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## Original article

# Conversation with presence: A narrative inquiry into the learning experience of Chinese students studying nursing at Australian universities

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** the aim of this methodological article is to reflect on and extend current understandings of the possibilities of narrative inquiry research giving voice to students, and to expand the power of story by sharing the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological considerations of narrative inquiry in an international education context.

**Background:** there has been much discussion about the need in providing a 'voice' to people across the society, who feel marginalised in many contexts, including international students. There is limited research about Chinese students studying in Australia. In particular, the learning experience of Chinese nursing students has not been fully explored nor understood.

**Discussion:** to enhance teaching and learning in international education contexts, and to cater better to international students, it is important to understand their experiences and perspectives. There is no better way to achieve this level of understanding than to let students' voices be heard, to let them speak for and about themselves because reality exists within these students' perceptions.

**Conclusions:** in the context of international education, narrative inquiry as a research methodology, when used with sensitivity and reflexivity, through the power of stories, offers a new dimension in the international education research.

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## 1. Introduction

There has been substantial discussion about the need to provide a 'voice' to people across the society, who feel marginalised in many contexts, including international students.<sup>1–5</sup>

A systematic review identified gaps in the existing literature. There is limited research on Chinese students studying in Australia. In particular, the learning experience of Chinese nursing students has neither been fully explored nor fully understood.<sup>6</sup>

To fill the research gap, Chinese nursing students need an opportunity to tell their stories and make their 'voice' heard rather than having the views, understandings and considerations held by Australian education bodies speak for them.<sup>6–8</sup> The aim in giving a voice to the students is to have them construct their own stories instead of having the authorities and educators construct stories for them.<sup>7</sup>

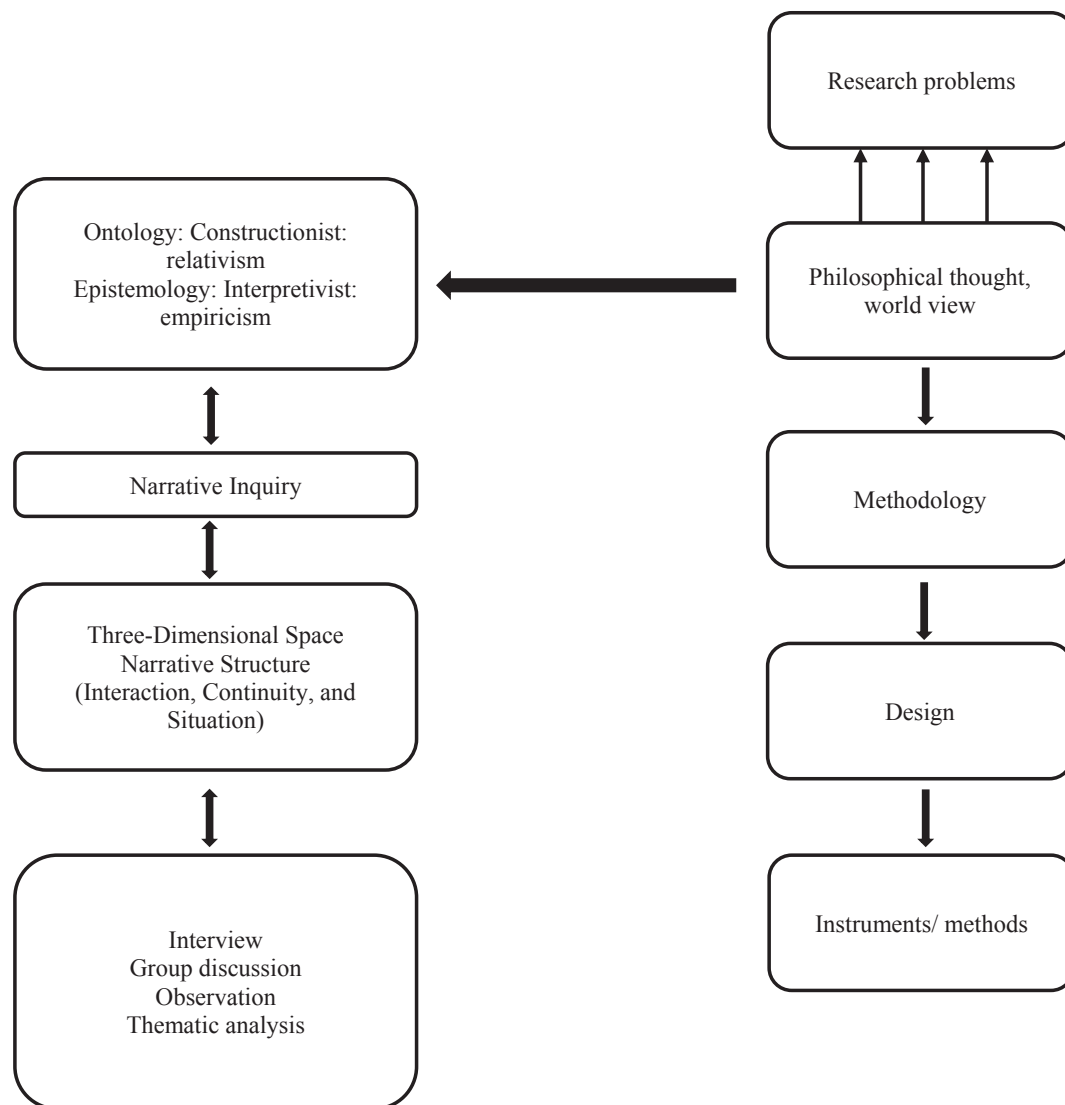
In the context of international education, narrative inquiry as a research methodology, when used with sensitivity and reflexivity,<sup>9</sup> could add a new dimension to international education research.<sup>5,6</sup>

The purpose of this article is to explore and interpret the 'ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), and methodology (how that knowledge may be gained)'<sup>10</sup> aspects of the constructivist view that shaped and defined my research, the 'Chinese nursing students at Australian universities: a narrative inquiry into their motivation, learning experience, and future career planning'.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the aim of this methodological article is to reflect on and extend the possibilities of narrative inquiry research by giving a voice to students as well as to expand the power of story within an international education context by sharing the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological considerations of narrative inquiry. My intention here is use the project as an example exploration of the issues I raise.

The underpinning research structure of the 'Chinese nursing students at Australian universities: A narrative inquiry into their motivation, learning experience, and future career planning' project is shown in Fig. 1, which is adapted from Tuli.<sup>10</sup>

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**Fig. 1.** The research structure of 'Chinese nursing students at Australian universities: a narrative inquiry into their motivation, learning experience, and future career planning' project.

Knowledge is created through social interactions within cultural settings.<sup>12–15</sup> The world is socially assembled, multifaceted, and constantly changing. To understand human values, beliefs, the meanings of social phenomena, and the complexity of the world, we need to understand cultural activities and experiences.<sup>10,16–19</sup> I am interested in understanding and unfolding the underlying structures and past experiences that affect the perceptions of individuals and groups.

To enhance teaching and learning for international students and thereby address their specific learning needs, it is important to understand their experiences and perspectives. An optimal way to achieve this is to let their voices be heard, letting them speak for and about themselves. Reality exists within the students, especially their perceptions, because truth and value making is socially constructed and people make their own meaning of social realities.<sup>15</sup>

By understanding the stories of Chinese nursing students' learning experiences at Australian universities, Australian educators may gain insight into how to approach teaching and learning more effectively. Specifically, nursing students' narrative accounts will enable Australian educators to understand this cohort of students better and thereby reconsider whether their taken-for-

granted knowledge as educators fits within the context of international education. Moreover, educators may become more cognizant of what they do not know about teaching and learning in international education.

## 2. Philosophical thought

### 2.1. Ontological considerations

Ontology refers to the nature of reality.<sup>10</sup> Since our origins, humans have been telling stories; narrative is central to human life, and our narrative instinct was built to tell stories and share experiences. As was articulated by Barthes and Duisit, 'Narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed, narrative starts the very history of mankind ... Like life itself, it is there, international, trans-historical, transcultural'.<sup>20</sup> Narrative allows us to comprehend, describe, and act within previous experiences; the story is how we make sense of the world.<sup>21,22</sup> Thus, we are interpretive beings, and storytelling is in our blood. When we seek to make sense of the stories we have lived, these processes can shape our lives in powerful ways. Our stories are created by connecting

events together over time; these events can shape the perceptions of our past as well as have implications for our present and future actions. By telling and retelling stories, we interact and respond to and with one another; we share and understand who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming. As Greene<sup>23</sup> describes 'some of us may like pure theory, theology, or philosophy, but all of us like stories. It's where we see the spirit best'.<sup>23</sup> For me, stories heal and soothe the body and spirit as well as provide hope and courage to explore and grow. The process of storytelling, a fundamental element in narrative inquiry, provides the opportunity for dialogue and reflection, both intertwined and cyclical.

In narrative inquiry, ontological questions<sup>12–14,24</sup> to be considered are as follows: What is true? What exists? What is real? What are the fundamental parts of the world and how they are related to each other? The purpose of these questions is to understand and describe the underlying structures that affect individuals' and groups' perceptions.<sup>14</sup>

A qualitative ontological perspective is underpinned by relativism.<sup>13,14</sup> Research in relativism involves searching for meaning in individuals' experiences such that relativism views reality as only existing within a context. Multiple perceptual constructions constitute reality. These realities are induced by experiences and social interactions; therefore, each person has his/her own reality. Relativism believes that realities are co-constructed; 'truths' are subjective, dynamic, and contextual, making knowledge contextual. Multiple, yet conflicting truths are still true and perceptions or truths may change with time.<sup>12–14,24</sup>

Relativism is an ontological perspective that leads to the constructivist paradigm of research.<sup>17,25</sup> Constructivists believe human beings construct meaning or reality based on interactions with their social environments. They believe reality is created in the mind of the observer; that is, we do not discover knowledge, we construct it. Therefore, it is possible to have multiple, socially constructed realities.

The primary ontological consideration in my research was to understand and describe the underlying structures that affect Chinese nursing students' learning experiences at Australian universities. The literature review<sup>6</sup> highlighted that there is a dearth of primary research on Chinese students studying in Australia. In particular, the learning experience of Chinese nursing students has neither been fully explored nor fully understood. Chinese nursing students' voices and narratives could challenge educational traditions, norms, and practice in an international education context. Teaching and learning could be improved if we capture these students' voices, as heard in their stories, and then reflect on, analyze and make sense of these experiences. This approach will enable nurse educators to learn about and understand the collective needs of students.

Rather than categorizing research data and viewing them from an objective stance, generalizing for efficiency or to develop 'laws', my research approach adopted the philosophical underpinnings of narrative inquiry, which acknowledges human experiences are dynamic and constantly in flux.<sup>26</sup> Stories could provide a primary means of understanding the pattern of an individual life and story 'makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear'.<sup>27</sup>

There is a growing interest in narrative inquiry for two reasons. One is a critique of the inherent strengths and weaknesses of conventional positivist research methods and another is a focus on the individual and the individual's construction of knowledge.<sup>28</sup> My research aimed to highlight the possibilities that narrative inquiry offers through the power of stories.

## 2.2. Epistemological considerations

Epistemology is the nature of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Stories are fundamental ways our brain organizes our experience of the world and

then processes and presents the complex information in manageable narrative forms so that we can understand events that have occurred. After all, it is much easier to remember a story than a random collection of facts. We tell stories so that we can know what is happening; we listen to stories so we can understand how people think, or have thought, helping to understand their experiences. Narrative is an organization, acting as one way of thinking, knowing, and communicating about the world, which helps us to make sense of our experience. This in turn, helps us understand much more about our own history, literature, and ourselves. Therefore, storytelling is connected to knowing and knowledge.<sup>20–22</sup>

The epistemology of narrative research understands the world as created, understood, and experienced by individuals or groups in their interactions with other people and the broader social context.<sup>16,18,19,22,29</sup> The nature of narrative inquiry is constructive and inductive; that is, it is concerned with encounters, the process, and the deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. It is less concerned with generalizability.<sup>30</sup> The role and function of narrative research is to make sense of and to understand the complexity of individual situations under research. To achieve this, it is important that the researcher builds a trusting relationship with participants to add depth and richness to the data.<sup>5</sup> The 'narrative researcher is in a dual role - in an intimate relationship with the participant and in a professionally responsible role in the scholarly community'.<sup>31</sup>

The epistemological questions to be considered<sup>10,16,18,19,22,29</sup> are as follows: How do we learn? What is knowledge? How do people get to know something? What is true knowledge? How may a belief be justified? How do we know that something is true? And, what is the relationship between the participants and the researcher?

Constructivism believes that researchers and participants are co-makers of findings. The research involves collaboration between the participants and researchers such that the research methods used are grounded on the interactive relationship between researchers and participants.<sup>5,30</sup>

Additionally, the epistemological view of empiricism posits that true knowledge is established in response to our senses. Experience and observations are important references when beliefs and claims are justified and proven.<sup>32</sup>

Empiricist John Locke believed that knowledge comes from experience.<sup>24</sup> He believed there are only two ways we can acquire knowledge, sensation (look, listen, and touch) and reflection.<sup>24,32</sup> We obtain information from our senses. We see, hear, touch, taste, and smell things. The other way we obtain information is through ideas, which Locke called reflection. An example for this claim is: How would you explain colors to a blind person who has never been able to see? Locke believed the truth is only produced through our sensation; truth has nothing to do with the thing itself. For example, think about color: When you see a color changes under different lighting, is the color really in the object itself, or does it have to do with the way we perceive color under different conditions when we receive it?

Dewey, Johnson, Geertz, Bateson, Czarniawska, Coles, and Polkinghore had tremendous influence on narrative inquiry.<sup>22</sup> The theoretical underpinning of narrative inquiry is 'telling a story about oneself involves telling a story about choice and action, which have integrally moral and ethical dimensions'.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, narrative inquiry aims to 'sign up many truths/narratives',<sup>33</sup> instead of finding one generalizable truth. The process of unfolding the story is thought to 'have the potential to transform the participants' experiences'.<sup>33</sup> This is further expressed by McMillan and Price: 'Narrative performances not only provide sites to represent and to deconstruct diverse and ever-changing experiences of identities

formation, but they are also potential spaces for democratic meaning making'.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of engaging numbers, statistical inference, and probability to provide a way of knowing and achieving reliability, 'narrative inquirers embrace the metaphoric quality of language and the connectedness and coherence of the extended discourse of the story entwined with exposition, argumentation, and description'.<sup>31</sup> Narrative inquiry desires to understand the human world instead of insisting on a single kind of truth.<sup>35</sup> The conception of validity and reliability in non-qualitative research relies on statistics that can prevent other ways of knowing. Rather than favoring the power of prediction and generalization, narrative inquiry aims at 'understanding the complexity of the individual'.<sup>31</sup> The process of telling, unfolding, and retelling the story itself is 'primarily an artful endeavor, it should be interpreted as an art form'.<sup>27</sup> van Manen beautifully settled this as such: 'After all, it is lived experience that we are attempting to describe, and lived experience cannot be captured in conceptual abstractions'.<sup>36</sup>

With respect to the voices and experiences portrayed in my research, a narrative inquiry helped to extend our present understanding of the common everyday learning experiences of international students in an Australian nursing program. Nurse educators may reconsider whether their taken-for-granted knowledge fits within the context of international education and may become more cognizant of what they do not know about the teaching and learning of international students. These reconsiderations and awareness could shift their teaching and learning approach to new or different understandings. While listening to and reading the students' narratives, I, as a researcher, interacted with the meaning and focused on what the students experienced rather than what I knew, which might be concealed rather than apparent.<sup>37</sup>

In narrative inquiry, both participants and researchers came to the interview with considerations of their own pasts and futures. The focus of the research may shift as participants concentrate on what is important to them. By trying to understand the narratives we create, we are better able to understand ourselves, our own literature, and our own history. In my research, as a methodology, narrative inquiry considers the participants as authors of their stories instead of the objects of research.<sup>10,31,38</sup> This highlights an empowering and enabling process for participants to make meaning of their own truths, value their own creation of knowledge through the process, and convey their interpretations freely, which they may not have had the opportunity to achieve with an outsider of the research.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Methodological considerations

Narrative inquiry was first used by Connelly and Clandinin<sup>39</sup> as a methodology to describe teachers' personal stories. Through stories, narrative researchers look for ways to understand and represent the lived experiences of participants.<sup>22,40</sup> This is supported by Lemley and Mitchell:

A burgeoning interest in narrative inquiry underscores how stories can explain experiences as well as serve as a catalyst for personal and social change in the lives of the participants telling the stories and in the lives of their audience.<sup>26</sup>

Narrative approaches permit a rich portrayal of individuals' experiences and search for the meaning that individuals tied to their experiences in a specific context. Narrative inquiry amplifies voices that would have been silenced<sup>41</sup> and employs narrative as a way of communicating reality.<sup>42</sup>

My research aimed to reveal the experience of Chinese nursing students studying at Australian universities to honor and authenticate the voices of international nursing students from the

mainland of China. Through the shared stories they possess, we have gained a deeper understanding of their experiences in Australia and how they strived for social and cultural change for themselves and others. Hearing stories, interpreting the field texts of human experience, discovering and understanding the lived experience of Chinese nursing students studying at Australian universities was achieved through narrative inquiry. What was then produced is an expanded understanding of human existence.<sup>43</sup>

Broadly, my research investigated 'the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon'.<sup>44</sup> The research employed narrative inquiry as the methodology because there is a 'long overdue recognition of the sound of silence, a sudden painful awareness of the extent to which human voices have been systematically excluded from the kinds of traditional research texts'.<sup>45</sup> It was concerned with what is essentially irreplaceable because 'As persons, we are incomparable, unclassifiable, uncountable, and irreplaceable'<sup>46</sup> cited in.<sup>36</sup> This approach allowed the participants to voice their experiences without constraints.

I have used narrative inquiry to understand international nursing students' experience and their interactions with others as an alternative way of knowing that involves curiosity, interest, caring, and passion.<sup>35</sup> The living and thinking of the research was grounded within Clandinin and Connelly's<sup>22</sup> understandings of experience as the central aspect of narrative inquiry. They wrote that:

Because experience is our concern, we find ourselves trying to avoid strategies, tactics, rules, and techniques that flow out of theoretical considerations of narrative. Our guiding principle in an inquiry is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads.<sup>22</sup>

Engaged with a narrative inquiry viewpoint and using field texts from multiple sources, the research intended to describe and interpret the rich narrative accounts of Chinese international nursing students' learning experiences in Australia. I began from a not-knowing, inquisitive position and focused on questions that helped the storytellers address their senses, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and ideas in the events they experienced. This illuminated portraits that captured vivid representations of their lived experiences.<sup>47</sup>

The intent of my research was to seek how international students make meaning of their experiences with the understanding that those meanings were various and context dependent. By using a narratives format to present findings, I gained rich layers of information and understanding about the particularities of this group of nursing students from their point of view. This knowledge has given me, as the researcher, as well as readers and nursing educators insights to recognize what parts of these stories educators could apply to their own practice in education.

Narrative research, arts-based inquiry, is simply an elegant and exceptionally useful way to uncover the nuances and details of lived experience. Narrative inquiry is not simply storytelling. Instead, it is a method of inquiry that uses storytelling to uncover nuances and enrich the analyses we can perform; also, narrating the findings can lead to fresh insights and understandings.

### 4. Design

Clandinin and Connelly's expansion of narrative inquiry as a research methodology is deeply shaped by philosopher John Dewey.<sup>48–50</sup> As a philosopher of experience, Dewey, based his principles on interaction and continuity, theorized the key terms *personal*, *social*, *temporal*, and *situation* to describe the characteristics of experience. For him, to research life and education was to research experience, because education, life, and experience are one and the same. The research of experience is central to narrative inquiry.<sup>49,50</sup>

The educational theorist John Dewey's<sup>48–50</sup> three-dimensional space narrative structure approach (interaction, continuity and situation) to find meaning in research is central to his philosophy of experience in a personal and social context. This approach posits that to understand people, such as international nursing students from mainland China, we need to examine not only their personal experiences but also their interactions with other people. Dewey's three-dimensional approach had a major influence on my research and the practice of narrative inquiry in many disciplines, such as education. The sense of fluidity in storytelling, moving from the past to the present or into the future, is at the heart of Dewey's theory of experience in the field of education.

Based on Dewey's theories, Clandinin and Connelly<sup>22</sup> advanced the three aspects of this narrative approach, *personal* and *social* (interaction); *past*, *present*, and *future* (continuity); and *place* (situation), as shown on Table 1:

As detailed in Table 1, interaction includes both personal and social characteristics. Using this framework, the researcher needs to focus on questions and analyze transcripts or field texts of the participant's personal experiences along with his/her interactions with other people in relation to the story. These other people could have different purposes, interpretations, and opinions on the topic of the story, which will also inform the analysis.<sup>22</sup>

Continuity or temporality is essential to narrative research. To support this, when analyzing the transcript or field texts for information, the researcher needs to consider the participants' past and present experiences, as illustrated in the description of actions of an event, and those actions they describe as likely to occur in the future.<sup>22</sup>

The situation or place also needs to be analyzed in a transcript or field texts. To do this, the researcher needs to search in the participant's landscape for specific situations that give meaning to the narrative, such as the participant's physical places or the sequence of the places and the impact these places have on shaping their experiences.<sup>22</sup>

As for my participants, I was once an international nursing student from mainland China. When I was working within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, my own experiences of being an international student would have been relevant to their narratives. As Clandinin and Connelly<sup>22</sup> state 'it is impossible ... as a researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self'. Hence, due to my experiences as an international student, I worked within the 'space' (past, present, and future) of my participants and myself. In doing so, my own unknown stories came to light as much as those of my participants.

I have seen myself in the midst of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space; I have seen myself in the middle of my participants' stories and my own stories. My background gave me entry to their world and the reverse was true such that my voice was part of the story.

In the study, it was important that I was transparent about my interests to ensure a trusting relationship with the participants. It

was also important that I provided a full explanation of the research before starting so that participants would not feel surprised or deceived later, if or when they may have read the published report.

As guided by Clandinin<sup>31</sup>: 'this interpersonal dynamic requires that we be good containers, that we can listen empathically but nonjudgmentally, feeling from within the participant's emotional space rather than from the locus of our own idiosyncratic reactions'.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. Methods

My research gathered narratives via field texts from multiple sources. The field texts (usually called data) were created by participants and the researcher to present aspects of experience. Because the way that researchers enter the inquiry field influences what they intend to discover, the data collection process is selective and the field texts are shaped by the selective interest or disinterest of the researcher and/or participants. Therefore, composing field texts was an interpretive and contextualized process of the text construction.<sup>22</sup>

### 5.1. Field texts

Engaged with a narrative inquiry viewpoint, I collected field texts from multiple sources, including individual in-depth interviews, group discussions, observations, and conversations.

Factors affecting Chinese international students' communication challenges, such as English language barriers,<sup>6</sup> were alleviated by conducting interviews with students in their preferred language (Mandarin and/or English). All participants were given pseudonyms.

Studies acknowledged that culture determines communication behaviors.<sup>27,45,51</sup> Confucianism has been deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Having been exposed to the value of Confucianism, Chinese students often present with certain characteristics in their communication patterns, such as respectfulness toward teachers; saving face, indirect behaviors in verbal communication, gestures and facial expressions, and quietness and silence.<sup>51</sup> At this cultural level, my ethnic background (Chinese), my personal experiences as an international student, and my role as a nurse educator helped participants to be open and share their views and experiences.

### 5.2. Interviews

As explained by Chou, Tu, and Huang: 'In a life story interview, the interviewee is a storyteller, the narrator of the story being told, whereas the interviewer is a guide, or director, in this process. The two together are collaborators, composing and constructing a story the teller can be pleased with'.<sup>27</sup>

The participants hold the power of knowledge because they are the only experts on their lived experience. During the interview

**Table 1**  
The three-dimensional space narrative structure.

| Interaction  |   | Continuity  |  |   | Situation/place  |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|
| Personal   | Social  | Past  | Present  | Future  |  |
| Look inward to internal conditions, feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions | Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view | Look backward to remembered experiences, feelings, and stories from earlier times | Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event | Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines | Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view |

Note: Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000)



process, as the researcher, what I had to offer to my participants was respectful and interested attention instead of my views. Via the practice sessions I had undertaken prior to conducting interviews, I also managed to minimize my personal biases and culturally based assumptions. I remained open-minded to others' experiences. I conducted individual personal interviews, which took between 2 and 3 h each. I met participants at venues, such as public areas; offices; cafés at university; or wherever was most convenient, quiet and comfortable for them. These interviews were in-depth and mostly involved the participant talking about his/her experience in Australia. An interview guide and interview probes were used as conversation starters and were only necessary during the interview. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by me.

I asked questions, such as 'What is your learning experience in Australia?' as an open-ended question that was a 'way of initiating a research conversation that reflects dynamic and organic, dialogical processes'.<sup>47</sup> As cited in Chou et al.,<sup>27</sup> Douglas (1985) suggested:

The most helpful questions would be those that guide the storyteller toward the feeling level. This is where the interview becomes active, and interactive, at its best, and where the most meaning in a person's life comes from. Getting to a deeper level of reality can be achieved in various ways, from specific types of questions to comments to sympathetic and responsive listening. The more interest, empathy, caring, warmth, and acceptance that can be shown, the deeper the response level will be. It is when these qualities are present in the interview that it can become a creative search for mutual understanding.

### 5.3. Group discussions

I also conducted a focus-group interview that gave the participants opportunities to reflect on their learning experiences in Australia while listening to other participants' stories. My participants developed comfortable friendships with each other due to the sharing of their interesting experiences prior to and during their time in Australia. The topics they shared included, but were not limited to, learning subjects, graduate attributes, food and eating habits, transportation, language, social life, happiness, friendship, dreams and ambitions. The interview took two hours and was audio recorded and then transcribed by me.

### 5.4. Conversation

I also encouraged my participants to communicate with me regularly via emails or any other media to update their experiences. I also sent the regular group phone messages asking how they were doing and encouraging continual communication with me.

### 5.5. Data analysis

Data analysis was a process of making sense out of the field texts. Based on the essences that were encoded inside of the stories and, expanded outward, the analysis was amplified to the fullest

possible extent of resonance while considering multiple aspects, such as the entire substance of the field texts. I considered the nuances of tone, pauses, and breaks in the conversation; the observation of participants' interactions with other people and their social cultural discourse; their past and present experiences; their physical places; and their dreams and ambitions.<sup>22</sup>

In analysis, the research employed both narrative representations and thematic analyzing approaches.

### 5.6. Thematic analysis

In using thematic analyses, I analyzed field texts to 'arrive at themes that illuminate the content and hold within or cross stories'.<sup>52</sup> Thematic analysis is transparent, adaptable and rich in detail to translate different aspects of the research focus. It consists of specific guidelines for 'identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data and describing data in rich details'.<sup>53</sup>

In my research, the process of thematic analysis followed the six phases (Table 2) outlined by Braun and Clarke.<sup>53</sup>

#### 5.6.1. Phase one

Phase one involved attentive listening, transcribing, and becoming familiar with the raw data. As the researcher, I was the main instrument in the research. Once I had listened to the audio recording of the interviews several times, I completed the English transcriptions verbatim. For those interviews conducted in Mandarin, I first translated them into English and then employed a professional Mandarin and English speaker to check the accuracy of the translations. Participants also checked the interpretation of the gathered transcripts. This check is a major step in narrative inquiry to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the stories told by participants.

This task took time and patience, but it was a valuable experience. It permitted me to be deeply engaged with the field texts and enhanced my understanding for further exploration. I also 'checked the transcriptions back against the original audio recording for accuracy frequently to acquire authentic information from the interviews'.<sup>53</sup>

#### 5.6.2. Phase two

In exploring the field texts, I began the coding processes, which involved attending to field texts in detail and then extracting the essence to capture tentative ideas for codes, issues and visible themes.<sup>54,55</sup> During this process, I gave equal attention to all field texts. In retaining accounts from the field texts, I coded as many potential themes as possible. Several meaningful sections were coded more than once to acquire a comprehensive thematic map.<sup>16,53</sup>

#### 5.6.3. Phase three

In this phase, to identify themes, I collected, combined, refined, and incorporated the codes into potential themes and sub themes relevant to the research questions and literature. In this ongoing

**Table 2**  
Phases of thematic analysis.

| Phase                         | Description of the process  |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. Familiarising with data    | Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas  |
| 2. Generating initial codes   | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.             |
| 3. Searching for themes       | Gathering data and collating codes into potential themes.   |
| 4. Reviewing themes           | Checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.                   |
| 5. Defining and naming themes | Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and generate clear definitions and names for each theme.  |
| 6. Producing the report       | Selection of vivid, compelling text extracts relating to the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report. |

Note: Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 35)

coding and recoding process, the codes and themes were developed into further refined levels to assist in explaining the thematic relationships in an in-depth analysis within and across the topics.<sup>16</sup> I also grouped the information that might need to be discarded in the next reviewing phase.

#### 5.6.4. Phase four

In this phase, themes were reviewed and refined to warrant their adequacy, authenticity and trustworthiness. The thematic map generated in this phase presented links and relationships between themes. I checked the themes with the original data and re-examined the thematic map to ascertain the robustness and uniformity of themes.

#### 5.6.5. Phase five

In this phase, with a detailed analysis, I defined and further refined the themes to ascertain the essence of each one that was relevant to the research questions. Following careful consideration, a succinct name was assigned to each theme.

Once thematic categories were created, the data were imported to a software program Nvivo, a popular and highly recognized software program for information management, reporting, and representation. It allows the researcher to categorize and store information as well as create textural and structural presentations, allowing for management of the information in an effective way. This allowed for rearranging and restructuring the themes to capture complex relationships and patterns.

#### 5.6.6. Phase six

This phase involved writing a scholarly report to interpret the complex information of the field texts and to present the findings in a succinct and coherent account.

#### 5.7. Narrative representations

I re-wrote each theme using a three-dimensional approach, and represented the themes in a narrative format. I categorized each story in the sections, parts, or chapters of my report that elaborated on an essential aspect of the phenomenon of the research. Each heading, named the theme that is being described in that section, and complex phenomena were further subdivided in subsuming themes.<sup>22,36,56,57</sup>

In narrative representations, I joined the themes by representing them in the style of narratives/stories. The created stories were narrative representations, an explanation of the phenomenon in my research. As Clandinin<sup>31</sup> explained, 'the creation of the story itself may be considered an act of narrative analysis'.

When I re-wrote my participants' stories in such a way to sustain the original and express coherence through time, my narrative inquiry was a lived experience. I was not only collecting field texts, I was presenting the shared stories in a way that preserved the integrity of the told experiences. Clandinin and Connelly<sup>22</sup> emphasized that the research text in narrative inquiry should be an 'adequate' and 'authentic' narrative. I respected and honored my participants' voices and stories as a narrative researcher. I was also aware of Bruner's<sup>58</sup> comments regarding the relationship of memory and imagination. He says, 'Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow ... The human mind ... can never fully and faithfully recapture the past, but neither can it escape from it'.<sup>58</sup>

Instead of a frequency count or coding of selected terms as sometimes occurs in 'thematic analysis', interpreting the meaning of the lived experience is a process of insightful discovery, as 'the notion of theme may best be understood by explaining its methodological and philosophical character'.<sup>36</sup> I listened to audio

recordings multiple times, read and re-read transcriptions and other field texts multiple times, and analyzed and tried to understand the meaning of the field texts according to the research questions. I then collaborated with the participants by checking and negotiating the meaning of their stories. Drafts of each participant's story were sent to each participant for verification and feedback. When the verification and feedback were collected, the stories were revised according to their suggestions and comments. This member-checking phase of interpretation was the core of my research because it gave direct access to the participants' interpretation of their stories. I marked notes, categorized the data by themes using thematic analysis procedures, and then re-storied using the three-dimensional approach that most accurately conveyed the research participants' meaning.<sup>40</sup> The participants' quotes were present within the findings because the participant voice is central to the telling. Lemley and Mitchell<sup>26</sup> suggested 'the richness of detail in the participants' quotations conveys identity more powerfully than any interpretation. Placing the participant as the primary teller allows the reader to interpret the participant's story instead of a researcher's interpretation'.<sup>26</sup>

In the process of telling and retelling stories, in the metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space of narrative inquiry, my participants and I moved backward and forward, inward and outward through time, from the personal to the social, shifting situation and place. Within this three-dimensional inquiry space, as the contents of our stories were woven alongside each other, continuity and resonance shaped and reshaped our knowledge and understanding of our experiences.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has summarized the key philosophical, theoretical and methodological perspectives that underpinned the 'Chinese nursing students at Australian universities: a narrative inquiry into their motivation, learning experience, and future career planning' research project as well as the issues around narrative inquiry and voice.

To enhance teaching and learning for international students and meet their specific needs, it is important to understand their experiences and perceptions. There is no better way to achieve this than to let their voices be heard, letting them speak for and about themselves. Reality exists within the students, namely in their perceptions. When used with sensitivity and reflexivity, through the power of stories, narrative inquiry as a research methodology offers a new dimension in international education research. Narrative inquiry gives a voice to students, enabling educators to hear and understand their collective needs, which provides insights into how teaching and learning experiences can be improved for them.

## Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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