A novice teacher's reflections on lecturing as a teaching strategy: Covering the content or uncovering the meaning

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Summary The lecture is the most widely used teaching strategy in adult education programmes. While it has advantages, it is criticised for its lack of student engagement and inability to stimulate higher-order thinking. The aim of this paper is to detail a novice teacher's journey using the lecture as a teaching strategy. The use of an action research approach provided the teacher with a framework to research own learning. In addition, the collaborative process inherent in action research resulted in students being invited to evaluate the teaching. The journey takes the teacher from a teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning to a student-centred approach. The influence of the teacher's own educational encounters is explored. In common with many novice teachers, the focus on content delivery and difficulty asking questions are two key issues. The gradual implementation of strategies to allow for more student engagement is discussed and advice is offered to the novice teacher.

Introduction

This paper explores my learning experience as a novice teacher. Like most teachers, I adopted the strategies I experienced during my own education regardless of the learning styles of the students or the appropriateness of such strategies for the subject being taught (Prosser et al., 2003; Gidman et al., 2000). The didactic lecture was the dominant mode of teaching during my own educational experience. The teaching was teacher-centred with the student taking little ownership of learning. Furthermore, there was an expectation that the teacher had all the answers and independent discovery was not undertaken by the student. This was in contrast to the philosophy and approach to learning which I experienced when I started the post-graduate diploma in clinical health sciences education (teacher training). A variety of teaching

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methods were used and student involvement in learning and in the evaluation of teaching was actively encouraged. However, when I tried to incorporate these strategies into my own teaching I discovered it was not as simple as it first appeared. Using an action research framework, I uncovered an understanding of how I could facilitate student engagement with the lecturer and the subject content thus progressing from the didactic to the interactive lecture.

Literature on lecturing

The lecture is the most common teaching strategy used in adult education programmes (Bligh, 1998) and is widely used for the delivery of the theoretical component of nurse education. Bligh (1998), in reviewing almost a hundred studies comparing lectures with other teaching methods, concluded that lectures are as effective as other methods for teaching information, but are ineffective in stimulating higher-order thinking and cannot be relied upon to inspire or change students' attitudes favourably. The limitations of lectures are related to the way students learn (Nicholls, 2002). Student learning occurs through active engagement with the subject matter and therefore, lectures are ineffective for such engagement (Ramsden, 2003; Billings and Halstead 1998). Furthermore, transmission of information and its transformation into knowledge are not the same (Race, 2007). For this transformation to occur, students need an opportunity to engage in deep processing of the subject matter.

Teaching methods where active discussion is used are found to be more effective when retention of knowledge, transfer of knowledge to new situations, problem solving and attitude changes are measured (Horgan, 1999). Sustained and unchanging low-level activity such as listening to a lecture lowers concentration, while at the same time requiring concentrated effort to follow lecture content (Biggs, 1999). The attention span of students under these conditions can only be maintained for 10–15 min, after which time learning drops off rapidly (Bligh, 1998). Over-reliance on lectures can lead to student dependence with the result that they come to expect all the information to be handed to them on a plate (Quinn, 2000).

The lecture has some advantages such as the ability to convey information to a large number of students. In addition, it may be useful when introducing a new topic, it can provide a framework of theories and ideas and the teacher may integrate subject matter better than students (Nicholls, 2002; Quinn, 2000). A well planned and presented lecture may succeed in gaining student attention (Curzon, 2004). While the traditional didactic lecture has been criticised for failing to facilitate active student participation, it still has an important role in that it can co-exist with other strategies and can be enhanced by providing an opportunity for greater student dialogue and reflection (Jones, 2007).

Methods

Action research in education settings provides a practical means of exploring your own practice (Mc Niff, 2002). It is, therefore, useful for the novice teacher in allowing research into own learning. It consists of a succession of cycles or spirals which are initiated by a practical problem and include elements of understanding or theorising, bringing about change through action and the carrying out of some form of formal or reflective research activity (Rolfe, 1998).

An evaluation-understanding-action framework as described by Rolfe (1998) was used to guide this project (Table 1). The process, which consisted of three cycles, commenced with self-evaluation of my teaching and feedback from the course assessor. This provided an initial understanding of the problem. In addition, data was collected from a variety of sources to inform my understanding of the problem and guide future actions (Higgins, 2000). In subsequent cycles and in keeping with the collaborative process inherent in action research, students were invited to provide feedback and evaluate my teaching. One group completed a simple questionnaire which asked them to state three things they liked about my teaching and three things they disliked and the other engaged in a discussion forum with me. A reflective diary and review of lesson plans provided a further perspective on the situation.

Student evaluation of teaching is an inherent part of the curricular process and every effort was made to ensure that ethical standards were adhered to. The nature of the project was explained to the students and they were informed that they were not obliged to take part in the feedback. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Following the evaluation and a simple content analysis of the data two main themes emerged, namely my focus on lecture content and a difficulty in asking questions. Each cycle concluded with an activity that increased my personal learning and