



Engaging undergraduate nursing students in face-to-face tutorials

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ABSTRACT

Chronic nursing shortages have placed increasing pressure on many nursing schools to recruit greater numbers of students with the consequence of larger class sizes. Larger class sizes have the potential to lead to student disengagement. This paper describes a case study that examined the strategies used by a group of nursing lecturers to engage students and to overcome passivity in a Bachelor of Nursing programme. A non-participant observer attended 20 tutorials to observe five academics deliver four tutorials each. Academics were interviewed both individually and as a group following the completion of all tutorial observations. All observations, field notes, interviews and focus groups were coded separately and major themes identified. From this analysis two broad categories emerged: getting students involved; and engagement as a struggle. Academics used a wide variety of techniques to interest and involve students. Additionally, academics desired an equal relationship with students. They believed that both they and the students had some power to influence the dynamics of tutorials and that neither party had ultimate power. The findings of this study serve to re-emphasise past literature which suggests that to engage students, the academics must also engage.

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Introduction

The pressures of a large, diverse student body have affected many nursing schools in Australia. Critical nursing shortages have often led to a focus on recruitment, which in turn has led to many universities enrolling large numbers of nursing students. Faculty often struggles to create a satisfying and productive learning environment under these circumstances. Driving the research reported in this paper were observed differences in student preparation and attendance at tutorials across different subjects within an undergraduate nursing degree. While some of these differences could be explained by the impact of clinical practicum, practicum could not explain all of them. The purpose of this research was to improve the authors' understanding of student engagement within

face-to-face tutorials in an undergraduate, internally delivered Bachelor of Nursing course.

Literature review

A number of changes in the higher education sector have served to increase the diversity of tertiary student groups. Changes driving student diversity at university include: the greater number of university enrolments; the internationalisation of the higher education sector; and a larger proportion of students who derive from historically underrepresented groups such as women, Indigenous students, and students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the students who belong to the latter two groups are also educationally disadvantaged, while many international students have English as a second language. As such, the past decade has seen heightened, worldwide interest in the processes of student engagement at university (Astin, 1999; Chickering, 2006; Krause, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005; Markwell, 2007).

Student engagement, defined as involvement with the activities likely to produce high quality learning outcomes (ACER, 2010; Coates, 2006), is widely recognised as important to student success at university (Krause and Coates, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, engaging a diverse range of students is very challenging. Small classes and frequent student–staff interaction are widely recognised as important to

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engaging students (Astin, 1999; Krause and Coates, 2008) and as contributing to active learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Both of these characteristics are often missing in large schools of nursing. So it is not unusual to hear nursing academics complain that students are not motivated to attend and to participate, an impression borne out by the 2009 Australian University Survey of Student Engagement (ACER, 2010) and the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2008) conducted in the USA. In Australia and New Zealand the students were found to spend only 8 h preparing for classes, while the NSSE found one in five students did not prepare for classes. D'Aloisio (2006) for example, claims that contemporary students are motivated by external rewards, such as better jobs and pay and not by the desire for knowledge on its own, suggesting that it is up to teachers to structure learning situations to motivate students (Ainley, 2004).

This renewed interest in student engagement sits somewhat uncomfortably beside other social forces that appear to be pushing in the opposite direction. While much of the focus has been on what the institution does to induce students to engage with their studies, less attention has been paid recently to the role of faculty in promoting student engagement in the classroom, even though interaction between faculty and students has been identified as critical to engaging students (Astin, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Laird et al., 2009; Coates, 2006). Davis and Murrell (1993) and more recently, Krause and Coates (2008) argue that staff is important to creating the conditions that encourage students to become involved. Teacher approachability is one of nine qualities used to conceptualise student engagement on the AUSSE (Coates, 2006). Gump (2004) found that an interesting teacher was one of the most common reasons students gave for attending tertiary classes. Furthermore, as Laird and her group argue, it is faculty who directly observes students and can report students' preferences for various teaching and learning strategies. Astin, one of the early pioneers of the concept of student involvement, considered involvement to be an outcome, in part, of the effort made by faculty.

In response to a School of Nursing and Midwifery initiative aimed at encouraging research into teaching and learning, a group of six, full-time members of the academic staff successfully applied for funding for this project. The funding paid for a research assistant who was also an experienced academic.

Research design

The study was conducted in second semester 2008 as an embedded, single case with multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2009). It was designed to provide the participants with practical knowledge about their specific context, and to help the authors learn more about themselves and their students. The intermediate units of analysis were tutorial classes. Tutorials were identified as important sites for the engagement of students in learning because they provide opportunities not available through other media. Tutorials supplement lectures and textbooks and provide a variety of teaching and learning activities which can better cater for students' diverse learning styles (Biggs, 2003). They also afford opportunities to provide and receive feedback which is predominantly formative, and to explore in greater depth the knowledge within a particular subject (Phillips, 2005). Tutorials are perceived also to be a less threatening and more personal environment. Students have the opportunity to better know their peers while tutors can better know their students (Exley and Dennick, 2004). Furthermore, as Markwell (2007) notes, engagement in different contexts may have different appearances.

The research took place in the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) School of Nursing and Midwifery. This large, metropolitan university in Brisbane, Australia has approximately 2400

undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing students. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from QUT's Ethics Committee.

The staff involved in this study were all full-time members of the QUT academic staff. All were experienced lecturers, having taught for more than ten years. With the exception of one academic, all taught core nursing theory subjects with a focus on the provision of nursing care in a variety of health settings. Student attendance at classes was not mandatory for any subject. Five of the six subjects involved in this study were core units while one was an elective. The tutorials were designed to accommodate 20–30 students. Academics involved in this study delivered between six and nine tutorials most weeks across the semester. Large tutorial size had been a concern of many academic staff in terms of its effect on interaction and the fact students were often anonymous to their teachers and unable to interact frequently with them.

Because the study was focused on what academic staff did in tutorials, the principal method of data collection was non-participant observation. A research assistant who was also an experienced academic was employed to take the role of a non-participant observer. One academic was not observed, because she was not teaching in the semester the study was undertaken. Four tutorials in each of the five subjects were observed, giving a total of 30 h of observations. These observations formed the context of the study. An initial protocol which recorded time, place, setting, length of observation, description of tutorial and reflective notes was developed and used. The observer kept a record of observations in the form of descriptive field notes.

At the completion of the observation period, academic staff were each interviewed individually for approximately 1 h by the research assistant. As a follow up to this, two, 1 h focus groups of all participating academic staff members were conducted. Both the interviews and the focus groups, which were conducted as semi-formal conversations, enabled the academic staff to explore in greater depth their perceptions about student engagement and the meanings they attributed to their actions and those of the students. The focus groups were transcribed live by a stenographer, while the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed.

The data were analysed by intensively reading through the field notes, observations, transcripts of interviews and focus groups multiple times and interrogated using the following questions (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009):

1. What does the interview data reveal about engagement in tutorials?
2. What does the focus group data reveal about engagement in tutorials?
3. What does the observational data reveal about engagement in tutorials?
4. What is it I want to know? Do tutors engage students? What do tutors do in tutorials to engage students?
5. What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know? Are there any gaps between what is said/done in the three sources of data?

All observations, field notes, interviews and focus groups were coded separately and major themes identified. As the coding proceeded, memos were made when gaps were identified. From this analysis two broad categories emerged: getting students involved and engagement as struggle. What follows is a description of each. Words used by the observer or participants are italicised.

Theme 1: getting students involved

The data demonstrated the extent to which academics go to make their tutorials stimulating and the wide variety of techniques

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