



Contemporary Issues

Development of a group work assessment pedagogy using constructive alignment theory



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore group work assessment underpinned by constructive alignment theory to develop a new assessment pedagogy. A review was undertaken of an existing module 'Mental Health Nursing 1', with student nurses participating in the BSc (Hons) Nursing Programme. Constructive alignment theory requires teachers to adopt a deep approach to learning where module learning outcomes are aligned with the teaching environment and modes of assessment. As the module progressed, reviewing the Mental Health Nursing 1 module became an excellent opportunity to begin to understand how constructive alignment theory can inform a group work assessment pedagogy. Working using a constructively aligned assessment process became a valuable learning experience for the module leader whilst at the same time revealed a gap in the research around the impact of constructively aligned teaching and group work assessment.

1. Introduction

Assessment of student learners aims to establish what has been learnt (Biggs, 2003; Gibbs, 2009; Bloxham, 2015). Comprehensive assessment of student nurses' theoretical and practical learning is fundamental to the development of professionals to meet their registration requirements of their regulatory body, in the UK, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Constructivism is a learning theory about how people acquire knowledge and learn. Constructivist learning requires the learner to be actively involved in making meaning and construction of knowledge during learning as opposed to direct instruction from the teacher.

The aim of constructivist learning theory is to promote comprehensive learning and teaching. Biggs and Tang (2007) describe constructive learning as deep learning, where the student moves beyond learning facts and develops a sense of the larger picture. Biggs and Tang (2007) stated the essential elements of a learning programme include the curriculum teaching methods, assessment procedures, creation of a positive and inclusive learning environment and incorporation of the Higher Education Institute (HEI) graduate attributes, rules and procedures. By aligning these elements, deep learning can occur, but the use of constructivist learning theory is required in order to establish the elements being aligned. The use of aligned teaching design alongside constructivism led to the term of constructive alignment theory (Biggs and Tang, 2007).

Fundamental to successful learning is selection of assessment methodology. Bloxham (2015) concluded that assessment methodology should reflect diversity of learning styles, should guide learning, and result in assignment of a quality assured grade which reaches the HEI's academic standards. Assessment methods should be directly related to the module learning outcomes, should encourage development of academic skills, and support development of vocational competencies.

This paper will examine how one HEI combined group work pedagogy, assessment and constructive alignment theory to review the Mental Health Nursing 1 module as part of the BSc (Hons) Nursing programme. The two units of assessment for this module were a group work presentation and completion of an individual reflective online log about learning gained from the module. Initially, there was a lack of consensus amongst teaching staff regarding the most comprehensive and fair way in which to assess group work, and assess whether learning outcomes had been achieved, however the theory of constructive alignment was adopted to adapt the assessment process to include all views and incorporate individual, group and team working skills.

This paper aims to critically discuss constructive alignment theory paying particular attention to the assessment of group work and presents a pedagogical group work assessment underpinned by constructive alignment theory.

2. Assessment of Group Work

The assessment of group work has been widely debated in educational literature (Gibbs, 2009). Issues include the challenges of delivering fairness, consistency and reliability; in brief, should assessors assign a single summative grade to all group members or should individual achievement within the group context be recognised. Research suggests that student nurses have preferences regarding group work assessment.

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Smith and Rogers (2014) found that student nurses believed that group work assessment was less representative of individual input than individual assessment; could penalise 'good' students; and should only be used as a form of assessment if it is the best way to assess learning outcomes.

Differing views exist in the literature as to the most effective way in which to grade assessment of group work and group work assessments. Allocation of a single group mark has been associated with freeloading; loss of potential individual learning benefits; and unfairness. In a study by Smith and Rogers (2014) 74% of students agreed that assessing individual members' contributions to group assessment was fairer than allocating a group mark, making the point that summative assessment is only valid when students are individually graded for their contributions. However these arguments failed to acknowledge the importance of developing team working and softer skills.

Conversely, the awarding of a group grade could be preferable to individual grading due to the enhancement of learning opportunities through group presentation outweighing student criticism of group grades. Gibbs (2009) recommended the use of a mixed method approach to group assessment and went on to suggest a grading strategy incorporating limited emphasis on group work by assessment of the outcome of group work alongside individually marked assignments.

Biggs (2003) found that constructive alignment led to deep learning, development of critical thinking skills and improved performance. Group work assessment enhanced the learning of students who did less well using traditional assessment methods. Overwhelmingly, current literature suggests that group work assessment is advantageous in preparing students for practice, prepares students in developing life-long learning approaches and promotes responsibility for one's own learning required of a registered nurse.

2.1. Methodology of Assessments

Most assessment in HEIs has a summative function which demonstrates the extent of a learner's success in meeting course requirements and contributes to their final mark. Formative assessment provides ongoing feedback in order to improve throughout a period of learning. In addition, Bloxham (2015) found the use of formative assessment can support students to reflect upon what they have learnt and enhance team working skills.

Bloxham (2015) suggested that formative assessment should not be contaminated by summative purposes. As the reflective online log assessment within this module attracts a summative grade, students could be reluctant to admit they do not understand something or ask for help. Alternatively, reflective accounts encourage students to respond to formative assessment in a spirit of collaborative partnership. Indeed, the fact that the reflections count towards the summative assessment may enhance engagement and motivate the student to ask more questions and seek additional support.

Although formative assessment more closely reflects the HEI's principles, in order to certify student achievement, the validity of summative assessments are important. The assessment task therefore must demonstrate intrinsic validity by assessing that the learning outcomes have been achieved for the module, whilst at the same time ensure students build upon feedback during learning (Bloxham, 2015). Therefore, the final grade must reflect the learning journey and the quality and content of the overall submissions, thus allowing for a student who struggles with the reflective element in the beginning to achieve a higher mark as their learning emerges.

2.2. Reflection and Assessment

The inclusion of reflection in assessment can enhance professional development. Reflection could be considered a strategy which integrates theory into practice, requiring students to analyse and evaluate their learning experiences therefore linking learning outcomes with the assessment strategy (Langley and Brown, 2010).

Reflection can benefit students personally by helping students identify their own strengths and limitations. Langley and Brown (2010) found reflective logs supported students constructed meaning of learnt material and experience; clarified opinions, explored beliefs and feelings; developed change agents; and equipped students for real world practice.

However, reflection does have limitations. Preparation of, and the formative feedback involved in reflective logs, is time consuming (Langley and Brown, 2010). In addition, being open in reflections requires students to trust the teacher. Students may be inhibited in their reflections and only include content which they believe would be acceptable, thus limiting the full benefits of the reflective process. The use of constructive alignment alongside reflective journals may limit the extent of learning. Therefore, there is a need for clear guidance, reassurance and confidence-building to be incorporated into instructions.

There is a paucity of guidance about assessment of reflection. The nursing literature offers insight into issues of reflection but no solutions. This compounds the difficulty of separating student knowledge and the ability to reflect upon it. Langley and Brown (2010) call for additional research to determine the impact of reflective journaling on teaching strategies of future educators.

3. Learning Theory and Constructive Alignment Theory

HEIs require students to think critically and graduate with life skills which enhance their employability. In order to achieve both, there is a need for clear links between outcomes and approaches to teaching as to how to incorporate graduate attributes into the assessment process. Recent literature suggests placing emphasis upon a student-learning focussed approach can bridge the gap between student knowledge, understanding and graduate attributes. Achievement requires teachers to move from focussing on the content of the syllabus to critically reflecting on how students learn and adjusting teaching to meet the learning outcomes accordingly (Gibbs, 2009).

Constructivist learning theory acknowledges the need to link new subject knowledge to existing concepts and experiences of the learner. Learning not only involves acquisition of new information, but involves changing students' views and comprehension of existing knowledge. Students' experiences and views need to be understood by the teacher in order to build upon them or challenge the way in which the student is thinking. If this change does not occur, learning may be disjointed. In order to achieve deeper learning, a teaching theory linking teaching, students and subject content through an overarching system is required. Teaching should be collaborative in nature to ensure learners change their understanding and involve discovery of student misunderstandings, interventions to change them and creation of a context of learning which encourages active engagement with the subject matter. The teacher focusses on the key issues that represent critical barriers to student learning, the content to be taught and student problems with learning direct the methods used. Theory three as described by Ramsden (2006) incorporates a deeper learning approach, continual improvement of skills and multiple teaching techniques to encourage learning.

Biggs (2003) argued that as well as developing a learning programme based upon constructivist teaching theory, that teachers needed to develop a constructively aligned curriculum where learning outcomes are aligned with the teaching environment and modes of assessment. The teacher must

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