

**A Landscape of Opportunities: Fast Tracking Down Under**  
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### **Introduction**

Reflexivity is important to nursing as it allows opportunity to reflect on how knowledge, both formal and tacit, and understanding have been developed within the context of the nurse's own perspectives (Freshwater 2002; Johns & Freshwater 2005). When embarking on my nursing career I was encouraged to keep a diary of my journey so that I would be able to look back and make sense of multifaceted learning experiences I would encounter along the way. Keeping a diary was particularly pertinent as, already having a first degree in psychology, I was undertaking a Post Graduate Diploma in Pre-registration (Mental Health) Nursing Course more commonly known as the 'Fast Track' course. The implication of this being that rather than having three years to complete a nursing course, registration is achieved in two years.

This paper is a reflexive account of my 'fast track' nursing course and the opportunities it afforded me to broaden my horizons regarding my chosen career. In particular I will focus on my experiences of having a clinical placement and presenting a conference paper in Australia. From the first week of the fast track course, the possibility of a placement abroad was introduced and discussed between students and lecturers. At that moment I was excited by the thoughts of what this opportunity could bring, not only to me as a person, but to my future career as a mental health nurse. In that instant I thought of the experiences and avenues a placement abroad could open for me, but where would I go? But then as the course gathered momentum I found myself socialised into a typical student nurse's life and the idea of going abroad became a distant memory.

**Key Words:** placement, student nurse, abroad, reflection, Australia

### **Wading Through Practice, Drowning in Theory but a Glow on the Horizon**

Ten months later, four placements achieved and deep in coursework, it was the Christmas 2007 break and I started to think about my elective placement. I had to organise my elective placement for September 2008, therefore I was thinking about it earlier than most. I reconsidered the possibility of going abroad, and started thinking about Australia, mainly because it is a predominantly English speaking country and I had always wanted to go there. I was particularly intrigued at why people go there and often do not return, and what makes Australia the place people either want to live in or travel to. Looking at the map Australia was enormous, so I made a rushed decision choosing Sydney as the place I would look for a clinical placement. Looking back at my diary I am not sure it was a 'rushed decision' as I had heard so much about Sydney, what might be referred to as 'intuitive knowledge' (King & Appleton 1997), however I had very little 'formal' knowledge about the place.

After deciding my destination, I then had to think about the nursing experience I wanted to encounter down under. Prior to starting my nursing course I had worked in a unit providing a service for young people who had eating problems. Throughout my nursing course I have continued to be drawn to working with children and adolescents experiencing mental health problems and believe that

this is my career goal as a qualified nurse. Taking account of my previous experience and what I had highlighted in my diary as being a 'high point' of my nursing course, those aspects that excited and motivated me, I began to think about the benefits of gaining experience of child and adolescent services in Australia and how such experience might enhance my career prospects.

I did a search using Google, looking for child and adolescent mental health hospitals in Sydney. A selection of results appeared, but only one really caught my attention, the Rivendell Unit. Reflecting back to my search the Rivendell Unit was the only place that offered enough information to make an informed decision about its suitability as a placement and it also provided a contact name and address which for me gave the satisfaction of knowing that I would be corresponding with a specific person rather than an inanimate object. This experience proved very important learning for me as it made me think about how providing someone with information about a service may enable them to get a feel for the service and whether or not they want to engage with that service. Likewise, being able to identify, if only in name, a specific person can give the sense of it being a cared about service, that those working in the service take pride in it by being named in association with it. For people using mental health services and their carers I will always remember how important and helpful it can be to have this type of information.

### **The Fate of the New Year's Resolution**

I made a decision to write only to the Rivendell Unit; looking back I believe this was the result of my mixed emotions. Firstly I felt my attempt to organise a journey to Australia was far too ambitious. Secondly as the elective placement was only a three week placement I felt the pressure would outweigh the benefit. In addition starting on the costing of such a journey brought me to reality and, at that particular time in my life, I also believed I did not have the courage to travel so far on my own. It was for all these reasons that I sent one letter and left my elective placement to fate. I posted that letter on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January and made a New Year's resolution, if the Rivendell Unit invite me to work as a student nurse I will accept and go, if they do not then I will apply to UK hospitals only for my elective placement.

At this stage I had kept the application to myself, mainly because I thought I would not hear anything from Australia and speaking about it would make me get too excited with no reason. A month later, and having almost forgotten about my application, the nursing unit manager from the Rivendell Unit got in touch with my tutor regarding my elective placement. From that moment I was liaising with the nursing manager of recruitment and retention for Sydney, South West Area Health Services (SSWAHS), through email. It was during this correspondence that I was invited to complete a placement in Sydney, Australia, on the proviso that I follow the process of applying for an occupational training visa using a set of instructions to assist me. I went from feeling over-whelmed and excited to over-whelmed and stressed.

When looking at the instructions I initially thought this to be impossible as I questioned how I could possibly manage to complete the application, especially as I found the terminology difficult to understand. In applying for my visa there were several aspects I found difficult. Firstly liaising with many different people, tutors for an up to date transcript, occupational health, and a solicitor to sign certain documentation, although the university assisted with this. This made me think twice about embarking on my journey. The visa and insurance costs alone made

me reconsider this opportunity, and quickly talked myself into believing it was not possible and unrealistic, especially on a short course with coursework and placements. However, the university was also of great support in directing me to comprehensive insurance cover available on the campus.

Again reflecting back to this time the learning was immense. It surprised me how terminology, as a barrier to understanding, can defeat people in pursuing what they were hoping to achieve. My own experience of the speed at which I became de-motivated and the consequential reaction of questioning my own abilities made me realise how easy it might be for those who have not had the same opportunities as me, in terms of a secure base and a good education, to lose sight of their dreams and aspirations. I believe this particular learning will stay with me throughout my career and be helpful when I eventually work as a qualified nurse.

### **Discovering the Covert Skills, Questioning the Overt Skills**

My tutor put me in touch with a colleague who specialised in assisting students with placements abroad. I found this incredibly helpful and I was able to begin my journey to Australia. I was also encouraged by discovering that my annual leave, occurring just prior to my elective placement, plus reading weeks, would supply me with a full eight weeks in Australia. This heightened my enthusiasm to go more than ever. I decided that I would put my energy into organising my placement in Sydney and hoped that once that was established I would have enough time to organise a journey that would also be 'a personal experience'.

Reflecting on that time in my life, I was very busy with university work. When reading my diary now I can see that applying for my visa became part of my university work. I can recall not getting my hopes built up and not dreaming or thinking of Australia until I was granted my visa. I was what my tutor would suggest, using my psychological defence mechanisms. By rationalising that my course came first, fantasising about something which may never happen was not an issue. Whilst the support from the University of Leeds was very positive, I believe that having to organise this experience encouraged me to face new and difficult challenges. It taught me how to liaise through email across countries, how to build a professional relationship through email, and develop strategies to approach challenges and work through them myself. This was a valuable lesson and prevented me from avoiding the task ahead. When reflecting on this part of the process I believe that what enabled me to get on with the task was the faith my tutors showed in my ability to organise such a trip. The experience of applying for a visa made me realise how organised I am when I am determined, a personal strength that I had previously ignored, but one which I will in future acknowledge, particularly in relation to my career. In addition the experience has taught me the importance of helping people find their own strengths by having faith in their own abilities. This made me think back to person-centred counselling as this is one of the underlying principles of Rogerian theory.

### **Just Before You Go.....**

During the demanding time of applying for my visa, I was approached by a lecturer regarding the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, 34<sup>th</sup> international conference, which was to be held in Melbourne at a similar time to when I was planning to do my placement. The conference was entitled 'Mental Health: A broad canvas, the art of mental health nursing in the age of technology and science'. My tutor and I discussed what I might be able to contribute to the

conference and eventually I submitted an abstract based on my reflexive diary which I was keeping during the fast track course. The title of my paper was 'A portrait of an abstract landscape: a student nurse's reflections of a fast track mental health course'. After a long wait of approximately 12 weeks I finally received an e-mail from the conference organisers telling me that my abstract had been accepted for an oral presentation. When asked to present at the conference I could not find the words to describe the intense feelings I experienced, the voice in my head reminding me that I am only a student nurse being offered the chance to present to professionals and voice my experiences and opinions. I wanted to embrace the event and enjoy every moment.

### **Arriving in a New Landscape**

As the visa arrived, I began to plan my trip. I booked my flights, knowing this would prevent me from backing out of an amazing opportunity that was suddenly becoming a reality. Arriving in Australia I was so excited I visited the placement as soon as I arrived despite having no sleep. The Rivendell Unit was located next to a general hospital and a psychiatric hospital. However it was in its own building, a heritage building which was old fashioned and located next to the Parramatta River. Personally I found the location of the unit therapeutic. The service provided the adolescents with a Monday to Friday service of two different school programmes, many of the adolescents being residential. The programmes used a group approach requiring the nurses to engage with the adolescents holistically, and covering diverse topics including medication, family dynamics and sexual behaviour. I found that the unit was able to offer a wide range of therapeutic interventions to meet the needs of young people with very different problems. I found it very easy to build therapeutic relationships at this unit, and in retrospect feel this was due to my accent as the adolescents showed a great interest in England and wanted to know all about it!

For me the most poignant part of being at the unit was when a young person was discharged from the unit. The staff and adolescents would make an album of memories for the young person to take away with them, giving them a personal farewell. This was very important for the young person, as it encouraged them to move on and not forget their experience at Rivendell. Likewise, the young people and their acceptance and interest in me and the kindness of the staff will be a lasting memory, not allowing me to forget my experience. Again when looking at this entry in my diary it demonstrates the importance of positive endings within therapeutic relationships. Saying good-bye and moving on is not always an easy task and sometimes it might bring back earlier memories of endings that were unhappy, frustrating or just raised more or a new set of questions. Such endings may well encourage the resurfacing of previous insecurities.

### **Learning the Art of Nursing: Presenting the Portrayal an Abstract Landscape**

The final stage of my journey in Australia involved my presenting at the conference. I experienced an amazing thrill as I took responsibility for my presentation and had opportunity to meet people from numerous countries. I came away from the conference realising the potential that nurses have to learn from each other and share different ideas, not only from different services, but from different countries and continents to achieve optimum healthcare. I feel this was a unique experience and with the support and knowledge from a specific lecturer at the university it allowed me to believe in my potential as a person and a student

nurse. This taught me the power of someone believing and encouraging another human being and the effect positive feedback can have in terms of promoting personal growth.

### **Returning to the Same but Different Place**

On my return from Australia I knew that my final placement would be in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) in Leeds. Having this placement has given me the opportunity to compare the services and utilise different skills. In comparison each service shares a number of commonalities, for example both provided the young people with structure through school sessions and group activities, both adopt a holistic approach to care and both meet the needs of young people with diverse mental health problems. For me the important learning from these experiences would include the globalisation of children and young people needing to have their mental health needs met through services that can harness and nurture abilities and strengths as human beings.

### **Postcards Home: Reflecting Back, Looking Forward**

Through my placement in Australia I was able to incorporate travelling as part of the experience I spent four weeks travelling up the east coast of Australia followed by a week at the conference in Melbourne. My journey allowed me to be a student nurse, a travelling individual and a professional, all in the space of eight weeks but, more importantly, enabled me to grow as a person and a professional. I was privileged to represent the university and uphold the university's reputation at all times.

Students considering doing a placement abroad should strongly acknowledge its difficulties and its rewards. Firstly the cost can be off putting; do explore different avenues of funding. I did not apply for funding due to lack of time and so the learning for me would be to think about and plan where you might want to go well in advance. I would advise students to build up a positive relationship with a tutor who specialised in placements abroad and liaise with a named nursing unit manager abroad. I would recommend students to be organised and trust that an experience abroad is beneficial, not only to learn about how services are organised and delivered in different countries, but to learn more about what we can learn from each other as the professionals of the future.

I began my journey nervous, unhelpful, negative, stressed and excited at the prospect. During my journey I was overwhelmed, excited, busy and contented. Looking back on my experience, I am moved by the support I was given from the university and the Rivendell Unit. I feel lucky and fortunate to have experienced the way another country views mental health and how it provides care. I feel that the journey in my life altered me as a person, I became independent, professional and I overcame many difficult obstacles which previously I would have avoided.

Incorporating travel and nursing as a student is a real privilege. For me it has uncovered many possible opportunities for my future career. I would recommend that those students who are considering a placement abroad fully acknowledge the challenge and the rewards it will bring, but also know that it is important to make it your own experience.

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