



Feedback

Nursing management and the management of nursing

Management and disciplinary power

It is an honour and a great privilege to be appointed as associate editor of the *Journal of Nursing Management*, especially because I am not a manager in the usually understood meaning of the term. I have no staff and no desire to direct or organize my colleagues. As a researcher, I largely follow the advice of the sociologist C. Wright Mills: 'Now I do not like to do empirical work if I can possibly avoid it. If one has no staff it is a great deal of trouble; if one does employ a staff, then the staff is often even more trouble' (Mills 1970, p. 225).

Nor do I believe that my colleagues would benefit from any operational intervention on my part. I do, however, believe strongly and passionately in management at a strategic level, which I take to mean putting in place strategies and systems which allow others to manage themselves. This approach is relatively simple (although not always easy) to facilitate at a departmental or even at an institutional level; the greatest obstacle to implementing self-regulating managerial systems is often individuals who would prefer not to be self-directing. The big challenge for me, however, is the macro-level strategic management of the discipline of nursing as a whole.

By 'discipline', I mean the entire knowledge infrastructure of nur-

sing: the principles, assumptions and accepted methods for identifying, contributing to, validating and disseminating the knowledge base, and the accepted and established ways for applying that knowledge base to practice. We can see, then, that academic journals such as the *Journal of Nursing Management* have a key role to play in the overall management of the discipline of nursing.

My concern for the discipline of nursing is that it is, at the same time, over-managed from the top, and also barely managed at all. In one sense, the discipline is largely unmanaged to the extent that most academic research papers are unsolicited and do not form part of a predetermined or organized programme of knowledge generation. Some journals, such as this one, order those papers into themes, but on the whole there is no overarching 'grand plan' to manage the generation, dissemination and application of knowledge in the discipline of nursing. However, the discipline is, in another sense, over-managed. Foucault (1974) points out that the term 'discipline' is very apt, as it determines and controls what can and cannot be said within any particular discourse (by a discourse, I mean a particular strand of thought or methodological position within the discipline). Certain types of knowledge, certain methods of producing knowledge and certain ways of transmitting knowledge are excluded by the exertion of disci-

plinary power. Once again, journals have a key role to play in this exercise of power.

The function of negative feedback

If we think of the managerial function of journals in terms of systems theory, we can see the necessity of such disciplinary restraint. Systems theory is based on the principle of feedback and, in particular, on the negative feedback loop, that is, on feedback which keeps the system in check and prevents the build-up of destabilizing influences. Think of a microphone connected to an amplifier and loudspeaker. If the amplifier is turned up too loud, the output from the speaker is picked up by the microphone and re-amplified, setting up a loud whistle of feedback. Of course, positive feedback is useful in certain circumstances: it can drive new ideas and initiate change, but if left unchecked and unchallenged, it will overbalance and tip the system into chaos. Negative feedback is therefore also necessary: by turning down the amplifier, the microphone no longer picks up its own signal, although if the amplifier is turned down too much, the output will be too quiet to hear. Negative feedback can therefore serve a positive function, but a fine balance is required.

If this approach is applied to the discourse of nursing, we can immediately see the problem. If the academic output from journals is left

unchecked and unchallenged, positive feedback can build up. Think, for example, of the discourse of evidence-based practice (EBP). The first paper to mention EBP was published in 1992. The number had grown to 15 by the following year, and amounted to over 6000 by the year 2000 (French 2002). This observation is not intended to be a comment on EBP per se, but merely an illustration of the way that certain discourses can tap into and become amplified by the discipline to produce an ear-splitting howl of positive feedback if left unchecked and unopposed.

The academic journals do, of course, exert some negative feedback, but it is largely applied at the boundaries of the discipline, that is, to ideas, methodologies and areas of study that do not readily fit with the dominant discourse of the discipline. The discipline of nursing is relatively successful at managing and policing its boundaries, but is less successful at challenging and critiquing mainstream ideas that at first sight appear innocuous, but which exert an inordinate amount of influence and which, at times, are in danger of running out of control. To the extent that the discipline of nursing is managed at all, it might therefore be said to be managed in a rather laissez-faire manner, controlled by the free market of the knowledge/power economy, where

those who already exert control over the knowledge base of the discipline are rewarded with more publications and greater influence, and where those on the fringes tend to remain there.

Managing the discipline

If academic journals wish to manage and influence the growth of the discipline of nursing, a fine balance between positive and negative feedback is required. On the one hand, it is vitally important that the voices and views of **all** participants in the discipline are heard, including those on the fringes. But it is equally important to encourage and enable more discussion, debate and critique of published papers and established discourses, particularly from those people who might not usually have the time or the confidence to write a paper or even a letter to the editor. This would have the added benefit of promoting a more democratic, participative and interactive approach to the management of the discipline of nursing, in which its shape and content would be influenced by a wider constituency with a wider agenda, including practitioners and (dare we hope?) service users.

With this in mind, I invite you to contribute to a new 'E-mails to the Editor' section of the journal, entitled **Feedback**, which aims to

encourage real-time discussions of individual papers and also of broader issues and concerns, which in turn will hopefully elicit further feedback from the authors, the editor and other interested parties. All of these responses, in the form of an e-mail debate, will then be published as soon as possible following the publication of the original theme or paper.

I hope you will consider adding your voice to what I anticipate will be an ongoing debate on the discipline of nursing by sending an e-mail with your thoughts, comments and opinions on any aspect of any topic or paper published in this edition of the journal.

E-mails, under the subject heading **Feedback**, should be sent to g.rolfe@swan.ac.uk.

References

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GARY ROLFE

Associate Editor

E-mail: g.rolfe@swansea.ac.uk