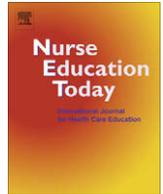


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Letter to the Editor

Conversations with ourselves: A rejoinder to Topping and Reed

I wish to thank Annie Topping and Jan Reed for their interesting and thoughtful responses to my paper *Writing-up and writing-as: Rediscovering nursing scholarship* (Rolfe, 2009). Of the two, Topping's response was the most critical, but also the most ambivalent and at times self-contradictory. Her main objection to my paper is that it harks back to a 'golden age' of scholarship 'largely inhabited by print based books, small numbers of students and little or no scrutiny of performance' (Topping, 2009). Perhaps this erroneous view of my work as an appeal for a return to some mythical golden age was prompted by a misunderstanding of the second part of the title of my paper, which called for a *rediscovery* of nursing scholarship, or perhaps Topping never read past the introduction, where I set out the historical background to my argument. Indeed, almost every point in my paper that she takes issue with can be found in this short 'Introduction' section.

However, I suspect that Topping's approach to my paper stems in part from her own apparent ambivalence towards the current state of the academy, and perhaps she is projecting onto my paper *her own* wish for a return to a 'golden age' of academic nursing. She certainly appears to have deep reservations about the university sector, describing it as 'a closely managed, highly complex, often overtly bureaucratic knowledge industry where economic imperatives determine priorities'. At least, I assume that this is meant as a criticism. Elsewhere, she describes the modern university as 'a world where performance is under constant surveillance from Government, potential and existing students, sometimes their parents (customers), professional, regulatory and statutory bodies, funding agencies, collaborators, competitors and industrial partners'. Interestingly, she adds 'that does not mean scholarship is dead, merely reframed', which is precisely the point that I was attempting to make throughout my paper. However, whereas Topping appears to accept as inevitable the reframing of scholarship to take into account 'the demands of the market, policy or external surveillance', I was attempting in my paper to challenge this somewhat repressive view and to outline a more active approach to scholarship that turns the critical gaze inwards onto ourselves. Thus, in addition to (or, perhaps, in response to) the surveillance of academic performance by outside forces, my paper attempted to promote the notion that 'scholarship is the discipline taking a critical look at itself'.

I suggested above that Topping's paper displayed a degree of ambivalence, and whilst she takes me to task as some kind of academic luddite who fondly harks back to a bygone era of 'print based books', she seems at times to be no happier with the status quo than I am. However, whilst I suggested that scholarship is being reframed and restricted by what I call the 'tyranny of research', Topping's analysis is that 'a far greater tyranny... is the delivery of quality undergraduate nurse education to large

numbers of students needed to maintain the nursing workforce'. For Topping, this growing requirement for academics to teach has had a dual impact. Not only does it contribute to 'the under achievement of nursing academics as empirical researchers', but it has also resulted in 'aspirant academics that specialise in education ... rather than exploring the clinical science of nursing', and who therefore publish scholarly and educational papers in journals such as *Nurse Education Today* rather than making a substantive contribution to clinical nursing science. Thus, when Topping suggests that 'as readers of this journal will recognise, scholarship appears to be alive and well' it is possible to detect a hint of disapproval in her tone. If her previous comments are to be taken at face value, then there is more than a suggestion that nurse academics ought to be getting on with the more important business of doing 'proper' clinical research.

Unfortunately, by restricting her critique to my preliminary observations about the history of scholarship, Topping manages completely to avoid addressing the scholarly substance of my paper. As she rightly says, the points I make in my introduction hardly constitute a new debate, and yet she completely ignores my subsequent attempts to take the debate forward. Topping has nothing to say about my use of the work of Wittgenstein and Lyotard to analyse the demise of traditional concepts of scholarship, nor of my use of Barthes and Foucault to examine different modes of critique, nor, indeed, of my attempts to distinguish between the language games of 'writing-up' research and 'writing-as' scholarship, from whence I took the title of my paper. Overall, I find it ironic that Topping's critique of a paper that is attempting to discuss issues of scholarship should skirt around the academic and scholarly arguments at the heart of what she calls my 'polemic'. For example, rather than discussing seriously my point about the difficulties in finding a published outlet for papers that do not meet the criteria of the RAE, she chooses instead to make the somewhat facile and completely unhelpful comment that 'Rolfe ... adopts the whispering pose of a conspiracy theorist'.

Interestingly, it would appear that, at least by Topping's standards, Jan Reed is a fellow conspiracy theorist. As Reed (2009) points out in her response to my paper, the prestige afforded to journals derives largely from their conformity to the standards of the dominant scientific discourse, which militates against the publication of non-research-based scholarly papers. Overall, Reed takes a somewhat different approach to my paper: whereas Topping locates my ideas in a nostalgic return to the past, Reed uses them as a jumping-off point to explore some of the implications for the future of the academy. Thus, whilst Topping bemoans ever-increasing teaching loads as standing in the way of research and scholarship, Reed regards the educational setting as a fruitful source of scholarly debate between teachers and students. The challenge for Reed is therefore to find ways of getting these classroom and common room debates into the public domain where they can influence practice, and she makes a number of helpful

suggestions about the production, validation, dissemination and, most importantly, the application of scholarship. As she rightly points out, nursing scholarship must ultimately relate to nursing practice, and 'our touchstone will be the way in which this practice can be informed and inspired'.

In the paper which sparked this debate, I described scholarship as a series of conversations that the academy has with itself in order to discover what it thinks. Whatever its merits and failings, my paper appears to have at least achieved the primary aim of a scholarly work, which is to get us all talking and looking self-critically at our place and role in the academy.

References

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