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Original Article

Investigation of nursing students' knowledge of and attitudes about problem-based learning

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To investigate nursing students' knowledge of and attitudes about problem-based learning (PBL).**Methods:** A total of 1200 students were surveyed at eight nursing colleges in Hunan Province.**Results:** In all, 1037 valid questionnaires were returned, for an effective return rate of 86.4%. Some 54.4% of the students learned that PBL was a pedagogical method from teachers, and 27.8% of the students had participated in PBL courses. Almost all of students (97.6%) were interested in PBL, and 66.7% of survey participants believed that students who were not good at solving problems would have difficulty in PBL courses.**Conclusion:** Nursing educators should guide students to adapt to new learning approaches, and encourage students to participate in the teaching reform to promote students' autonomous learning ability, innovation ability, and comprehensive ability.

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1. Introduction

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a teacher-guided, student-centered, pedagogical method that is based on independent learning and problem solving by students. PBL stresses mobilizing the motivation of students to find their own solutions to problems [1]. Higher education of nursing shoulders a

great historical mission to foster high-quality nursing personnel with an innovative spirit and practical ability. Yet, current nursing education is based on a traditional, textbook-centered and teacher-centered model that ignores the central role of the students in learning activities. This model easily leads to mechanical modes of teaching and rote modes of learning by students, which restrict the ability of nursing students to engage in two-way intellectual discourse with

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nursing faculty. This approach impedes the cultivation of high-quality, modern-thinking nursing personnel. Therefore, many nursing schools have introduced PBL to cultivate students' learning skills and comprehension.

This aim of this study was twofold. The first aim was to examine nursing students' knowledge of and attitudes about PBL. The second aim was to identify existing problems with PBL in nursing colleges, to provide a reference point from which to expand and improve PBL in nursing.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted between October 2012 and December 2012. The researchers distributed a questionnaire survey to 1200 students in eight nursing colleges in Hunan Province, including four 3-year vocational nursing schools, three 4-year bachelor degree nursing schools, and one 5-year bachelor degree nursing school.

Inclusion criteria for participation in the study were: ① the students who are enrolled in clinical professional courses; and ② Students who volunteered to participate in this survey.

2.2. Data collection instruments

The investigators designed a pre-survey questionnaire based on the relevant literature and the expert opinions of four professors, who have been in nursing education for 10 years. We pilot tested the pre-survey questionnaire with 20 students to test its feasibility and readability. Based on the results of the pre-survey, we modified individual questions and answers to create the formal questionnaire. Demographic data included gender, age, schooling, education, grades and other general information on knowledge about PBL, attitudes about participation in PBL classes, and other related topics. The survey items were in question form, with each question having at least four alternative answers. Generally, participants could choose only one answer to multiple-choice questions. Some items were open-ended questions, for example, "What do you want from your teacher in PBL courses besides nursing expertise?"

2.3. Procedures

After permission was obtained from the leading institutions and teachers, the researchers delivered the questionnaires to the sites of presiding teachers. Study participants answered the questionnaires on-site, and gave them to the investigators. The investigators examined whether there were any omissions and had them corrected immediately. Of the 1200 questionnaires that were distributed, 1037 were returned with valid responses, for an effective return rate of 86.4%.

2.4. Statistical analysis

The responses were entered into a SPSS database and analyzed by, SPSS 13.0 statistic software. The results are presented as frequencies, and other descriptive statistics.

3. Results

3.1. Basic information

A total of 1037 nursing students completed and returned the questionnaires for the study. The sample consisted of three groups of students: 50.0% ($n = 519$) were 3-year vocational nursing school sophomores; 42.0% ($n = 436$) were 4-year bachelor degree juniors; and 8.0% ($n = 82$) were 5-year bachelor degree seniors. The vast majority of the students were female (98.7%, $n = 1024$), with males accounting for 1.3% ($n = 13$) of the sample. Student perceptions of teacher-student roles are shown in Table 1.

3.2. Knowledge of the PBL model

Of the 1037 participants, 41.2% ($n = 427$) had not heard of PBL and 58.8% ($n = 610$) had heard of it. Of the 610 students who had heard of PBL, 54.4% ($n = 332$) knew it was a teaching method, but they did not know its specific content. Roughly three out of 10 students (30.3%, $n = 185$) knew the meaning of PBL, and 15.2% ($n = 93$) of the students who had heard of PBL (9.0% of all students in the sample) were familiar with its format and concepts. More than eight of 10 students (82.0%, $n = 500$) who knew of PBL said the main way they learned about it was from teachers who introduced BPL in their courses, while 16.3% ($n = 98$) of students gained knowledge of PBL through communicating with classmates. A small number of students (2.0%, $n = 12$) learned about PBL through books, other literature, or the internet.

Over a quarter (27.8%, $n = 288$) of all the students who were surveyed ($N = 1037$) had participated in PBL courses. Roughly comparable numbers of students said they had a "Single course of individual chapters" (14.8%, $n = 153$) and "Many courses of individual chapters" (13.0%, $n = 135$).

3.3. Attitudes about the PBL model and the traditional teaching model

Students' attitudes toward the traditional teaching model are described in Table 2. Of the 1037 students surveyed, 47.2% ($n = 489$) were unsure or did not know whether PBL could change learning styles, and 34.8% ($n = 361$) students said it was

Table 1 – Students' perceptions of teacher-student roles ($N = 1037$).

Item	Traditional teaching method		PBL method	
	Number	%	Number	%
Teacher role				
Authority	199	19.2	83	8.0
Initiator	706	68.1	0	0.0
Mentor	132	12.7	879	84.8
Counselor	0	0.0	75	7.2
Student role				
Knowledge recipient	774	74.6	0	0.0
Knowledge seeker	263	25.4	977	94.2
Knowledge builder	0	0.0	45	4.3
Knowledge creator	0	0.00	15	1.5

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