



Using reflective models to enhance learning: Experiences of staff and students

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Summary In this paper we reflect on a quality activity undertaken with students enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing course who were required to write a 3000-word reflective paper for a unit called 'Nursing People Experiencing Long Term Illnesses.' Students were required to select one chronic illness from a list of five suggested by the teaching team. Having made their choice, they developed their paper in two parts. Students were first required to briefly discuss the pathophysiology of the illness, and its psychosocial effects on the individual and family. Second, they were required to use a model of reflection to discuss how knowledge they gained could be applied when working with a person with this condition, within the hospital and the community.

Highlighted in this paper are the voices of 10 students who accepted an invitation to be involved in a focus group discussion which elicited their views, experiences and concerns regarding this assessment. Analysis revealed that students found the assignment topic to be challenging, rewarding and an appropriate vehicle to unveil what they learned. However, completion of the assessment was not without its difficulties. In this paper, insights gained in using this teaching and learning strategy are shared.

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Background

When setting assignment topics for students, it is important to consider the alignment of the learning

task with the educational pedagogy that shapes the course (Davis, 2000). Thus, if the pedagogy is one in which students are expected to demonstrate mastery learning, then their assessment tasks should reflect this. Further, when designing assessment tasks, it is also important to acknowledge that they must enable the learner to demonstrate achievement of the overarching aims and objectives that are specified within the curriculum document. Hence, within courses of study, a variety

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of assessment strategies should be designed and implemented, to enable students to demonstrate their capabilities in various domains of learning.

However theoretically sound these suggestions may be, as educators we often experience a number of confounding influences which inhibit the realisation of these ideals. These confounders include such things as time pressures related to submission of assessment tasks, lack of stability within our teaching teams, high teaching loads accompanied by large class sizes and lack of time to validate the assessment items that we develop. Further, within Australia the University sector does not mandate that those who are employed to teach have an educational qualification. Hence, on occasion individuals are appointed into a teaching role with little understanding or knowledge of educational theory. Each of these factors contributes to the development of assessment items that may fall short of our ideals and professed desire to construct valid and reliable and yet innovative assessment items.

It is acknowledged that these limitations are currently being addressed within the Australian higher education sector, with a number of Universities seriously addressing issues related to fostering excellence within the arena of teaching and learning. However, until they are satisfactorily resolved, tensions will continue to be experienced by those who must develop assessment tasks that are well aligned to the intent of learning, as well as to the learning needs of the students. Parenthetically, once assessment items are devised, it is important to seek the views of the students for whom such items are developed, to ascertain whether the assessment task was meaningful and enhanced their learning. Hence, this paper reports on a quality initiative that was undertaken within the unit of study called 'Nursing People Experiencing Long Term Illnesses', which is offered within the second year of the Bachelor of Nursing program at Deakin University.

The quality initiative

The context of the quality initiative

The unit of study previously mentioned is a core subject for all undergraduate students who are enrolled in the School of Nursing, Deakin University and who will seek registration by the Nurses Board of Victoria upon successful completion of their course. The course uses problem-based learning (PBL) as a conceptual framework and as

a strategy for teaching and learning. The nursing course is provided on the three campuses (Melbourne, Geelong, and Warrnambool), of Deakin University, in Victoria, Australia. At the time that this quality activity was undertaken, this unit of study was offered to approximately 250 full-time nursing students across the three campuses; however, this report relates to the experiences of staff and students located on the Melbourne campus only. The unit is also offered to students who undertake an international nursing exchange with the School.

For one of the assessment tasks of this unit, students were required to write a 3000-word reflective paper, where they selected one chronic illness from a list of five that were suggested by the teaching team. Having made their choice, they were asked to first briefly discuss the pathophysiology of their selected illness, as well as reflect on the psychosocial effects of this illness on the individual and their family. They were then instructed to use a model of reflection to discuss how the knowledge they gained could be applied when working with a person with this chronic condition, within both a hospital setting and the community.

Whilst some authors have argued that students do not have sufficient experiences and acumen to engage in reflection in a meaningful way (Greenwood, 1998; Heath, 1998; Wellard and Bethune, 1996) the teaching team who developed this assignment task was of the firm belief that reflection is a corner stone of nursing practice. This belief is supported by a number of key authors who have written rather extensively about reflective practice (Johns, 2002a,b; Taylor, 2000; Ghaye and Lillyman, 2000; Durgahee, 1997), as well as through the plethora of articles which have emerged over the last ten years in particular, which attest to the centrality of reflection to practice (Frank, 2002; Glaze, 2001; Charmaz, 1999; Snyder et al., 1997; Johns, 1996). Hence, the teaching team wanted to introduce this skill early in the student's learning experience, to enable them to develop not only a reflective attitude towards their learning, but also to develop some practical skills of reflection which they could subsequently apply in practice, a decision which is supported by the writings of Heath (1998).

On a practical level, the team decided against teaching the student's one model of reflection and requiring them to use this model to develop their paper. Instead, they gave the students freedom to select from the various models that were available in the literature, thereby encouraging them to find one that resonated with their own ways and styles of learning. The approach of

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