



Midwifery education in practice

Assessment of the quality and applicability of an e-portfolio capstone assessment item within a bachelor of midwifery program



Kathleen Baird*, Jenny Gamble, Mary Sidebotham

School of Nursing and Midwifery, Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, University Drive, Meadowbrook, Queensland, 4131, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Education programs leading to professional licencing need to ensure assessments throughout the program are constructively aligned and mapped to the specific professional expectations. Within the final year of an undergraduate degree, a student is required to transform and prepare for professional practice. Establishing assessment items that are authentic and able to reflect this transformation is a challenge for universities. This paper both describes the considerations around the design of a capstone assessment and evaluates, from an academics perspective, the quality and applicability of an e-portfolio as a capstone assessment item for undergraduate courses leading to a professional qualification. The e-portfolio was seen to meet nine quality indicators for assessment. Academics evaluated the e-portfolio as an authentic assessment item that would engage the students and provide them with a platform for ongoing professional development and lifelong learning. The processes of reflection on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, comparison of clinical experiences with national statistics, preparation of professional philosophy and development of a curriculum vitae, whilst recognised as comprehensive and challenging were seen as highly valuable to the student transforming into the profession.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing focus and expectation within education programs leading to professional licencing to ensure that assessment throughout the program is constructively aligned and mapped to the specific professional expectations. In addition there is an expectation that assessment should be scaffolded in such a way that enables students to demonstrate their competency to practice on completion of the program. The requirement to demonstrate program learning outcomes is being translated into practice with the introduction of capstone courses and assessments into the final year of several professional degree programs. Holdsworth et al. (2009 p.2) describe a capstone course as one “that provides opportunities for a student to apply the knowledge gained throughout their undergraduate degree. This involves integrating graduate capabilities and employability skills, and occurs usually in the final year of an undergraduate degree”. The purpose of the capstone course within a degree program is to promote a student’s

integration of knowledge and understanding and ensure theory is reconciled with practice (Bailey et al., 2012). Similarly, a capstone assessment is designed to provide opportunities for reflection on the student’s knowledge and experiences gained across a degree program, as well as the skills, attitudes and the knowledge required to transition into employment and the profession (Bailey et al., 2012). As such a capstone assessment should be (1) practical and aligned to program objectives, allowing the student to integrate and apply learnt knowledge; (2) reflective of the real world and therefore holistically apply all attributes required upon graduation; (3) sustainable, fostering a student’s lifelong learning through self-assessment of ability to meet required standards; (4) feedback focussed, allowing the student to assimilate input from a variety of sources including staff, peers, consumers; and (5) evident of overall learning achievement demonstrating the students integration of interrelated learning (Bailey et al., 2012). Within a capstone assessment, a high emphasis exists on transformation, with the student seen as disengaging from their undergraduate status and transitioning into a new graduate, prepared to embrace the requirements of the profession (Bailey et al., 2012; Mummalaneni, 2014).

A well designed capstone assessment has the potential to be both a vehicle which socialises the student into the profession and

* Corresponding author. Women’s & Newborn & Children’s Services, SaPS, Gold Coast University Hospital, Australia.

E-mail addresses: k.baird@griffith.edu.au (K. Baird), j.gamble@griffith.edu.au (J. Gamble), m.sidebotham@griffith.edu.au (M. Sidebotham).

an item to evaluate this transformation. It allows them to establish a professional identity and gain a sense of self-efficacy (Bailey et al. 2012). Self-efficacy is an individual's level of confidence and self-judgment regarding ability to organize and implement actions needed to perform effectively within the new role (Bandura, 1997). The culminating capstone assessment integrates coursework, knowledge, skills and experiential learning all of which enable the student to demonstrate a mastery of learning across the curriculum for a promise of initial employability and further career advancement (Moore, 2004). Indeed, Kiener et al. (2014) suggest that one of the most important skills required by employers is critical thinking and that a capstone course can provide the student with the opportunity to practice and demonstrate these skills through an appropriate assessment. Kiener et al. (2014) in their qualitative evaluation of an undergraduate human services program established that a capstone assessment is as much about students gaining confidence in their own ability; understanding their transition from a student role to a professional role; cultivating the professional perspective and critical thinking skills needed to be competent professionals; as it is about being able to apply knowledge gained across the program. Increasingly e-portfolios are being developed as tools of assessment (Perks and Galantino, 2013; Perlman et al., 2011) and for deeper engagement with learning (Peacock et al., 2011, 2012). This paper explores the validity of using an assessment item incorporating the features of production of an e-portfolio as an effective capstone assessment within the final year of a Bachelor of Midwifery program.

2. Background

2.1. Setting the context

In order to ensure graduating midwifery students were appropriately prepared to commence professional practice a capstone assessment item in the form of a personal electronic e-portfolio was introduced into the final year of the BMid program at xx University, Australia. Portfolios have been used widely within professional degree programs to demonstrate completion of clinical requirements as well documenting a student's progress throughout the program. A recent review of the literature on the use of e-portfolios in nursing education provides a useful summary of the growth in use of e technology to create a platform for students to record and store their elements of their learning journey (Green et al., 2014). The review highlights the potential of the e-portfolio to enable students to develop reflective critical thinking skills and demonstrate competence, but emphasises the importance of design and relevance of required items to ensure acceptability by students and alignment to assessment requirements. More recently Australian researchers surveyed nursing and midwifery students using e-portfolios to assess the value and acceptability to students (Birks et al., 2016). Most students who responded saw the value in using the e-portfolio as a useful repository to store documents and reflections on their learning, but found the actual use the operating system to be frustrating. The literature supports the view that the development of an e-portfolio during an undergraduate degree can provide the student with a framework for recording their professional learning and experience that could be used to support their entry in to professional employment, providing an ongoing platform to record continuing professional development and growth (Andre, 2010; Garrett et al., 2013; Pincombe et al., 2010). However for the e-portfolio to act as an authentic assessment, and be acceptable to students within a program there must be a component that mirrors real world experience requiring the student to demonstrate an application of a variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes (Raymond et al., 2013). It was therefore an important

consideration in the design of the assessment item that the e-portfolio functioned not only as a repository but more as an integrated collation of the experiences of the student, incorporating critical thinking, reflection and holding the capacity for ongoing professional development.

One of the main aims of the assessment was to provide a framework that challenged students to demonstrate their preparedness for practice through a demonstration of critical thinking, reflection on practice, an application of professional practice standards, ethics and regulatory requirements to the level expected of a qualified midwife. In order to achieve this aim in an authentic way that would translate into practice it was important to design the item around a professional framework. The frameworks considered were the annual United Kingdom (UK) supervisory review (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2014) New Zealand Midwifery Practice Review (New Zealand College of Midwives, 2014) and the Australian College of Midwives Midwifery Practice Review (Australian College of Midwives (2011); Griffiths and Homer, 2008).

A decision was made to base the e-portfolio requirements on the Australian College of Midwives (ACM) Midwifery Practice Review (MPR) (ACMMPR) framework (Griffiths and Homer, 2008). Students completing the assessment are based in Australia and would therefore find this framework the most appropriate structure to work within for ongoing practice. The ACMMPR provides midwives in Australia with a recognised framework in which to demonstrate an ongoing record of achievement around key skills including critical thinking, reflection, and evidence based practice adherence to competency standards (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2014) as well as plan for meeting ongoing professional development needs. The e-portfolio template used to administer the assessment item was created within the Google sites platform and students were provided with guiding instructions outlining how to access, personalise and populate their personal e-portfolio site. The Goggle site template was designed around the requirements of the ACM MPR program with defined sections that enabled students to demonstrate their sense of purpose and professional identity as a midwife, through the requirement to create a personalised midwifery philosophy. Students were required to self-assess their current knowledge against the current national competency standards for the midwife and develop an ongoing short and long-term learning/professional development plan. In order to assist their ongoing professional development they were required to undertake a strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats (SWOT) analysis enabling them to demonstrate an awareness of opportunities and threats as well as an assimilation of their current strengths and identified areas of weakness.

An important feature of the Australian midwifery education standards is the requirement to complete a set number of continuity of care (CoC) experiences with women (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2014). Students were required to present statistical outcomes of their personal CoC caseload and reflect on those outcomes with both a reference to current evidence and a comparison to both national statistics and the statistics of the organisation where the women birthed. By utilising the Bass Model of Holistic Midwifery reflection (Bass et al., 2015) students applied personal reflection on clinical scenarios to identify strategies that worked well, whilst exploring in a proactive manner where improvements could be made in situations where care was considered by the student to be less than optimal. Promotion of structured self-reflection enables students to examine potentially stressful situations and achieve effective closure and transition. This has the potential to be a significant facilitator in the journey for students from closure to transition when faced with critical incidents (Kift et al., 2008). This could strengthen students' ability to develop resilience and sustain them as they enter the

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