



## Building life-long learning capacity in undergraduate nursing freshmen within an integrative and small group learning context



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Life-long learning involves the development of skills in critical thinking (CT), effective group process (GP), and self-directedness (SDL). Recent studies have shown that small group learning with active interactions is effective in enabling students to develop themselves as independent learners beyond graduation. With a view to integrative learning, the purpose of this study was to evaluate life-long learning outcomes through the work of small group teaching and learning for a class of undergraduate nursing freshmen during one academic year.

**Methods:** A mixed-methods approach was used to evaluate the CT, GP and SDL of 99 freshmen with a self-assessment questionnaire before and after their learning activities in three nursing courses, and to identify themes from a total of six focus group interviews with the students and teachers.

**Results:** The CT, GP and SDL results obtained from self-assessment did not indicate significant differences. Four themes emerged from the qualitative analysis.

**Discussion:** Many factors contributed to the results on life-long learning skill development of students in this study. The qualitative analysis provided good insights for future teaching and learning development.

**Conclusions:** With a developmental perspective, life-long learning may be better developed and evaluated over a longer period of time in the nursing program.

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### Introduction

With the high separation rate of nurses and the aging population in Hong Kong, there have been increasing demands for registered nurses. More student places are being allocated to baccalaureate pre-registration nursing programs. Student intakes for such programs have increased rapidly to a maximum of 200 per class in recent years. Tertiary education institutions have developed strategic plans to introduce student-centered and more group learning opportunities to enable students to actively utilize their own learning opportunities, and to strengthen their life-long learning abilities. Student-centered learning and better student development of life-long learning capacity are the keys to educational reform in Hong Kong, which is aiming to increase the three-year university study to four-year programs with more liberal education and life-long learning development (Poon and Wong, 2008). All these contextual factors formed the basis of this study's attempt to re-structure and align three undergraduate nursing courses that target the acquisition of life-long learning skills and a broader knowledge base for nursing freshmen. These

learning goals match the education reform for a new four-year university structure in Hong Kong, with the objectives of strengthening life-long learning skills and liberal education, and advancing opportunities in continuing professional education.

#### *Life-Long, Self-Directed and Small Group Learning*

Life-long learning is an active process in which students search for knowledge, understand it, and apply it to meet their personal and professional goals throughout the life span (Aggarwal and Bates, 2000; Nayda and Rankin, 2008). Life-long learning skills are broad and involve problem-solving and critical thinking, effective teamwork and self-directedness. A meta-analysis of 39 studies showed that small groups were an effective setting for learning (Springer et al., 1999). In addition, life-long learning skills can be achieved through small group interactions (Baptiste, 2003; Neo, 2003; Prince, 2004). Knowledge exchange and discussion are enhanced in small groups through sharing, active listening, and providing and receiving constructive feedback to and from each other in the groups. University students, as adult learners, prefer to take charge of their own learning through self-direction (Merriam et al., 2007). In small groups, these active learners are further developed with the approach of problem-based learning (PBL) (Kemp et al., 2002; Wilkie and Burns, 2003; Prince, 2004); the

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taking of such an active role within the PBL context prepares them for life-long learning (Bengtsson and Ohlsson, 2010). Problem-based learning is the process of students' learning through active work towards the understanding and resolution of a problem; operationally it is done through the small group setting (Barrett, 2005).

In summary, self-directed learning can be achieved through small group interactions as students take responsibility for their own learning (Mifflin, 2004). In small groups, students are motivated and able to play an active role in exploring and learning new knowledge collaboratively and cooperatively with the developing broad learning skills, rather than being taught didactically (Baptiste, 2003; Neo, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to evaluate broad life-long learning outcomes through the work of small group teaching and learning in three aligned Year 1 courses of an undergraduate nursing program. These courses were re-structured to improve the course design with an integrative approach, in order to meet the increasing need of education for life-long learning skills in the forthcoming new academic nursing structure under the current university education reform. The re-structuring was expected to align with the vision of the new education structure in Hong Kong, which aims to prepare students with a broader knowledge and skill base, a more solid foundation for future study in their particular disciplines, and a continuous whole-person development throughout the life span.

### Theoretical Framework

As stated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2004), our study aim was based on the need for tertiary educators to foster students' abilities through integrative learning across courses and over time, so that they are better prepared for the real-world practice of nursing. Defining integrative learning has been a topic of discussion since the turn of the 20th century with a focus on its approaches of multi-, inter-, and intra-disciplinary work (Drake and Burns, 2004). Schneider (2003) argued that integrative learning leads students to unite their learning with the world beyond the tertiary education institute, and above all to continuously translate their education to new contexts, new problems and new responsibilities, which is a life-long process. Our integrative learning approach means using a set of teaching and learning methods (Schneider, 2003) within the small group context, which is constructed in alignment with the common life-long learning goals across three nursing courses in the freshman year of study. This enables students to put their knowledge to effective use. The integrative learning is thus done through their reflective practice and active linking of their learnt knowledge and skills; exposure to multiple sources across the integrating courses; application of theories to practice in various settings; utilization of diverse and even contradictory points of view within a teamwork environment; and enhancing the understanding of issues and positions contextually (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2004; Huber et al., 2007).

We hypothesized in this study that with the integrative learning approach and the small group teaching and learning focus across the relevant courses, students would develop and demonstrate the essential capacities of life-long learners, for instance, the skills of self-directedness in study, critical thinking and teamwork. Lai and Tang (2000) found that high school graduates entering universities in Hong Kong typically did not possess these skills. With the emphasis on integrative learning, students could put these skills together and develop habits of mind. The integrative approach with a focus on small group teaching and learning would prepare them to make informed judgments in the conduct of their professional and civic lives (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2004; Huber et al., 2005).

### Methods

This study used a mixed-method design with a quantitative pre-post evaluation and an exploratory qualitative approach of the naturalistic

inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 2000). According to Morse and Niehaus (2009), the mixed methods used were sequentially quantitative and qualitative (Quan→qual), with the former a core component and the latter supplementary to it. With the qualitative data set, the quantitative analysis can be invoked to explore more in-depth relationships among variables. The quantitative data were collected with a set of self-administered questionnaires containing three sub-scales, and the qualitative data were obtained later from focus group interviews. Outcomes were collected from multiple informants, both teachers and students, since different types of data collected from different sources can be triangulated to produce a more comprehensive picture of the topic being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Sands and Roer-Strier, 2006). The central premise of the mixed-methods approach is that the combination can provide a better understanding of the research topic than either the qualitative or quantitative approach alone (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). These two approaches complement each other so that the evidence base of the required knowledge can be broadened (Flemming, 2007).

### The New Integrative Courses

Three foundational nursing courses in Year I were aligned for their contents: Nursing Foundations (NF) in semester one, and Introduction to Nursing Theory (INT) and Health Promotion and Education (HPE) in semester two (Box 1). After re-structuring the contents, these courses incorporated the teaching and learning of students through small group activities for their basic and broad skills of life-long learning as professional nurses in 1) identifying the learning needs, 2) searching for and applying information, 3) thinking critically and solving problems, 4) being self-directed, and 5) functioning well in a group/team setting with good communication skills. Small group learning is a common teaching and learning strategy in all these courses. The small group learning activities were led by eight facilitators (tutors) among the three courses. Prior to the group teaching and learning, a discussion session was conducted by the researchers with these facilitators to share experiences and consolidate their perspectives on small group teaching and the PBL approach. The aim of this exercise was to align the approach of these facilitators in such learning contexts.

Good communication skills are believed to be an integral factor for effective multi-disciplinary teamwork among healthcare professionals (Deering et al., 2011; Lingard et al., 2004). The literature has demonstrated that the use of simulated exercises and role plays in the curriculum provides promising results for effective student learning (Calhoun and Chambers, 2004; Festa et al., 2000; McCaughey and Traynor, 2010; Vessey and Huss, 2002). Hence, group activities through a series of communication workshops in which students role-played, peer reviewed and reflected on their competence of communication skills in interviewing and interacting with patients and their relatives were added in NF in particular. After the mass lectures regarding communication skills had been delivered by the NF lecturer to all students, they designed their communication scenarios, wrote their scripts and videotaped their role plays. During the small group sessions, with the help of group facilitators, the student peers reviewed and reflected on their performance captured on videos in order to achieve the best learning outcomes.

### Expected Outcomes and the Instruments

After completing the three courses, students were expected to have developed the motivation to play an active role in their own life-long learning. They were equipped with basic and broad skills for obtaining appropriate resources to meet their own learning needs (self-directed learning/SDL). Students had started to acquire knowledge about the concept of health and appreciate the importance of health maintenance with their active and self-directing

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