



Designing and implementing reflective practice programs – Key principles and considerations



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an educational evaluation study that sought to identify key principles that could inform the design and implementation of undergraduate nursing reflection programs and thereby enhance the potential that nursing students will develop sound reflective practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nursing graduates to explore their perceptions of an undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing reflection subject and explicate the factors that could enhance the implementation of this subject. Subsequent validation and refinement of these factors was managed by correlating the factors with students' qualitative feedback, gathered through a formal subject evaluation of the undergraduate reflective practice subject. The correlation analysis, ascertained three principles that are posited as highly significant in the design and implementation of undergraduate reflective practice nursing programs. These principles, which are explained in this paper, despite being conceptualised in an Australian University have relevance and are appropriate across national and discipline boundaries and could be used in the design and implementation of any reflection subject, particularly those in undergraduate programs.

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Introduction

Reflection is well established as an important concept that must be taught in any nurse education program (Levett-Jones, 2007). It is recognized as a critical skill for nursing students to acquire and utilise because it prompts the development of personal philosophies and competencies of nursing that will inform professional practice in the future (O'Donovan, 2006). Despite the virtues of reflection, nursing students find it a challenging paradigm of learning to engage in and often struggle to appreciate the benefits of this component of their education curriculum. Anecdotal feedback from students undertaking a Bachelor of Nursing course in an Australian university communicated a perception that reflective practice had no benefit or relevance to their course or the nursing profession, was a nebulous concept and there was even the suggestion that it should be eliminated from the undergraduate curriculum. These opinions were the foundation of a research project that focused on ascertaining how a second year undergraduate

reflective practice subject could be enhanced so that it would be more valued by nursing students.

Literature review

Research and the wealth of literature addressing the notion of reflective practice in nursing suggests that nurses who are able to effectively reflect are: more proficient in developing strategies that promote a flexible, individualized and holistic approach to patient care; better equipped to resolve problems through thoughtful reasoning; and more inclined to monitor and enhance their professional competence (Braine, 2009; Rees, 2013). Reflection is a vehicle that assists nursing students to analyze where they are in regard to their practice development and identify the areas they need to further develop (Levett-Jones, 2007; Rees, 2013; Walsh et al., 2002). As such, reflective practice has been acknowledged to be a critical component of nursing students' practice development and an essential paradigm of learning in any undergraduate nursing curriculum (Boud, 1999; Levett-Jones, 2007).

Reflective practice is acknowledged as fostering essential skills that are highly valued in nurses including critical thinking, problem solving and self-assessment (Braine, 2009; Carroll et al., 2002; Levett-Jones, 2007). Carroll et al. (2002) suggest that these skills which are essential to the advancement of responsive dynamic

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nurses should be the focus of undergraduate programs rather than reflection per se which is ill-defined and lacks clarity in regard to its teaching and assessment.

A variety of strategies such as journals, learning diaries, critical incident analyses and discussion have been identified as effective in nurturing reflection (Braine, 2009). However, empirical evidence qualifying how reflective practice can be effectively taught and assessed is still very limited. A range of hypotheses have posited factors purportedly critical to student nurses' development of reflection. Across these, two commonly identified factors are firstly the nurse educator and secondly the approach and program employed to teach reflection (Braine, 2009). Nicholl and Higgins' (2004) research supports the importance of these factors with the outcome of their research determining that there is an imperative to ensure that the reflective practice curriculum is clear and that the nurse educators are adequately prepared to teach this curriculum. There is some suggestion across the reviewed literature that the specific teaching strategy is irrelevant, rather the utilization of real experiences, establishment of clear aims and objectives, a well-designed program, explicit directions; promotion of structured frameworks, sufficient support for students; and adequate preparation of teachers are the critical elements that impact on students' development of reflection (Braine, 2009; Johns, 2004; Levett-Jones, 2007). Alternatively, double loop learning has been proposed as an approach that effectively develops reflective practices by encouraging individuals to look past the answers and triggers of a problem to the underpinning beliefs and values inherent to the situation (Braine, 2009). According to Boud (1999), if nursing students actively critique exemplary practice as well as their own practice they will build professional competency.

The impact that nurse educators have on students' learning is largely dependent upon the educator's knowledge of the subject content and ability to communicate this to students. There is an assertion that many nurse educators are not skilled at reflecting and as such are not able to aptly assist their students to develop reflective practices (Braine, 2009). Braine (2009) found that many new educators felt inadequately prepared to facilitate reflective practice. Inadequate teacher preparation has been acknowledged as a substantial explanation for why nurse educators cannot reflect and in turn why they are not able to teach students how to reflect (Atkins and Williams, 1995; Braine, 2009). If students are to effectively develop reflective practice then it is imperative that educators have a sound knowledge of the concept, its foundational theories, influences and value.

Methodology

An educational evaluation methodology designed to assess and improve an educational program (Cohen et al., 2007) underpinned this study. A primary aim of the study was to evaluate an undergraduate second year Bachelor of Nursing reflection subject and identify key factors that could meaningfully enhance the subject. The reflective practice subject was administered via a blended delivery mode and focused on models of reflection that could be used in healthcare practice as well as assisting students to develop skills for personal and professional reflection. The subject was assessed through three tasks – a media release promoting a constructive image of nursing; a tutorial presentation debating an aspect of professional health practice that was gleaned from the movie 'Forest Gump'; and an essay that used a reflective model to critically evaluate factors that influence the public's perception of nursing, this was an extension on the topic and outcome of the media release.

The evaluation was conducted in two phases, phase one sought to explore with nursing graduates whether reflection becomes more meaningful in professional practice and if it does what the key factors were that evoked this shift. Phase two focused on validating and refining the identified factors from phase one, by correlating them to the results of an analysis of students' qualitative feedback, gathered through a formal subject evaluation process.

Sampling

The project utilised a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. An invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview was sent, through the University alumni office, to all nursing graduates who had completed their Bachelor of Nursing course at the university within the last 2 years (2010–2011), and who were currently employed as healthcare professionals. The four graduates who participated in the interview phase, three females and one male, included every individual who indicated he or she was willing to be involved in the evaluation study and subsequently provided written consent.

Phase two qualitative data was gathered through a formal subject evaluation process, which was administered by the university Policy and Governance Unit as part of the institution's quality review cycle. Every student enrolled in a second year reflective practice subject in the 2012 Autumn session, was given a subject evaluation questionnaire to complete. Of the 321 students enrolled in the subject, 244 (76%) completed the evaluation questionnaire, which included both quantitative and qualitative questions. 184 (75%) of the 244 students who completed the evaluation questionnaire provided qualitative responses that were analysed as part of this study.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face to face or by phone with the four nursing graduates. The semi-structured interview questions were specifically designed to explore whether reflection becomes more meaningful in professional practice and if it does what the key drivers were that evoked this shift. Interviewees shared their perceptions about the value of reflection given the hindsight of professional employment and highlighted key elements they believed needed to be integrated into the undergraduate reflection programme. Interviews were transcribed and the interview transcripts were validated by the interviewees prior to data analysis. A qualitative descriptive methodology was adopted because it was recognized as a viable approach for hypothesizing about how the second year reflection subject could be enhanced (Cohen et al., 2007). The qualitative descriptive methodology guided the interrogation of the transcripts resulting in the identification of a set of factors for enhancing the reflective practice subject.

Qualitative student feedback was gathered through a subject evaluation questionnaire that was administered to every student in the 2012 Autumn reflective practice subject as part of the formal subject evaluation process. The evaluation questionnaire posed two questions – What are the best aspects of the subject? and How can the subject be improved? This particular subject evaluation data was purposely included in this investigation because it was the anecdotal feedback from students undertaking the same second year reflective practice subject that was the catalyst for this research project. Students' qualitative evaluation responses were coded and then analysed using NVivo 8. An interpretive grounded theory approach (Cohen et al., 2007) was adopted to code and analyse the evaluation feedback. Using this approach, data was initially classified into themes; similarities between the theme categories were identified and synthesized to generate a

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