



Planning problem based learning opportunities for students in social work and nursing at Staffordshire: A case study in learning and teaching about assessment in social work education

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This case study focuses on the initial planning of some joint teaching for social work and nursing students at the University of Staffordshire, using a Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach to teach the process of assessment. This case study was developed from an interview with Bernard Moss and Liz English from social work and Betty Harris, Dawn Holding and Verity Mitchell from nursing.

Origin of the project

Bernard Moss from social work and Betty Harris from nursing found themselves talking to each other at an event within the university and found there were some common interests. At that point the new social work degree was still a bit on the horizon, but as the new degree began to get closer, possibilities were starting to emerge and other colleagues were brought into the discussion to begin to explore whether this was something that really could happen on an interdisciplinary basis. Questions that were then explored were whether nursing and social work students could work together in a similar way and whether a PBL approach would be one way of facilitating joint learning. Other university staff now involved include Dawn Holding and Verity Mitchell from nursing and Liz English from social work.

Purpose

There are a number of reasons why the group is proposing a PBL approach:

One of the attractions of PBL is that you can lecture students until you were 'blue in the face' and they still do not seem to know what the realities are. We want students in the early stages of their careers to have to work with students in another discipline and to take responsibility for their learning.

(Bernard)

From a social work perspective, one of the Department of Health initiatives is to try to expand the number of practice learning opportunities that social work students will have, and this provides opportunities for students to practise as part of a multidisciplinary team. The staff involved also considered that it's important for nursing and social work students that they need to think 'outside the narrow box':

Some of the students feel that they need to solve the problem and they say for example 'but I don't know what the local authority does with children who need to be in care and all this'. What we are saying is what we are actually looking for is your communication skills: how you engage with the person, how you communicate with them, how you interview them, how you listen to them. Students get so hung up on needing to know. Somebody has presented them with a problem and they want someone to give them a prescription about how to solve this problem. It's a good lesson for a lot of them. (Liz)

Furthermore:

... because in some ways that is almost the most important thing that they take responsibility for finding out, making sure that the evidence that they have gathered is correct, and finding ways of bringing it back to the group so that the group can gain the benefit of it. (Bernard)

Students

Social work and nursing will both have intakes of approximately 60 students and all will be about six or seven months into their courses. The nursing students come from three separate streams focussing on adults, mental health and children, whereas the social work programme is a generic course. PBL is used already in both courses in a variety of ways, and all students will have some experience of PBL prior to the joint teaching:

... so they will be getting familiar with that style of learning and taking responsibility and in that sense what we are doing jointly is a culmination of a process... So we hope that by the time that they actually get to this joint working session students will know what it means to trust each other, to work collaboratively with each other, to see some of the benefits of it and to recognize that it is one of the best preparations for practice. (Bernard)

The total number in each group still has to be worked out but it will be in the region of 10 or 12 absolute maximum, with each group being half social work and half nursing students. Social work students are based on the Stoke on Trent campus and the nursing students are on the Stafford campus. Although each student will know others from their own course to a greater or lesser extent, one of the most important things that they will have to do at the very beginning is to establish a group identity to help them feel that this is now a new group that has to work together.

The groups will be scheduled to meet on four or five occasions over a five week period to work through the particular scenario. For social work students, this will coincide with the period they are going to be on an observational placement in a number of settings for the other four days of the week. Hopefully the observational placement will feed into the subject matter of the PBL. Similarly in nursing, this is a space in the program when they have completed a whole range of different modules and will be involved in practice for four days a week. So they will be using the practices as a resource and case notes.

Envisaged outcomes

There are a number of envisaged outcomes from the joint teaching, which was noted as an apparently inefficient way of teaching:

You can say in some ways that this approach is less efficient than lecturing because of the staff inputs required. We would argue that this is a more efficient approach to teaching because the outcomes are much richer qualitatively. The efficiency of it is that whenever students go up the wrong alleyway, follow a red herring, they argue amongst themselves about what is a priority for the problem. There are all sorts of things that go on in that group that take up more time and more energy than having an hour and a half lecture and a handout. But the upside of that is that they have actually read through all of the problem which is reflected in real life, gained the kind of skills they need, and need to develop. (Liz)

Yet

When a student is faced with a situation, whatever that situation is in practice they should have the skills and the know how to deal with that, not necessarily the answers because the answers are different for each one. And that is why this is a terrific model for developing reflective practice. (Betty)

It was thought that giving students the skills and the confidence of being able to acknowledge that you don't know and how do you then go and find out good quality information is important to develop at an early stage:

How do you talk to people? How to ask questions? How do you confront issues? How do you challenge something? Because if they are ready to challenge each other it is then easier when you start to develop those skills to then challenge colleagues and then challenge management. There is also a bit about what real life is about when you have to go and work in a different setting, someone else's territory, and that is important to get experience of this. (Betty)

Preparation

The scenario is still to be developed. The process is beginning with some suggestions about the content of the scenario and possibilities for collaborative work, also taking into account the particular issues for each group of students. Students will initially get very little information. In a scenario currently being used with nursing students, the initial information provided is the presenting problem and the client's handbag. The scenario will evolve in response to the various inputs of members of the group. Whatever is done will be based on reality, and it is authentic in that it reflects what you will get exposed to when you walk out and actually experience practice:

Actually the intention is with the PBL they start from a place of not knowing so what is important is for them to be able to identify what they don't know. We are not necessarily interested in what they know only from their personal perspective or experience or past experience that might be similar to the scenario. So they are actually presented with a scenario which is kind of illstructured not that specific to kind of get them to start thinking get some imagining space and from that kind of start to drive them to start to consider what it is they need to know about its development or to look at. (Betty)

At this stage of things, it is envisaged that there will be a designated group of staff and both schools will pilot this particular first group through. Facilitators will need more information than the students such as lists of resources, and be aware of the learning objectives from the module. Students have some ideas as to the learning objectives, but it is a matter of these areas need to be covered rather than how each group covers them.

Process

Each session will last for about an hour and a half to two hours, with sessions scheduled in two hour slots. There will be between four and five meetings one of which is without a facilitator. Groups will be staggered throughout the day simply because the number of facilitators. Both nursing and social work will provide facilitators for half the groups. This may mean some facilitators will work with two or three groups. However, for students the involvement will be for five full days. In addition to the sessions students have three or four hours to do background work that they need to make the contacts.

At the end of the first session, each student or each pair of students will have certain tasks to go and find out and report back to the next session this is what we discovered, for instance about the policies, or whether they are entitled to open that handbag. The next week they will come back with that information, which will be fed back to the group. This way, each student contributes to the broadening knowledge of the group. New questions will emerge each week for the students to go off and research. Some additional information may be provided by the facilitators, and this may in part depend on the questions which students are asking, for example, information about the kind of setting where the client is. There might be an occasional trigger, such as new information at some point to get students to shift their focus to get to where they need to in order to ensure key learning is covered over the course of the scenario.

In addition to researching answers to questions which arise from the scenario, students will be expected to keep a log book where they keep copies of information they find and sources they meet and also keep notes from PBL sessions. Nursing students who are currently involved in PBL are asked to write, and again it varies where they are on the program, but over two scenarios they have to produce three reflective pieces of writing in the log book and then hand them in to the facilitators who give them formative feedback. In terms of the course work for the nursing students, there is also an assignment around care, models of care and the critical incidence of them choosing the person they are working with and focus on a critical incidence and look at the care in practice and the model that

was used in that person's care. For social work students, the joint PBL sessions will form part of the communications skills and social work 30 credit module, and there would be similar expectations as for nursing. There will be practical arrangements such as getting people sorted out into groups at the very beginning and making sure they are all in the right place at the right time to start of with, but it is anticipated that will be relatively straightforward. Both groups of students include very few males. In the past nursing have tried to put two men together in a group rather than having an isolated token male. The placement of black and Asian students may also warrant some consideration.

As well as arrangements for students, the group is also aware of the need to make sure that there is a mechanism for liaising with the various facilitators who are leading the groups, and that resources and handbooks are prepared. A pre-briefing session for the facilitators to meet and go through the scenario will need to occur, followed up by a session halfway through where staff can just check in with where we are up to. The facilitators will also need to meet at the end of the series of sessions for debriefing and evaluation.

Support

There are also aspects of university infrastructure which will support the joint teaching. Although social work is taught at Stoke on Trent, and the nursing students involved in the joint teaching are based at Stafford, there is a minibus which runs between the campuses, and where possible, students will attend the sessions at the campus closest to where they live.

Rooms won't be a problem because what happens at this end of semester, demand for rooms starts to taper off. Most modules have been completed and so we can get the several rooms that are required.

Developmental Issues

Finding a suitable time in the timetables of both social work and nursing students has been facilitated by the fact that both groups of students are involved in placements for four days a week in April, with no other discipline-specific teaching needing to be scheduled at that time. Early thinking is that feedback on formative assessment tasks, such as reflective logs, will be provided to students by the facilitator of their group, irrespective of whether their facilitator is from the same or different discipline. Formatively principles have been established about the philosophy and about common goals, so it doesn't feel like that will be a problem. It was noted that the facilitators "need to be able to model some respect for the two disciplines" (Bernard):

... because that addresses the big issue of "I am not going to work in that if it is going to be managed by a nurse", a social worker might say or vice versa. That can be a big issue for a lot of people. (Liz)

However, as far as the summative work will be concerned, then social work staff will deal with the social work assignments and nursing staff will deal with the nursing assignments because that is part of the professional requirements.

Another issue to be addressed concerns attendance:

It is going to be compulsory for students to turn up. Obviously if people do miss sessions it does affect the dynamic of the whole group. That's not going to be unique to this, it happens all the time as an issue. (Bernard)

In nursing, it has been the practice that if a student misses one PBL session then a point will be made of seeing them and just checking out that they are alright or if there are any issues or something getting in the way of them coming in and if it happens a second time then another approach needs to be taken. In social work, students will have to do twenty days of simulated practice of which fifteen are out in the agency and these five will be part of that package and so it is compulsory. Ways of making up the missed time will have to be found, not just for practice requirements in terms of numbers of days but also because it is so closely linked to assessment in terms of the live interview they are going to be doing for their summative assessment. Most of the other social work assignments will be in by that point, so the focus will be on this and work out in the agencies that will be the focus. Having had two terms of quite heavy academic input for people who are young and motivated and keen this should be the first taste of practice for them and hopefully they will be keen and want to do it and motivated to come anyway.

Course in Action

This case study was produced in April 2003 and highlights some of the anticipated issues which have already been anticipated, and will need to be considered in further planning for the first sessions of joint teaching in April 2004.

Review

An evaluation is planned.

Next steps

Planning this series of joint sessions at level 1 is the current priority, but the development of joint learning activities at levels 2 and 3 could be a future initiative.

This case study was prepared by Beth R. Crisp and Mark R. Anderson, Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Glasgow, in consultation with Bernard Moss and Liz English, Institute of Social Work & Applied Social Studies, Staffordshire University, and Betty Harris, Dawn Holding and Verity Mitchell, School of Health, Staffordshire University. This is one of a series of case studies which have been produced as part of a larger project about learning and teaching of assessment in social work, which was commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the Social Policy and Social Work learning and teaching support network (SWAPItsn).



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