

Perceptions

of Postbasic Nursing Students in the Use of Seminars

as a Teaching Method

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ABSTRACT

With the transformation of education in the country, and the outcomes-based education that is learner-centred fast gaining ground, nurse educators need to revisit the teaching methods and consider those that will foster reflective thinking through interactive constructing process. These methods, according to Cropley and Dave (1978:196) prepare learners for lifelong learning and to challenge problems in the working world.

A descriptive and exploratory study using descriptive naïve sketches to collect data from 44 final year post basic nursing students at a university was undertaken. The students volunteered to take part in the study. A content analysis according to Tesch's (in Cresswell 1994:55) method was used. A follow-up interview using an open-ended question to gather more in depth information as well as to validate the collected data was done with 10 students from the previous sample. Four positive and three negative categories and their sub-categories were identified namely: Positive categories:- encourage active participation, professional growth and maturity, facilitate reflective thinking, encourage facilitative communication and interpersonal skills. Negative categories were:- time consuming, causes conflict amongst students, inability to teach becomes an obstacle. A literature control was conducted to support and confirm the findings. Concluding remarks and recommendations for effective use of seminar as a teaching method are made.

INTRODUCTION

The recognition of nursing education by the South African Qualification Authority Act 1995 (SAQA) as belonging to the country's mainstream of education system has been a breakthrough and particularly instrumental in raising the awareness and interest in the effectiveness of nursing education.

The National Qualification Framework (SAQA Act 1995 – clause 2) is taking the direction of an integrated outcomes-based education approach to learning whose central theme is the facilitation of reflective thinking through integration and interactive methods of teaching. According to Van der Horst and McDonald (1997:49,50), these methods of teaching should foster self-direction in learning, self-regulation, self-management and self assessment. Students should take full control and responsibility for constructing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in their learning process. The outcomes-based education is learner centered and discourages the positivistic, reductionistic objective-based type of learning that socialise students to be passive recipients of knowledge Pitts (in Walton 1996:400-403)

Post basic nursing students at tertiary institutions are adult learners who, according to Knowles (1980), possesses the four characteristics of an adult learner namely: self concept, experience, learner readiness and learner orientation. With these characteristics the post basic nursing students are in a better position to challenge the reflective methods of teaching and learning based on the interactive constructing process such as seminars.

Pine and West (1986:584) see learning from the constructivistic perspective that learners must always be involved in the construction and generating their own understanding of reality. Ausubel (1968) also assert that meaningful learning takes place through social interaction. The learner is continuously engage in the construction of own knowledge and skills to make sense of their world through “deep processing” multi routes to access rich knowledge Coles (in Humphreys and Ison 1993:110). Coles maintain that knowledge is not acquired by students like marbles filling an urn, but knowledge is assimilated into existing structures like new buds on a tree, and therefore needs interactive ap-



proaches to learning. Seminar method is one of them.

On the contrary, from the researchers observation, post basic nursing students are still holding on to the teacher-centered approach to learning. They still expect to be directed and receive knowledge passively through the positivistic objective-based methods of teaching. They claim that they have multiple roles to play such as being a worker, a wife, a mother, a student and sometimes a bread winner in the family. This situation makes them to resent learner-centered teaching methods such as a seminar because they are always tired and have no time to explore knowledge or take full responsibility in their learning.

The researcher believes that there has to be a starting point to foster changes in the transformation of nursing education since, world-wide, literature put emphasis on the necessity of a paradigm shift in the methods of teaching to foster critical-analytical and reflective thinking. These methods are interactive in nature. The researcher was motivated to undertake a study to determine the perceptions of post basic nursing students with regard to the use of seminar as a teaching method. The research question arising from this problem is: "What are the perceptions of post basic nursing students at the university with regard to the use of seminar as a teaching method?" Therefore the purpose of the study is to explore and describe the perception of post basic nursing students at a university in Gauteng province with regard to the use of seminar as a teaching method.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the study is realised through the following objectives:

- * to explore and describe the perceptions of post basic nursing students with regard to the use of seminar as a teaching method at a university in Gauteng
- * to make recommendations for the effective use of seminar as a teaching method

TERMINOLOGY

Seminar

A seminar is a teaching method where a group of students are working in a specific subject under the guidance of a teacher. It is a method of organising a class to allow for guided discussion of a specific topic or problem Mellish, Brink and Paton (1998: 127)

Facilitator

A facilitator is one who makes things possible for another, through a process, which makes it simpler for the person to achieve a goal, and to grow personally and professionally Mellish, Brink and Paton (1998: 75)

Post Basic Nursing Student

In this study post basic nursing students refer to registered nurses who undertake a post basic diploma or degree course on a regular one-day per week attendance at a university in Gauteng.

RESEARCH METHOD

The design selected is exploratory and descriptive Mouton and Marais (1990:43,90); Talbot (1994:90), which is contextual in nature. From a class of 60 final year students for a post-basic degree in nursing, a purposive sample of 44 students volunteered to participate in the study. 10 students were absent from class. In this exploratory and descriptive study, naïve sketches Giorgi (in Omery 1983:52) were used to elicit students' perceptions in the use of a seminar as a teaching method. The study took place at the end of the second semester. A central question was written on a transparency and shown to students using an overhead projector as follows: "What are your perceptions with regard to the use of a seminar as a teaching method?" Students were given sheets of papers to write on. Participation was strictly voluntary, and participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity (no name on the sheets), and freedom to withdraw at anytime they wished to do so without threat of prejudice from the lecturer. Participants were allowed to write without any time limit so that perceptions could unfold as they existed. As participants were writing, the researcher was collecting field notes to demonstrate the group dynamics as they were writing.

Tesch (in Cresswell 1994: 155)'s method of data analysis was used. Analysis proceeded inductively by classifying each narrative unit separately into positive and negative categories. To acquire indepth information and to validate the data collected about the perceptions, a follow-up interview was made with 10 participants from the previous sample who also volunteered to take part in the interview using a similar open ended question. Recommendations for the effective use of seminars as a teaching method were made. An external coder, who is familiar with the protocol, was purposively selected to independently analyse the data according to the method of data analysis as described by Tesch (in Cresswell 1994:55). A consensus discussion of the findings was held to identify the categories and subcategories. Throughout the study, trustworthiness was ensured according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) related to the four aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The following principles

of trustworthiness are justified. Prolonged engagement, since the researcher is an experienced nurse educator. Triangulation, by use of various sources (nurse educators and literature). An external, independent coder was used for the content analysis and consensus was reached on the main categories, as well as a dense description of the research process and method was given.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND LITERATURE CONTROL

The most striking finding of the study is that all participants considered the use of seminars as 'more than the best' method of teaching and learning for adult learners. However, few negative aspects were identified and recommendations made for the effective use of the strategy. The positive and negative perceptions of post basic nursing students with regard to the use of seminar as a teaching method are reflected in table one.

Positive Aspects

Positive perceptions identified are: active participation; professional growth and maturity; facilitation of reflective thinking; effective, facilitative communication and interpersonal skills.

Active participation

All participants acknowledged the value of active participation and the involvement by every member of the group in preparing for seminar presentation. Participants also indicated that this method of teaching helps in building up confidence, being independent and taking part in a group freely as evidenced by: *"Yes, a seminar method can be used as a teaching method because it teaches students to search information on their own, be responsible, evaluate their ability to participate in a group, and to be in control of their own learning."*

Constructivists encourages active participation of students in their own learning. They are interested in the acquisition, understanding and application of conceptually structured knowledge which the students acquire by continuous construction and reconstruction of meaning through active interaction between the new knowledge and the existing knowledge (Pine 1978); Pine and Novak (in Pine and West 1986: 584). It is therefore important that students are encouraged to engage in constructive debate, dialogue, discourse and narratives during seminars to help them view issues, facts and ideas from a different

Table 1: Distribution of perceptions of post-basic nursing students in the use of seminar as a teaching method. (n=44)

| POSITIVE CATEGORIES | N | NEGATIVE CATEGORIES | N |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Active Participation | 44 (100%) | Time Consuming | 10 (23%) |
| * Sharing of ideas * Literature search * Problem Solving | | * No time for group discussion * No time for library search * No time for teacher input * Presentation time prolonged | |
| Growth and Maturity | 40 (91%) | Conflict | 7 (16%) |
| * Responsible * Independence * Confidence * Commitment * Teaching * Experience * Self-evaluation | | * Selfishness in group formation * Group acceptance/ culture * Group pressure * No co-operation | |
| Reflective Thinking Skills | 37 (84%) | Inability to teach | 6 (14%) |
| * Critical-analytical and reflective thinking leading to Life-long learning | | * No individual-consideration * Lack of confidence * Lack of library skills * Lack of structured guidelines * Inadequate preparation | |
| Facilitative Communication and Interpersonal Skills | 30 (68%) | | |

perspective for meaningful learning to take place.

Heiderken (1946: 331) states that seminars should always be a co-operative discussion in which problems are attacked. It may be planned and conducted by the teacher or co-operatively with the student. The author maintains that seminars, if properly conducted, teach students the method of scientific analysis and techniques of research. Co-operative learning stimulates peer interaction and according to Fraser et al (1993:52), co-operative learning refers to a variety of activities where students are encouraged to work in groups with the intention of developing aspects such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, face to face interaction and co-operative skills.

Fraser et al (1993:52) indicate the requirements for co-operative learning namely: Co-operative skills which include effective communication, conflict management, decision making, shared leadership, recognition, respect and trust building. These are professional virtues that must be cherished by nursing

students. Co-operative learning should give learners the opportunity to develop these skills. Individual accountability is another requirement where each individual member of the group should be held responsible for the performance of the group in general. The performance of the group in a given task may also be assessed on the performance of one individual in a group. This enforces the fact that each individual has to develop a sense of responsibility and has to realise that the survival of the group depends on the performance of each member of the group as evidenced by: *"equal distribution of efforts is necessary for the success of the group, or else leave out the one who does not co-operate"* The performance of the group has to be assessed on a regular basis in order to identify and attend to problems. Co-operative learning help the learners to engage in face to face interaction. Learners engage in helping, assisting, supporting and encouraging each other. Students exchange facts and attempt to crystallise a group opinion, which is sound and workable. They develop socially desirable skills and attitudes in addition to acquiring knowledge. Skill-

fully directed seminars give training in self-learning, promote independent thought, group spirit and an attitude of co-operation because they give practice in joint study, discussion and problem solving. The goal of nursing education is to prepare a critical, analytical and creative nurse who will function independently in a dynamic, value-laden practical situation where decision making and problem solving are the hallmark of their practice Cerinus (1994:35). Getting used to solving problems through seminars is therefore helpful.

Vygotsky (in Mellish, Brink and Paton 1998: 32) argues that cognitive development takes place through our conversations and interaction with more capable members (educators) or peers as evidenced by a citation "what I can do today with someone, I can do on my own tomorrow". Educators can act as facilitators whilst capable students, chosen by the group, can be leaders of the group.

Professional Growth and Maturity

Forty participants indicated that the seminar method of teaching promotes

personal and professional growth and maturity. This is a positive note as demonstrated by a quotation: *"seminars promote personal and professional growth of students. We are assertive and can accept and tolerate one another. We are responsible and independent to the extent that our teaching skills are also improved. Thanks to the proper guidance of the teacher."*

Use of the interactive methods of learning help students to increase their skills in teaching, promote assertiveness and generate culture sensitivity among students. This statement is supported by Mellish, Brink and Paton (1998:314) who maintain that assertiveness helps one develop skilful ways of handling conflict by expressing contradictory feelings and opinions and set limits. It reduces stress and anxiety in handling social situations, improves one's self-image, and promotes more positive feelings about oneself and actions indicative of personal growth.

Post basic students at university are adult learners who are self-directed and self-regulatory with accumulated experience to appreciate the value of application of knowledge to real-life situations (Knowles 1980: 44). Jarvis (1983) asserts that the teacher, as a facilitator, must create a dialogic, co-operative and interactive climate conducive to deep-holistic lifelong learning. The climate must be challenging but also have a positive affective climate (Mellish, Brink and Paton 1998: 33). One of the roles of the facilitator during seminars is to provide a physical and psychologically conducive climate to promote creativity and assertiveness of students, and to respect one another.

Facilitation of reflective thinking skills

Thirty-seven participants indicated that seminar method of teaching developed their thinking skills as displayed by the citation: *"seminars provide students with critical, innovative and reflective thinking. One becomes independent and looks at the problem differently"*. Thinking skills are a requirement for lifelong learning. The first critical cross-field outcome designed (SAQA) in Van der Horst and McDonald (1997:49) state that the learner should be able to identify and solve problems by using critical and creative thinking skills. This learning outcome challenges the educators to use teaching methods that will facilitate critical and reflective thinking skills in learners. Pine and West (1986: 584) state that constructivists see learners as mentally active agents struggling to make sense of their world. Therefore students engaged in seminars actively construct knowledge under the guidance of the

facilitator for meaningful learning to take place.

Effective, facilitative communication and interpersonal relationship

Thirty participants indicated that seminars help students to develop effective and facilitative communication and interpersonal relationship skills to be able to interact with others as evidenced by a quotation: *"through seminars we learn to communicate effectively, we debate and share ideas with others. Interpersonal skills are improved in a constructive way with different people of different cultures."* (Mellish, Brink and Paton 1998: 309) state that student involvement which occurs in seminar method, gives them practice in expressing themselves, assessing the thoughts of others and provides opportunities for practising interpersonal relationship skills. Interacting with students of differing cultures assists in knowing and understanding other students' values and how they do things may contribute positively to learning.

Negative Aspects

Negative aspects which participants highlighted were that seminar method of teaching is time consuming, ineffective due to the inability of students to teach and thus causing confusion and conflict amongst themselves.

Time consuming

Ten participants stated that the seminar method of teaching consumes much of their time in having to meet for discussion. Presentation time is prolonged, leaving no time for the facilitator's input, therefore students would depend solely on other student's information. Students have no time for library research, as they are workers as well as family members. The following quotations support the statement: *"this method is inadequate for part time students as there is no time to meet for discussions. We are staying at different places and do different shifts at work". "It is time consuming in that other areas of the course may be neglected or poorly presented. Time is not enough for the facilitator to give input and where there is no guidance, students get confused and frustrated."*

To support the argument Vygotsky (in Mellish, Brink and Paton 1998: 32) states that the learner is on the verge of learning and will be able to solve problems if provided with the 'right' amount of structure and verbal prompts such as (questioning, prodding and recall of prior information). However, the support provided must be characterised by joint decision making and shared power of students and authority. Part time students need to have skills in time management in order to strike a balance

between the family, work and the course. Library skills are necessary to explore information at tertiary institutions, therefore the facilitator must arrange library orientation sessions for students at the beginning of the semester.

Conflict

Seven participants stated that when using a seminar method, conflict is caused by selfishness, dominance, and non-acceptance of other students especially those of different cultures, group competition, no co-operation and peer group pressure. This is evidenced by the following citations: *"The problem comes when students selfishly choose their friends to form groups, or according to their intellectual ability or nationality. Some students want to belong to two groups at the same time. Non-participation by other members of the group or dominance is another problem that exists in group work, and asking too many questions seems like an attack on the student presenting."* Yet another problem is the spirit of *'I want to present better than others' or 'you are too slow for the group'.*

Argyle (in Byran 1994: 92) attributes the described behaviour as resulting from socially inadequate individuals who have failed to learn a wide range of interpersonal skills through peer group relationships. They are perplexed by 'unfamiliar' behaviour of others. They feel rejected or reject members of other cultures. There is confusion in role expectation, values, feelings and self-identity. This type of behaviour is a deterrent to effective use of a seminar as a teaching method and Vygotsky (in Mellish, Brink & Paton 1998:32) state that dominance, selfishness by the more able partner, or to merely demonstrate the solution will not help the group to learn and develop.

Inability to teach

Six participants expressed their frustration due to their inability to teach as indicated by the following citations: *"seminar method does not accommodate individuality. Some of us are not good teachers by nature and we have to suffer those consequences. Students would stand in front of the class, rattle over the material and mumble incoherently in a monotonous voice. Thereafter the topic is done, with no structure or follow-up by the teacher, it is a waste of time"*. To be able to teach one need to have explored the information in the library. It becomes difficult if one is not conversant with the use of the library as indicated by a citation with regard to the use of the library: *"seminars are interesting if one is able to search for information. I am still not sure how to explore information using computers. One is not sure where to get information. To us library search is an em-*

barrassing situation indeed." To address these ill-findings, participants, Mellish, Brink and Paton (1998: 127, 314) as well as Heiderken (1946: 333) made positive contributions to be included in the recommendations for the successful implementation of seminar as a teaching method.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions derived from the positive and negative perceptions by post-basic nursing students with regard to the use of seminars as teaching methods are as follows:

- * Seminar method of teaching promotes personal and professional growth of students through interactive and co-operative learning which encourages teamship in shared decision making and problem solving. It increase the learners skills of assertiveness through knowledge, and encourages acceptance and tolerance of others.

- * Students who learn through seminar method of teaching develop critical-analytical and reflective thinking skills to enable them to solve problems and function independently.

- * Through the use of seminar method, the interpersonal relationship of students amongst themselves and the facilitators become improved. Continuous interaction results in self-awareness and understanding of different cultures and values, and students develop positive attitudes towards learning.

- * Use of seminar method of teaching for part-time students with employment and family commitments, is frustrating and time consuming. Students are unable to explore information from the library, some students do not have the ability to teach and therefore more time is wasted with presentations, giving the facilitator no time to give input and guide the students on the topic.

- * Conflict amongst group members is caused by the following factors: selfishness, dominance, competition spirit, peer-group pressure (some students are slow learners), and non-acceptance of other students especially those of different cultures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made were arrived at through deductive analysis of the participants perceptions supported by literature. The recommendations may not be regarded as ends in themselves but a means to an end. It is a situation where the facilitator, in partnership with the students, must clearly define the top-

ics such that students have a clear understanding of what is required from them. Each topic must have clear and attainable objectives. The seminar group is preferably limited to 10 or 15 students with a maximum of 25 (Heiderken 1946: 333).

Culture differences should be considered during group formation, assertive training must be accommodated to develop skilful ways of handling conflict, thus reducing stress and anxiety in presentations and group discussion. Members of the group must select the group leader. It is important that the group leader keep the discussion within the limits of the problem discussed. The climate must allow free discussion under the guidance of the facilitator. All should enter into the seminar discussion in an informal but orderly manner. Preparation must be thorough and active participation be encouraged.

The facilitator or leader should be skilled in encouraging the timid, curbing the talkative, and gently but firmly guiding the discussion in other appropriate ways. Provide students with a structured framework of what is expected of them with regard to the topic, and help students to suggest available sources of information. Discussion must continue after presentation followed by the facilitator's comments. The role of the facilitator is to keep the discussion flowing to prevent dominance of the group by one member and to keep to the point. The success of a seminar method of teaching is build on the professional virtues such as: commitment, mutual trust and respect, responsibility and accountability, caring, courage, patience and empathy. It would be interesting if the same study could be replicated with full-time student nurses. The following hypothesis could be tested: seminar method of teaching facilitates learning of student nurses through reflective thinking skills.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Post-basic nursing students are adult learners who are self-directing and self-regulating. The situation challenges the teacher as a facilitator to create a climate that is conducive to the facilitation of reflective thinking as a skill for lifelong learning. Reflective teaching methods are a point of departure.

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