from 42.2 ± 4.9 to 63.2 ± 4.5 ($p < 0.001$). Over 90% of participants reported that the workshop improved their empathy and self-reflection. Most recommend its inclusion in future curricula.

Conclusion: Narrative medicine workshops are an effective educational tool for enhancing empathy and reflective capacity among nursing interns. These findings support the integration of narrative-based methods into nursing education to foster more compassionate and self-aware healthcare professionals.

Keywords: Narrative medicine, empathy, reflective practice, nursing interns, nursing education, storytelling, reflective writing.

Introduction

Narrative medicine is an innovative educational approach that emphasizes the use of storytelling, reflective writing, and close reading to improve healthcare professionals' understanding of patients'

experiences (Fenstermacher et al., 2021). In the context of nursing education, it can be a valuable tool for developing two essential skills: empathy and reflective practice. Empathy is the ability to understand and connect with the emotions and perspectives of others, which is critical for patient-centered care (Abu Lebda et al., 2023). Reflective practice involves self-examination of clinical experiences to foster learning and improvement in future professional conduct. Both are indispensable for delivering compassionate, safe, and effective nursing care, yet often underdeveloped in traditional nursing curricula (Verner et al., 2021).

Several studies have reported a concerning decline in empathy among nursing students as they progress through their clinical training. This trend is frequently attributed to high stress, emotional fatigue, and the overwhelming focus on clinical efficiency (Xu et al., 2023). Reflective practice, while endorsed by nursing regulatory bodies and educational frameworks, is inconsistently applied due to lack of time, insufficient guidance, and absence of structured formats (Lertsakulbunlue et al., 2024). Studies across various regions have shown that a significant number of nursing interns complete their clinical education with limited ability to reflect critically on their actions or emotionally engage with patients, potentially compromising both patient outcomes and their own professional growth (Shakurnia et al., 2023).

Empathy and reflection are not only academic competencies; they are vital to ethical and safe nursing care. Empathy allows nurses to perceive the needs and emotions of patients accurately, leading to better communication, improved trust, and more tailored care (Abou Hashish, 2025). Reflective practice helps identify personal biases, process emotional challenges, and improve critical thinking. Together, these skills contribute to improved patient satisfaction, reduced medical errors, and stronger therapeutic relationships. Additionally, nurses who regularly reflect on their experiences are more likely to manage stress effectively, prevent burnout, and maintain a high level of clinical performance (Heggstad et al., 2022).

Narrative medicine offers a compelling strategy to address the deficits in empathy and reflective ability among nursing students. By engaging in narrative writing, reading literary texts, and sharing personal or clinical stories in a guided environment, interns can develop a deeper emotional awareness and moral insight (Dukes, 2023). The process of writing and discussion in narrative medicine allows for emotional processing, perspective-taking, and moral reasoning skills often neglected in traditional training. These workshops, often facilitated by trained educators, have shown potential in fostering personal and professional growth among students in medicine, though their use in nursing education is still relatively new and underexplored (Westcott, 2024).

Despite its theoretical promise, there remains a lack of experimental evidence demonstrating the impact of narrative medicine on empathy and reflective skills, specifically in nursing interns. Most existing literature focuses on qualitative impressions or medical students, with very few quantitative studies applied to nursing populations (Savitha et al., 2021). Moreover, the pedagogical value of narrative methods in diverse cultural and educational settings, especially in resource-constrained environments, has not been adequately studied. This creates a pressing need for robust empirical research to assess the effectiveness of narrative medicine interventions within nursing education (Efthymiou, 2025).

As nursing interns stand at the intersection of academic learning and professional practice, they are particularly receptive to interventions that shape their attitudes, values, and clinical behavior (Law, 2025). Introducing structured narrative medicine workshops during internship could serve as a transformative learning experience, reinforcing empathy and self-reflection as core professional habits. The interactive and emotionally rich nature of these workshops allows students to process complex patient encounters, confront their own biases, and develop a more holistic approach to care (Ho, 2024). This study seeks to fill the existing research gap by evaluating the impact of narrative medicine workshops on empathy and reflective practice among nursing interns through an experimental design.

(Bajaj et al., 2023). As healthcare systems increasingly emphasize compassion, ethics, and emotional intelligence, integrating narrative-based methods into nursing education could offer a practical and humanizing complement to technical training. Findings from this study may contribute to the development of more comprehensive and empathetically grounded nursing curricula and provide educators with evidence-based tools to enhance the professional formation of future nurses (Kim et al., 2021).

Methodology

The effectiveness of narrative medicine workshops on interns' empathy and reflective abilities was evaluated by a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design. The design made it possible to assess how much the participants learned from the intervention. The research took place at Saidu Teaching Hospital, Swat, with nursing interns who were enrolled in their clinical internship. For the study, 60 nursing interns were chosen using purposive sampling as they were both available and ready to join. Individuals who had previous experience with reflective or narrative-oriented training were not allowed to participate to ensure the intervention was performed correctly.

The intervention involved running a formal Narrative Medicine Workshop over a period of two weeks. Sessions on storytelling, reflective writing and narrative sharing were part of the program, presented by specialized facilitators. Students were encouraged to read accounts written by real patients, think about their own experiences in the clinic and converse with others to review emotions, ethical issues and their sense of professionalism.

Instruments:

Two validated tools were used:

The Jefferson Scale of Empathy – Health Professions Student Version (JSE-HPS) should be used to assess empathy.

Reflective Practice Questionnaire (RPQ) to evaluate reflective capacity.

Every participant did both tasks, a pre-test and a post-test, before the workshop and two weeks afterwards.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using **SPSS version 27**. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) summarized demographic data. **Paired sample t-tests** were applied to compare pre- and post-intervention scores. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results and analysis

Demographic Characteristics

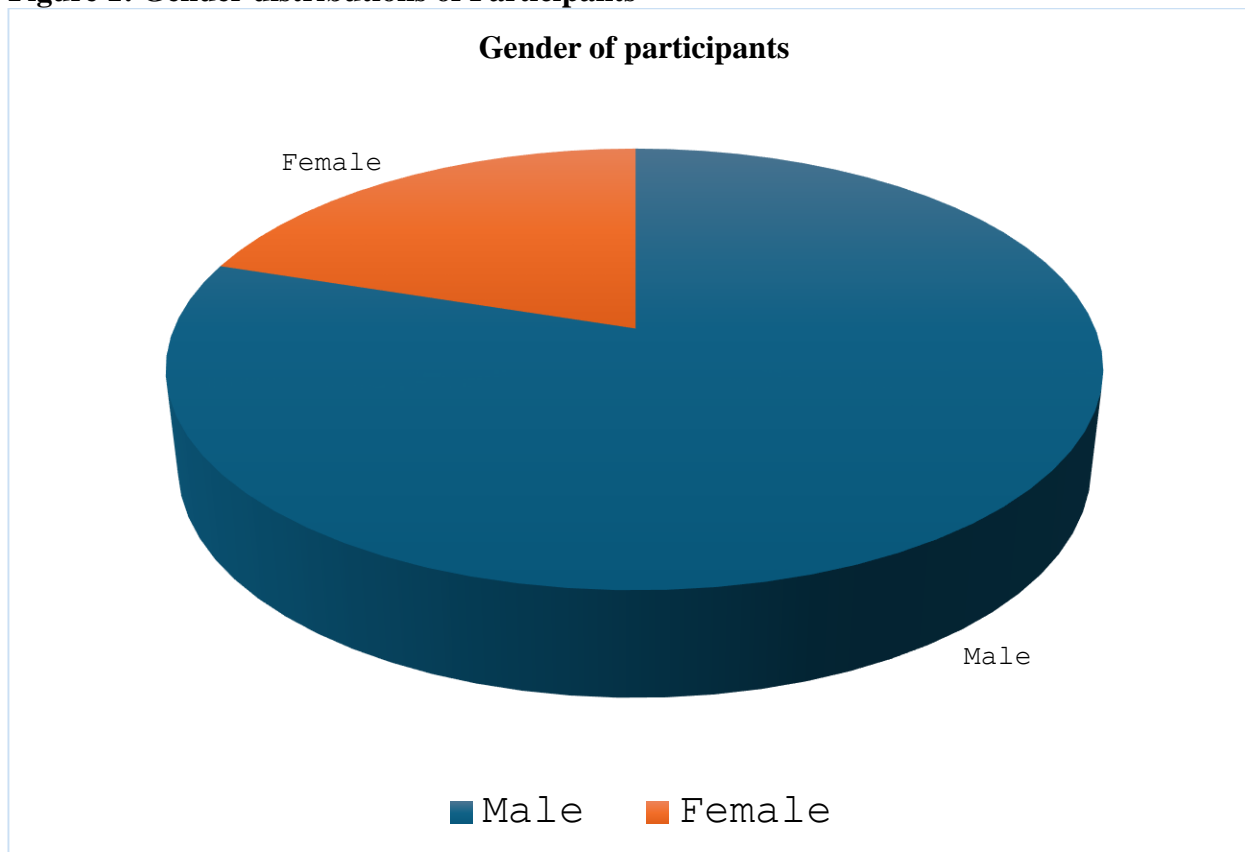
There were a total of 60 nursing interns, with 48 being male and 12 being female. The age group that made up the majority (58.3%) was 20–22 years, while those between 23–25 were the second largest at 41.7%. Approximately three-quarters of the interns (70%) worked for at least three months. All participants had no prior experience with reflection, suggesting that learning these skills would be valuable (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Nursing Interns (n = 60)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48	80.0
	Female	12	20.0
Age (years)	20–22	35	58.3
	23–25	25	41.7

Internship Duration	< 3 months	18	30.0
	≥ 3 months	42	70.0
Previous Reflective Training	Yes	0	0.0
	No	60	100.0

Figure 1: Gender distributions of Participants



The above figure shows that the majority of the nursing interns were male, accounting for 80% of the participants. Female interns made up the remaining 20% of the sample.

Pre and Post-Test Empathy Scores

Every aspect of empathy significantly improved once the intervention began. Students showed a 5.3-point increase in perspective taking, a 4.3-point increase in compassionate care and a 4.4-point increase in their ability to see things from the patient's viewpoint. There was a significant increase in total empathy, from 44.3 to 58.3, in response to the narrative medicine workshops ($p < 0.001$) (Table 2).

Table 2: Pre and Post-Test Empathy Scores Using JSE-HPS (n = 60)

Item	Mean Pre-Test Score (\pm SD)	Mean Post-Test Score (\pm SD)	Mean Difference	p-value
Perspective Taking	17.2 \pm 2.8	22.5 \pm 2.3	5.3	<0.001
Compassionate Care	14.8 \pm 3.1	19.1 \pm 2.6	4.3	<0.001
Standing in the Patient's Shoes	12.3 \pm 2.5	16.7 \pm 2.0	4.4	<0.001
Total Empathy Score	44.3 \pm 5.4	58.3 \pm 4.7	14.0	<0.001

Pre and Post-Test Reflective Practice Scores

The results indicate that reflective practice improved significantly because of the intervention. Reflection skills went up by 7.8 points, understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses by 6.6 points and ability to spot emotions and react wisely by 6.6 points. All the changes in reflective practice score were significant, and the overall score increased from 42.2 to 63.2, reflecting how much the workshops helped participants (Table 3).

Table 3: Pre and Post-Test Reflective Practice Scores Using RPQ (n = 60)

Item	Mean Pre-Test Score (\pm SD)	Mean Post-Test Score (\pm SD)	Mean Difference	p-value
Reflective Capacity	15.6 \pm 3.2	23.4 \pm 3.0	7.8	<0.001
Self-Appraisal	13.9 \pm 2.8	20.5 \pm 2.2	6.6	<0.001
Insight and Emotional Awareness	12.7 \pm 3.0	19.3 \pm 2.5	6.6	<0.001
Total Reflective Practice Score	42.2 \pm 4.9	63.2 \pm 4.5	21.0	<0.001

Participant Feedback on Narrative Medicine

Most participants (91.7%) said that the workshop increased their empathy for patients, whereas only 6.7% said it wasn't clear to them and only 1.6% complained that their empathy decreased. Most participants or about 88.3%, found reflective writing useful in examining their habits in practice, while only a small minority disagreed. In addition, 95% said they think narrative medicine should be included in future courses, highlighting people's supportive views toward it (Table 4).

Table 4: Participant Feedback on Narrative Medicine Workshop (n = 60)

Feedback Item	Agree (n, %)	Neutral (n, %)	Disagree (n, %)
The workshop improved my empathy toward patients	55 (91.7%)	4 (6.7%)	1 (1.6%)
Reflective writing helped me analyze my clinical behavior	53 (88.3%)	5 (8.3%)	2 (3.4%)
I recommend including narrative medicine in the future curriculum	57 (95.0%)	3 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Discussion

This study aimed to find out if narrative medicine workshops help nursing interns practice empathy and reflection. All aspects of empathy and reflection had an improved result as a result of the intervention. This shows that using stories can impact learning, mainly by helping nursing learners build key non-technical skills for caring for patients. Enhanced empathy and reflection scores confirm that people learn more by being engaged with stories and reflective writing.

The study follows the results stated by Bland (2025), explaining that using narrative medicine procedures in medical students leads to higher empathy scores as time goes on. In a similar way, Moulaei et al., (2023) discovered that reading patient stories encouraged people in healthcare to understand their emotions and grow as professionals. Whereas the majority of findings relate to medical education, our work helps to fill the small number of studies which use statistical methods to explore nursing intern experiences during their transition to the workforce.

In contrast to ordinary lectures, narrative medicine lets students take part and feel the emotions of learning. Similar to Howell (2021), the findings of this study suggest that having narrative competence gives clinicians a better understanding of the patient's feelings. At the same time, research involving

just facts or simulations reveals a reduced impact on lasting empathy and thoughtful skills (Sellers, 2024). Including creative reflection and peer conversation, similar to this study, may result in more helpful outcomes for people's emotional well-being.

The fact that the participants had not learned reflective practice beforehand and still moved closer to reflective practice after workshops is truly remarkable. Therefore, giving children brief narrative lessons can have a big impact. However, studies carried out by McFarland & Hlubocky (2021), indicate that reflective capacity grows slowly and might take a longer period under mentoring. People may learn new habits and gain knowledge faster, as narrative writing is engaging and tends to spark deep reflection with the help of others.

Most participants confirmed that taking part in the workshop significantly improved their empathy and thinking skills. This agrees with what Nash (2022) states, stating that creating narratives can reduce workers' burnout and make them stronger emotionally. Even so, some studies remain doubtful about whether these practices can be used widely, since they depend on competent facilitators and support from the school system (Timm et al., 2021). Still, because the workshops were highly recommended, it seems that they can be organized as a regular part of internship programs for nursing students.

Measurable changes in outcomes were made possible in this study because it used dependable experimental methods. These findings are different from earlier ones, which discovered that narrative approaches have little impact on clinical practices (Bland 2025). This may happen because of variations in how long the program runs, who leads it and how much the participants are involved. Since our study used an attentive approach and encouraged participation, it made it easier to improve vocabulary skills.

Conclusion

This study concludes that narrative medicine workshops are highly effective in enhancing empathy and reflective practice among nursing interns. The significant improvement in post-test scores demonstrates that structured storytelling, reflective writing, and narrative sharing can positively influence emotional and cognitive competencies essential for holistic nursing care. Given that none of the participants had prior formal training in reflection, the outcomes highlight the transformative potential of narrative methods even within a short intervention period. These findings support the integration of narrative medicine into nursing education as a means of nurturing more compassionate, self-aware, and professionally grounded healthcare providers.

Recommendations

1. **Curriculum Integration:** Narrative medicine workshops should be formally integrated into nursing internship programs to strengthen empathy and reflective thinking.
2. **Faculty Training:** Nursing educators should be trained in narrative facilitation techniques to ensure consistent and meaningful delivery of workshops.
3. **Ongoing Reflection Opportunities:** Institutions should provide regular opportunities for reflective writing and discussion throughout nursing education, not just during internships.
4. **Multi-Center Studies:** Further research across diverse educational settings is recommended to validate these findings and assess cultural or institutional influences.
5. **Longitudinal Assessment:** Future studies should examine the long-term impact of narrative interventions on professional behavior, job satisfaction, and patient outcomes.

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