



Midwifery Education in Practice

Preparing student midwives for professional practice: Evaluation of a student e-portfolio assessment item

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ABSTRACT

Capstone experiences facilitate consolidation and application of previous learning, strengthening professional identity and competency. This study evaluates the effectiveness and acceptability of a capstone assessment item, in the form of an e-portfolio, designed to identify and demonstrate preparedness for professional midwifery practice. A sequential explanatory strategy occurred within a mixed method research design. Final year Bachelor of Midwifery students at an Australian university, having completed the e-portfolio assessment, participated in two phases of data collection; an initial online-survey, followed by in-depth exploration of emergent concepts within a focus group. Analysis of the quantitative data identified completing the e-portfolio assessment increased students' skills, knowledge and confidence and promoted reflection and critical thinking. Three themes emerged from the qualitative data; acknowledging growth and development; transitioning to practice, and knowing 'who I am and where I am going'. The e-portfolio assessment meets the aims of a capstone assessment and provides an appropriate framework and authentic opportunity for students to identify and demonstrate their level of preparedness for professional practice, determine their ongoing learning needs and develop strategies for achieving them. The assessment item provides an opportunity to develop and articulate a personal practice philosophy and embeds the principles of lifelong learning.

1. Introduction

It is acknowledged globally that quality midwifery care is key to delivering positive health outcomes for women and babies. Several landmark publications within *The Lancet Series on Midwifery* attest to this central role of midwives including the evidence-informed framework for maternal and newborn care (Renfrew et al., 2014). The framework outlines the components of a health system needed by childbearing women and newborn infants and maps the contribution of midwifery across the whole continuum of need from health education and promotion to care of childbearing women and babies with complications.

Concurrently there has been burgeoning evidence demonstrating the benefits to women and newborns of providing maternity care within a continuity of midwifery care model compared with other models of care (Sandall et al., 2016). However, despite this compelling evidence and three decades of state, national, and international reviews calling for systematic maternity reform, few women are able to access continuity of midwifery care (Dawson et al., 2015). Dominant models of

maternity care remain largely fragmented, medicalise childbirth, and focused primarily on physical risk around the time of birth.

A values-aligned competent midwifery workforce may assist with creating the systemic reform needed to reorient maternity services with evidence-informed maternity care models. Midwifery education providers have a key role in designing programs that enable graduates to develop a clear sense of purpose within a philosophy that demonstrates a commitment to woman-centred continuity of midwifery care.

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) recognises and supports the transformative potential of midwives and provides comprehensive guidance to education providers on curriculum design (International Confederation of Midwives, 2012, 2013). Midwifery curricula should have a clearly defined philosophy, demonstrate clear values that are articulated by faculty staff, and guide the students' development of a personal midwifery philosophy and identity as they transition through the program and into professional practice. These key values should be inextricably linked to the professional competency requirements and provide students with the opportunity to develop the capacity to reflect in and on practice, and identify their growth towards

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preparedness for practice throughout the program (Bass et al., 2017).

Assessment is an integral component of curricula and should be designed to contribute to student learning. Key components of an assessment learning framework include strategies designed to foster self-awareness and acknowledge achievement across all educational activity (Broadfoot et al., 2002). Learning transpires when students are provided with assessments to develop their metacognitive abilities, think about what they are learning and reinterpret new and existing knowledge skills and conceptual understandings. If a student can see the relevance and future ‘usefulness’ of completing an assessment they are more likely to engage in a purposeful meaningful way and at a deeper level. Curriculum approaches to assessment design should therefore demonstrate constructive alignment of authentic innovative assessment strategies designed to promote learning scaffolded across the curriculum (Biggs and Tang, 2007).

Similar to other professional practice programs, the accreditation standards for midwifery education programs leading to professional registration in Australia stipulate that a program must include a summative assessment of students’ competency in practice using the national midwifery competency standards prior to graduation (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2014). Whilst students are required to meet the basic competency requirements to practice on graduation, there is a growing body of literature describing the wider focus of curricula to enable students to transition into professional practice on completion of their degree program. The term “capstone” is frequently used to describe a final year course, or assessment plan, designed to facilitate and demonstrate this transition. Durel (1993) describes the capstone experience as “a rite of passage, ...an experience through which undergraduate students both look back over their undergraduate curriculum to make sense of that experience, and look forward to a life by building on that experience” (p. 223). Therefore, the aim of the capstone experience is to provide an opportunity for students to consolidate and apply previous learning, with a view to strengthening professional identity and professional socialisation (Shircore et al., 2013). McNamara et al. (2011) identified five key features of a capstone experience including; provision of an opportunity for students to enhance their professional skills and competencies and develop lifelong learning skills, and provision of an opportunity to engage in career development and planning.

1.1. Midwifery capstone experience

The Bachelor of Midwifery (BMid) program at Griffith University has been designed within a social emancipatory transformative framework (Cranton, 2016). The program aims to provide an enriching transformative educational experience that produces graduates who are confident and competent reflexive practitioners able to transition smoothly into professional practice and provide woman-centred care within a continuity model. To support a scaffolded approach to transition into professional practice, a capstone assessment item was designed and implemented within the clinical course in the penultimate semester. The learning outcomes assessed were: 1. Self-assessment of clinical and theoretical knowledge and skills in order to create an individualised plan to successfully complete the program, and; 2. Understand and articulate the role of the midwife within the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) (2006) competency standards and 3. identify individual professional goals to be met prior to graduation.

1.2. Design and implementation of the capstone assessment item

In line with the social emancipatory transformative framework (Cranton, 2016) the assessment item was designed to be self-determining and self-reflective enabling the students to think critically about midwifery practice within its social and cultural context. The assessment task requires students to construct an electronic professional

portfolio (e-portfolio) over one semester using a template situated within the Google sites platform. To provide authenticity and links to the practice context, the template design was based on the requirements and processes of the Australian College of Midwives’ (2017) Midwifery Practice Review program. The Midwifery Practice Review program supports midwives to reflect on practice and professional development, and demonstrate their capacity to practise holistic midwifery care across the continuum of maternity care (Griffiths and Homer, 2008).

In compiling the collection of professional practice evidence for the assessment item, students are required to use the NMBA Midwifery Competency Standards (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2006) to identify areas of competency and develop a plan to achieve competency in the remaining areas. In line with national midwifery program accreditation standards, students are required to undertake a minimum number of continuity of care experiences (CoC) as part of their studies (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2014). Students at this university complete a minimum of 20 CoC experiences (with many students voluntarily choosing to exceed this number) (Carter et al., 2015). Using key clinical indicators and comparing outcomes with published national perinatal statistics and the outcome statistics (where known) of the health service where they completed their clinical practicum, students analyse their practice outcome statistics based on completed CoC experiences, as part of the capstone assessment. Through a structured model of reflection (Bass et al., 2017), and with reference to the literature, students provided commentary on the statistical data. Students were also required to identify the impact on their learning and transition to practice of completing the CoC experiences. Following completion of these information-building activities, and using the same structured model of reflection, students discover their own strengths, skills and weaknesses and identify future opportunities and threats to achieving future learning goals. From the cumulative information, the student creates a professional development plan with clear goals and learning outcomes to direct their learning, in achieving competency and preparedness for professional practice on graduation. As well as promoting the synthesis and demonstration of course and program learning outcomes, the e-portfolio assessment provides students with a valuable tool to commence preparing for the transition to employment through the inclusion of a requirement to build a curriculum vitae and develop a midwifery philosophy statement.

The rationale behind the decision to use an e-portfolio design framework has been presented in previously published work, which provides details of an evaluation of the quality and validity of the design concept by an international panel of academics (Baird et al., 2016). The design was positively evaluated and the e-portfolio capstone assessment item determined by this group of academics to present an engaging authentic learning experience. They confirmed that the e-portfolio platform would support and enable the students to demonstrate preparedness for practice and promote professional development and lifelong learning (Baird et al., 2016).

This paper reports on the experience of final year midwifery students’ completing the e-portfolio capstone assessment item within a BMid program in South East Queensland. The aim of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness and acceptability of the e-portfolio assessment item designed to identify and demonstrate preparedness for professional practice from the student’s perspective.

2. Research design

A mixed method research design, using a sequential explanatory strategy (Cresswell, 2011), was adopted. Student midwives participated in two phases of data collection. The first phase was an online survey with Likert scale and free text responses. The second phase was a focus group to explore concepts identified in the survey. The survey tool was designed to reflect quality indicators of academic assessment identified within the literature and grouped into eight domains (Baartman et al.,

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