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Learning and assessing competence in reflective practice: Student evaluation of the relative value of aspects of an integrated, interactive reflective practice syllabus



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Summary Although the literature is rich with information on the value of reflective practice, there is a paucity of information on techniques to assess whether professionals have learnt this essential skill. In this article, we describe the introduction and evaluation of an innovative, integrated, interactive approach to teaching and assessing competence in reflective practice using an online self directed learning package.

As part of a new staff start up scholarship of teaching and learning grant project in an Australian university, we converted an existing one day reflective practice workshop for undergraduate nursing students to an interactive online learning package that could also be applicable for students in other health professions. The assessment of learning in the package was integrated with overall clinical competence assessment using Tanner's Clinical Judgement Model and Lasater's Clinical Judgement rubric to enable immediate online feedback to students on their progress.

In this article, we focus on those aspects of the package that students evaluated as most beneficial to their learning, specifically immediate feedback by lecturers guided by Lasater's rubric.

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Introduction

Professionals such as teachers, nurses, midwives, and medical and allied health practitioners encounter challenges every day that require the evaluation of information from multiple sources and the translation of that knowledge into action. Educators in professional programmes producing these practitioners must utilise pedagogical approaches that prepare graduates with knowledge, values and skills to meet these challenges (McGuire, Lay, & Peters, 2009). Reflection is one strategy which is used extensively in professional education to facilitate learning and professional development and is a critical skill for functioning effectively in diverse and complex practice situations (Asselin, 2011; Lasater & Nielsen, 2009; McGuire et al., 2009; Nielsen, Stragnell, & Jester, 2007; Tanner, 2006; Wald, Borkan, Scott Taylor, Anthony, & Reis, 2012). However, the pedagogy of teaching and assessing reflection is currently inadequately delineated to provide clear guidance for educators or learners (Brookfield, 1995; Fisher, 2003; McGuire et al., 2009). Additionally, although there is an abundance of literature across professions on the value of reflective practice, there are few concrete methods described and validated that facilitate rigorous assessment of competence in reflective practice (Levett-Jones, 2007).

Approaches to teaching and assessing reflective practice

Universities aim to equip graduates with broad, generic, transferable skills in preparation for embarking upon a path of lifelong learning and self reflection (Cowan, Norman, & Coopamah, 2005). One strategy widely used for this purpose is to teach reflection through reflective writing (Asselin, 2011; Levett-Jones, 2007; Wald et al., 2012). According to McGuire et al. (2009), reflective writing has the potential to facilitate both self-reflection and integration of theory with practice. Dilliard et al. (2009) further assert that purposeful reflection can help to bridge the theory-practice gap. It has also been reported to be consistent with adult learning theory in that it promotes a deeper understanding of issues, and the development of judgement and skill through re-evaluating the relevance of a particular intervention or event (Cassidy, 2009; Cirocco, 2007; Freshwater and Stickle, 2004; Stockhausen, 2006).

Although reflective writing has long been regarded as effective in promoting critical thinking and reflective practice (McGuire et al., 2009; Nielsen et al., 2007), professional educators are divided about how to best evaluate students' learning of reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995; Fisher, 2003; Wald et al., 2012). Problems associated with the current method of teaching and assessing reflective practice through reflective writing centre on its lack of focus, the effects of variable levels of skill in writing, students' incomplete understanding of the relevance of 'reflection' and, in some instances, its overuse (Fisher, 2003; Wald et al., 2012). In this article we describe the evolution and outcomes of an integrated approach to teaching and assessing reflection designed to assist in reducing the lack of students' understanding about the relevance of reflection

and to assist with the development of the skill of writing reflectively whilst also maintaining rigour.

Methods

This study was part of a larger project intended to implement interprofessional learning of reflection for health science students. This article reports on the initial stage of the project, namely the evaluation, by participating students, of the implementation of the integration of an interactive learning package with online assessment of reflection as part of overall assessment of clinical competence.

The participants were students in their first semester in an Australian undergraduate nursing program. This undergraduate nursing program involved two consecutive sessions per week in the clinical setting and the online learning modules were designed to complement that clinical exposure.

Development of the modules and tools

In the first phase of the project, prior to the development of the online package, written self directed learning modules were developed by a small team of experienced lecturers who had an interest in inculcating reflective skills in students. The team reviewed the existing content from the workshop format, discussed key features of reflection and goals of the modules, and reviewed the literature for current evidence on teaching and assessing reflection and clinical reasoning. The five modules were then divided amongst the group and written individually. The project leader, who was also the Clinical Practice Course Coordinator for Nursing, then reviewed the modules to ensure there was no duplication of content and that all materials were written in a consistent language, and in accordance with best practice. The modules were then peer reviewed by the Undergraduate Program Convener and the Clinical Practice Course Coordinator for Midwifery and final updates completed by the project leader.

Once written, the project leader then converted the modules to an online format including videoed vignettes and activities for each module with the assistance of the university's eLearning designer. The completed modules contained exemplars of reflection and highlighted that reflection takes many forms. Some of the vignettes recounted stories from experienced practitioners in a variety of fields of nursing and explored why they valued reflection and what it meant to them as practitioners in their everyday practice. Activities were integrated throughout the modules to illustrate different aspects of clinical reasoning. One module asked the students to consider and blog about a clinical video and respond with feedback to two students' blogs as part of a peer review. These activities were staged so that students could develop skills as they worked through each module with the final module being a blog of one of their own experiences in the clinical setting. The modules were uploaded into the students' familiar Blackboard learning system site enabling easy access.

As their formative assessment, the students reflected on the blogged experience utilising the skills they had developed throughout the modules, the Australian National

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