

Chapter 2

Narratives of Research Design

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ABSTRACT

The authors explain the design of a survey that provides a new technology for physical therapy clinicians to use while treating patients. The survey dovetails knowledge from the fields of writing and medicine to provide a resource for patient education. In a medical clinic, a patient is asked to numerically rate how he or she feels; however, the new survey discussed not only looks at how patients feel numerically, but also how they subjectively feel using writing. This survey is a new tool that encourages communication between patients and clinicians, makes patients more aware of what they are feeling when they write down responses, and helps clinicians adjust treatment plans when they read what the patients write. Through writing, patients become accountable for their actions and increase their education. The authors focus on the connections among writing, positive outlook, and healing, as well as the lessons they learned from working together and discussing their fields of expertise.

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INTRODUCTION TO A SYNERGISTIC COLLABORATION

When writing meets medicine, exciting possibilities occur in the fields of patient education and teacher education. Dr. Jennifer Bird is an English professor and Dr. Eric Wanner is a physical therapist. We learned a significant amount about each other's fields through a research and writing project we designed together. Patients at Eric's physical therapy clinic used strategies from Jen's writing classroom as we studied how writing about emotions affected physical health. We want our research and writing to continue to help the patients at Eric's clinic and the students in Jen's classroom.

Change takes courage. Most people live their lives never leaving their comfort zones. Johnson (2005) observes, "teaching superbly is like running a marathon by yourself in the dark. Few people even notice what you're doing, and those who notice don't pay much attention – but their oblivion doesn't slow you down. You still enjoy the thrill and satisfaction of finishing the race, and you are definitely a winner" (p. 5). But education doesn't have to be each teacher alone in a classroom, especially with technology that makes collaboration only an email away. Teachers tend to stay in their own classrooms; every once in a while they might venture down the hall to have a conversation with a colleague, but then they lock themselves back in the world of literary criticism. People often choose the safe route or the path of least resistance with their lives and with their health, even with new information, technology, and resources that could make their lives easier. At first glance it may seem unlikely that an English professor and a physical therapist would want to work together to create positive change in the lives of patients and students. Despite our divergent backgrounds, both of us share passion for research and compassion for people. We used this common ground to learn from each other and find trends between emotional writing and physical healing.

Each person has a story. Eben Alexander and Hilary Tindle are both medical doctors who advocate awareness of thoughts and feelings. Alexander (2012), a neurosurgeon, believes, "true thought is pre-physical. This is the thinking-behind-the-thinking responsible for all the genuinely consequential choices we make in the world" (p. 84). He elaborates that it is "the subliminal thinking that is always there, when we really need it, but that we have all too often lost the ability both to access and to believe in" (pp. 84-85). Tindle (2013), a doctor of internal medicine, also refers to mindfulness and explains, "this is called the triangle of awareness, in which we remain mentally centered in

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