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Self directed learning in nutrition counselling

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Abstract

Self-directed and problem oriented learning are significant components of effective adult education (Knowles, 1990), yet for various reasons are difficult to foster in higher education institutions. Given the role of fear/safety issues in the adult learning process (Sappington, 1984), it is argued that the threatening nature of assessment, and indeed the forms of assessment, such as examinations and teacher designed assignments, are major contributors to this problem. The threat of assessment may be even more daunting when it involves the observation of clinical performance.

The University of Wollongong received five National Teaching Development Grants awarded by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) this year. Four of the projects, all aimed at improving the quality of student learning, are described below by the principal researchers.

CAUT project 1

Self Directed Learning in Nutrition Counselling

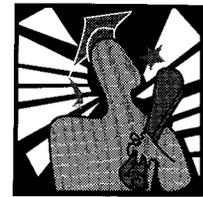
Linda Tapsell

Self-directed and problem oriented learning are significant components of effective adult education (Knowles, 1990), yet for various reasons are difficult to foster in higher education institutions. Given the role of fear/safety issues in the adult learning process (Sappington, 1984), it is argued that the threatening nature of assessment, and indeed the forms of assessment, such as examinations and teacher designed assignments, are major contributors to this problem. The threat of assessment may be even more daunting when it involves the observation of clinical performance.

This project aims to develop self directed learning skills in student dietitian-nutritionists using audio-tapes of their performance in nutrition counselling. Students will develop a critical view of professional practice and be better prepared for the ensuing supervised practical placement within the health system and thereafter the workplace. Competency standards recently developed by a joint DAA-NOOSR (Dietitians' Association of Australia - National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition) taskforce will form the basis of assessment. Although these standards are referred to in determining educational objectives, their utility in professional qualifying courses has yet to be determined. The national taskforce will be consulted as the reference group for the project.

In Australian dietetic education, nutrition counselling is assessed through observation by and feedback from supervisors without the use of technological aids. The value of supervised performance assessment is in its openness in assisting the student to learn the required performance, and its utility in promoting self-directed learning skills (Jessup, 1991). Studies of student dietitians in the United States have shown that supervised practice creates an awareness of the need for continuing self-education (Oring and Philal, 1993). This project will extend the supervised assessment process by audiotaping interactions between students and patients and analysing the contents with reference to a performance checklist. Audiotaping of interactions with clients has been used in medical education, where it has been found to be a convenient and effective method for encouraging self directed learning and improving performance (Sideras, 1990). In this project, the audiotaping of students goes beyond the normal responsibilities of assessment, and the learning value of the innovation needs to be carefully assessed with professional expertise at the national level.

The MSc (Nutrition and Dietetics) at the University of Wollongong is one of the six accredited courses in Australia. This course qualifies graduates as professional dietitian-nutritionists who generally seek employment in the public health system. Although the course comprises individual subjects, the learning is integrated and the curriculum takes a problem-solving approach to progressively build on professional knowledge and skills. Students are introduced to simple case studies in the first session and begin to develop interviewing skills. The course uses the resources of both the University and the Illawarra Area Health Service, such that



students have access to 'real-life' learning experiences. The subject Nutrition Counselling is undertaken in the second session of the course prior to students undertaking long term clinical placement within the health system in NSW. Nutrition counselling involves the integration of knowledge and skills in a way which is responsive to circumstance and at the completion of this subject, students are expected to adequately counsel individuals on dietary change at a beginning practitioner level. Students have been able to counsel consenting clients under supervision in the manner described earlier whilst undertaking this subject, but have commented that access to transcripts of their performance would improve the learning experience.

Assessment of Students

Where the educational goals concern professional practice, assessments based entirely on essays and exams are limited (Jessup, 1991). In this case, particularly where performance standards are stipulated by the profession, competency based assessment is appropriate. There are problems, however, in developing this form of assessment within the University.

Competence is defined as "the abilities to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the standard expected in employment" (Heywood et al, 1992), and professional competence refers to the integration of professional qualities within the task, not simply the performance of the task (Hager, 1992). There is some discussion as to whether competency assessment is entirely outcomes based, or may incorporate process measures (Hager, 1992; Fletcher, 1992), but it does focus on individuals and is continuous, not 'one-off', assessment (Fletcher, 1992). Judgements are based on a comparison of collected evidence to pre-determined standards, and the validity of the process is determined by the sufficiency and appropriateness of evidence and the clarity of assessment criteria (Jessup, 1991). Fletcher (1992) states that 'observation of natural workplace performance must be the primary form of assessment', but at the same time recognises that there are operational constraints. These are all issues which the reference group have been dealing with in the theoretical sense for some years in the national DAA project on professional competency standards (Ash, 1992).

In this proposal operational constraints concern observing student performance in an outpatient

clinic of the Area Health Service, with concomitant organisational and ethical issues. Although audiotaping of interactions between clients and providers was conducted in 1992 for research purposes, students indicated they would like to have access to the tapes to review their performance. In order to establish the process as a regular component of student learning a teaching clinic will be formed which will involve consultation and negotiation with the Area Health Service and clients themselves.

There are also academic issues which will need to be critically assessed throughout the project. These concern the validity and reliability of the assessment protocol, and they will form a large component of the consultation with the reference group. Case studies will be specifically reviewed by this group for this purpose .

Benefits

Adult learning principles suggest that a problem-oriented approach to learning is appropriate (Knowles, 1990), particularly in the development of professional competence. If students are given the opportunity to observe and reflect on their own performance, they will also be able to define their future learning needs. This in turn would assist in developing their self-concept as responsible for their future professional development.

Evaluation findings from the project should indicate the utility of such a protocol in the qualifying years, and provide further information on the use of adult learning principles in educational institutions. In particular, results will focus on the value of problem solving techniques and evidence of self-directed learning skills. The benefits of the project lie in the implementation of an assessment protocol which more closely reflects the learning objectives of the subject, a goal which is pursued by this university. It prepares the student for supervised assessment in the ensuing practical placement and for self-assessment in the future workplace. The project will also contribute to the information available to the national reference group on the utility of the competency based standards in professional education. Problems identified through this project may add to the academic discussion of competencies in higher education.

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Linda Tapsell is a senior lecturer in the Department of Public Health and Nutrition at the University of Wollongong. For the last three years she has been working with a national DEET-funded group for the development of competency-based standards for dietitians.

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