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ORIGINAL RESEARCH – QUALITATIVE

Midwifery students experience of teamwork projects involving mark-related peer feedback

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ABSTRACT

Background: Lack of teamwork skills among health care professionals endangers patients and enables workplace bullying. Individual teamwork skills are increasingly being assessed in the undergraduate health courses but rarely defined, made explicit or taught. To remedy these deficiencies we introduced a longitudinal educational strategy across all three years of the Bachelor of Midwifery program.

Aim: To report on students' experiences of engaging in team based assignments which involved mark-related peer feedback.

Methods: Stories of midwifery students' experiences were collected from 17 participants across the three years of the degree. These were transcribed and analysed thematically and interpreted using feminist collaborative conversations.

Results: Most participants reported being in well-functioning teams and enjoyed the experience; they spoke of 'we' and said 'Everyone was on Board'. Students in poorly functioning teams spoke of 'I' and 'they'. These students complained about the poor performance of others but they didn't speak up because they 'didn't want to make waves' and they didn't have the skills to be able to confidently manage conflict. All participants agreed 'Peer-related marks cause mayhem'.

Conclusion: Teamwork skills should be specifically taught and assessed. These skills take time to develop. Students, therefore, should be engaged in a teamwork assignment in each semester of the entire program. Peer feedback should be moderated by the teacher and not directly related to marks.

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Summary of Relevance:

Problem or Issue

Deficits in teamwork are major contributing factors to errors in health care provision.¹ The costs to organisations of poor teamwork include litigation, bullying, absenteeism, poor performance and, where staff have the option to leave, high staff turnover.^{1–3} Students do not begin university with well-developed teamwork skills.⁴

What is Already Known

According to the literature, many courses require students to work in groups or teams but rigorously teaching and assessing individual student's teamwork skills is not embedded into health curricula.^{5,6}

What this Paper Adds

This is the first reported study that asked midwifery students' to describe their experiences of learning and being peer-assessed for teamwork skills. Recommendations for midwifery academics to improve their practice in teaching and assessing teamwork skills are presented.

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1. Introduction

Effective teamwork has long been known as a protective factor in maintaining patient safety.^{7,8} The problem is that a lack of communication skills and poor teamwork remain as common contributing factors to errors in health care provision.^{9,10} A lack of teamwork skills also indicates a work culture where bullying and mobbing can coexist.^{1–3} Poor teamwork can have negative mental health consequences for staff, such as anxiety, depression and even suicide.^{1,11} The costs to organisations of poor teamwork include absenteeism, poor performance and, where staff have the option to leave, high staff turnover.^{1–3} Teamwork skills are considered to be so important that the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Authority (AHPRA) Code of Conduct template for professional bodies at Section 4 focuses on the competencies needed for “Working with other practitioners”.¹² Likewise, The Australian Qualifications Framework requires that higher education institutions ensure that their graduates exit with interpersonal skills and the ability to work well with others.¹³

Individual teamwork skills are increasingly being assessed in undergraduate health professional courses but rarely defined, made explicit or actively taught.^{5,6,14–16} To assure graduate attributes and professional competency requirements as regards teamwork skills, we introduced peer-marking for Bachelor of Midwifery students engaged in teamwork assignments in 2012. We subsequently surveyed the students about their satisfaction with these teamwork-related educational experiences.⁴ Building on our observations and the feedback from our students, we then conducted an extensive review of teamwork theory and related research to design a theoretically grounded rubric for teamwork teaching and assessment.⁴ In 2013 we formed an ongoing multidisciplinary action research group of nine inter-professional health and education academics to systematically assess, plan, implement, evaluate and improve our efforts to teach and assess teamwork skills in undergraduate courses. In Midwifery, we designed and implemented a teamwork educational intervention in all three years of the Bachelor's course at our university. The rubric used for teaching and assessment has undergone improvements over the past two years. In 2014, communication and teamwork experts ($n = 36$) evaluated the rubric for validity.¹⁷ The study reported here concerns midwifery students' experiences of learning and being peer-assessed for teamwork skills. This study is part of the evaluation phase of TeamUP, the larger action research project.

Consistent with midwifery's woman-centred philosophy, this study is grounded in feminism. ‘Feminism’ is the theory, research and practice of identifying, understanding and changing the intrapersonal and social factors that sustain women's disempowerment.¹⁸ Feminism seeks to increase understanding how power and knowledge operate within the dynamic and complex social networks which contain and constrain all people.¹⁹ In designing, teaching and evaluating TeamUP, our overall aim has been to assist students to develop ‘emancipatory knowledge’.²⁰ According to feminist nurse theorist, Peggy Chinn, emancipatory knowledge provides students with more personal power than would normally be available to them in the patriarchal health system.²⁰ Her concept of emancipatory knowledge is consistent with Foucault's notion that knowledge and power are inseparable; conceptually, practically and politically.²¹ Emancipatory knowledge enables women, in this case midwifery students (who in our course all happen to be female) to: (i) set and maintain healthy personal boundaries, (ii) speak up for themselves using appropriate assertion, (iii) collaborate effectively as an equal team member, (iv) be effective advocates, (v) know when to be silent, and (iv) know how to use the systems and processes of the organisation to protect themselves and others. Ultimately, we want midwifery

students of any gender to be both more effective and psychologically safer in work-based teams than would otherwise be the case if they were unprepared for the realities of teamwork in the health care system.

This paper answers the research question: How do undergraduate midwifery students experience working on team-based assignments that include mark-linked peer feedback? The first author, subsequently referred to as ‘I’, was the primary researcher for this study; she collected the data and conducted the analyses. The first two authors conducted collaborative conversations to interpret the qualitative findings. The paper begins by situating the present study within the broader health professional literature. Next, the review of research of direct relevance to the research question is presented. The paper then follows the standard format for reporting research; question, intervention (educational intervention), setting, methodology, findings, discussion and finally, conclusion.

2. Teamwork in the health professions

Teamwork research in the field of health has focussed mostly on simulation-based training, for example cardiac arrest emergencies.^{22–27} These types of ‘ad-hoc teams’ are characterised as being of short duration and having clear goal/s, lines of responsibilities and boundaries. Military style rules make these types of teamwork skills easy to teach and assess; TeamSTEPPS, for example, is a well-validated methodology for teaching emergency teamwork.²⁸ The day-to-day teamwork required in contemporary health services, however, is neither short-lived nor relatively simple; indeed teamwork requirements in health services are enduring, complex and dynamic.²⁹ Following Levi,³⁰ we distinguish the concept ‘team’ as a sub-concept of the broader construct of ‘group’ (see [Table 1](#) Definitions of Key Terms).

Health professionals perform the ongoing day-to-day activities of health care provision working in functional groups.³⁰ These functional groups are part of the organisation's hierarchy and serve organisational goals.³⁰ Unlike ‘ad hoc groups’ (discussed above), functional work groups are characterised by both ongoing relationships (for some staff members) and unstable membership (as other staff join and leave). Functional work groups often have competing goals: those established and monitored by the health service and the professional goals of different members of the group.^{31–33} These differences in professional goals are often quite evident between midwifery and obstetrics,³⁴ for example. The teamwork skills required to work effectively in functional work groups are what this study specifically aimed to address.

3. Review of related research

Using the research question as a guide, I conducted a systematic search of all health disciplines on the following databases: SCOPUS, PubMed, CINAHL and Cochrane. Key words from the research question were: “teamwork OR group-work”; “assessment OR assignment” and “Research OR Study OR trial” and “peer”. The key words variations and/or alternate terms were used when searching. The limits were to peer-reviewed research articles, published in English, in the last 10 years. I reviewed the reference list of each included article and found an additional three articles of potential relevance. Only six of the final twelve articles were directly relevant to the research question.³⁵ All six articles reported on students' perspectives and met the criteria for trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba.³⁵ These articles formed the basis of this review.

The review of related research indicated that students generally value teamwork assignments and acknowledge the importance of peer feedback.^{4,36} However, they dislike the interpersonal conflicts

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