



Increasing student involvement and learning through using debate as an assessment

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Abstract

Assessment has long been recognised as the single most influential factor in shaping what and how students in higher education choose to learn and the quality of learning outcomes depends on the quality of assessment. Within intellectual disability nursing the student are prepared within a biopsychosocialeducational model and curriculum address these challenges. Structured student debates have great potential for promoting competence and in-depth knowledge of substantive topics relevant to practice. Like other interactive assignments designed to more closely resemble real-world activities, issue oriented debates actively engage students in course content. Allowing students to develop and exercise skills that translate to practice activities. Most importantly debates help to stimulate critical thinking by shaking students free from established opinions and helping them to appreciate the complexities involved in practice. This article identifies the use of a debate as an assessment method within an intellectual disability nursing programme and a student's reflective comment on the process, and their experience of a debate as their assessment method.

Key words

Nurse Education, Learning, Debate, Third Level, Reflection

Introduction

Some of the challenges in facing nurse education include the complexity of healthcare and the enrolment of multi-generational learners (Jensen et al., 2009). Within intellectual disability nursing students are prepared within a biopsychosocial educational model (Sheerin, 2004) and curriculum addresses these challenges. Dependent on the pedagogical approach many educational strategies can be used which increase dialogue between the teacher and learners, enriching the classroom environment, enhancing meta-cognition and promoting critical thinking (Jensen et al., 2009). Within education assessment is a feature and is designed to facilitate the collection, review, monitor and ultimately judge student learning (Lambert and Lines, 2000). Assessment is much more than the use of a range of techniques to measure achievement and is a systematic process that plays a significant role in effective teaching (Race et al., 2005). In the context of nurse education it signals that the student has acquired the necessary skills and knowledge for registration and professional practice (Wellard et al., 2007). Thereby educators and those designing curricula need to take steps to ensure their assessment practices and instruments are well designed and valid (Garside et al., 2009).

With this in mind and to prepare nurses for the challenge of a complex, dynamic healthcare environment, the faculty member designed an assignment (a debate) specific to a module on allied therapies for intellectual disability nursing students. The challenge was to engage students in; the subject matter, participating in classes and tutorials, and to be motivated to research and think critically about the topic in a manner that is broader than the suggested reading. This is in line with the Irish professional nursing body (An Bord Altranais, 2005) where they identify registration education programmes to enable students to develop skills of analysis, critical thinking, problem solving and reflection. The need for these skills have been emphasised in response to the rapidly changing healthcare environment, where nurses must think critically to provide effective care whilst coping with the expansion in their role associated with the complexities of current healthcare systems (Simpson and Courtney, 2002). It has been shown that critical thinking and problem solving skills help nurses to cope with clinical problems, fulfil the requirements of their roles and, thereby, provide efficient and quality healthcare (Simpson and Courtney, 2002; Tiwari et al., 2003).

Learning occurs more effectively when students actively analyze, discuss, and apply the content in meaningful ways rather than absorb the information passively (Bonwell and Eison, 1991); therefore, students benefit when educators utilize instructional strategies that promote active engagement (Rai, 2011). This article presents the use of debates and presents the use of a debate as an assessment method within an undergraduate module incorporating a student's (co-author) reflective comments on the module.

The use of debates in student education

Debates date back over 4000 years to the Egyptians (2080 B.C.) and debates as a teaching strategy date back to Protagoras in Athens (481e411 B.C.) the "father of debate" (Hury, 1986; Combs and Bourne, 1994; Snider and Schnurer, 2002; Freeley and Steinberg, 2005). Yet in most universities the only students who participate in debates are those on competitive debate teams (Bellon, 2000). Debate refers to the process of considering multiple viewpoints and arriving at a judgement, and its application ranges from an individual using debate to make a decision in his or her own mind to an individual or group using debate to convince others to agree with them (Freeley and Steinberg, 2005). Just as writing assignments have been incorporated across the curriculum, debates have been successfully used in a variety of disciplines including sociology, history, psychology, biotechnology, math, health, dentistry, nursing, marketing, and social work (Jugdev et al., 2004). This shift from teacher-imposed styles of teaching permits learners to become active participants in their own learning experiences which have long been a valued part of education (Bevis and Watson, 2000; Richardson, 1987). Encouraging an active learner role in learning fosters a deeper level of learning and cultivates an increased capacity for self-direction and initiative which in turn facilitates greater self-esteem and learner success (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990; Gaston and Cappello, 1996; Barrington and Street, 2009).

Interaction between the learner and the teacher comprises the heart of education and learning (Codde, 2006), and nurse educators must be willing to facilitate rather than control learning (Ahern, 1999; Barrington and Street, 2009). As student learning occurs through active engagement with the subject matter, lectures may be ineffective for such engagement (Billings and Halstead, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). Furthermore, transmission of information and its transformation into knowledge are not the same (Race, 2007). For this transformation to occur, students need an opportunity to engage in deep processing of the subject matter (Clynes, 2009). The educator's role is to help students develop the capacity to incorporate new and sometimes conflicting ideas and experiences into a coherent cognitive framework. Kolb (1984) suggests that, "if the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas in the person's belief systems, the learning process will be facilitated" (p. 28). While Dewey (1939) suggested that the initial advance in the development of reflective thought occurs in the transition from holding fixed, static ideas to an attitude of doubt and questioning engendered by exposure to alternative views in social discourse (Baker, 1955; pp.36-40).

The central activities of critical thinking are identifying and challenging underlying assumptions, exploring alternative ways of thinking and acting, and arriving at commitments after a period of questioning, analysis, and reflection (Brookfield, 1987). Vo and Morris (2006) found that debate increased the benefits of the traditional lecture by engaging the learner in the material. Additionally, debate is effective in helping students learn a discipline and demonstrate the ability to read and write critically (Osborne, 2005). The ability to effectively argue influences success of students in preparation for their future careers and the

debate process assesses the student's ability to write effectively, work in teams, and analyze arguments, all of which can improve the ability to think critically (Dickson, 2004). Critical thinking that includes debate allows for collaboration where teams can achieve higher levels of thinking through the use of persuasive evidence. This collaboration allows individuals to retain information longer and the opportunity to engage in discussion and shared learning (Gokhale, 1995; Freeley and Steinberg, 2005). Debate as a pedagogical method are used to improve critical thinking skills and oral communication skills, and are currently being used in various programs to foster student learning, critical thinking and learner-centred education (Roy and Macchiette, 2005; Allison, 2006; Vo and Morris, 2006; Lin and Crawford, 2007). Thereby debates can be tailored to increase student learning and understanding of difficult topics by encouraging student dialogue and research of the debate topics.

Debates require; active engagement and mastery of the content and listeners and participants to evaluate competing choices (Freeley and Steinberg, 2005). Following Vygotsky (1978) social interaction through developing higher-order psychological functions and critical thinking skills by moving up Bloom (1956) Taxonomy (Gorman et al., 1981; Elliot, 1993; Gazzard, 2004; Jugdev et al., 2004). The lower order thinking skills of knowledge, comprehension, and application focus on rote learning or what students should think, whereas the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation focus on how to think. The short term objective of acquiring knowledge should be tempered with the long-term goal of training the mind to think analytically and critically (Vo and Morris, 2006). Instructional strategies such as debate are better suited to the development of students' higher order thinking skills than traditional instructional strategies such as lectures (Roy and Macchiette, 2005). Critical thinking skills used in debates include defining the problem, assessing the credibility of sources, identifying and challenging assumptions, recognising inconsistencies, and prioritizing the relevance and salience of various points within the overall argument. Thereby offering immense opportunities for students to enhance relevant skills; both for a personal and profession development context. Debating, as a skill, can be seen as a means of discussion; however they go beyond this, requiring a structured argument to be developed. Challenging students to consider the present and discuss their views with others. These elements can all be aspects students fear or lack confidence in, but need to be individually developed by students. Helping students to improve is about encouraging them to develop their own style and to learn to be confident about it (Peelo, 1994).

From a professional standpoint, the debating process encourages an individual to consider multiple viewpoints and arrive at a judgement (Moon, 2005) and enhances students' oral critical communication, as a means of self-expression, social interaction, and working in a team (Kennedy, 2007). These skills will be invaluable to discussing ideas, problem-solving and working with colleagues in the future. The use of debates is seen as a holistic teaching method because it requires students to develop research skills (Alford and Surdu, 2002), critical thinking abilities (Crone, 1997). Preparing students to structure arguments in ways that authenticates their opinions and teaches them to perform in front of audiences (Dundes, 2001). Students generally enjoy debates because they add an element of competition to assessments, whilst still allowing for multiple opinions to be heard and accepted (Goodwin, 2003). Debates are also found to be socially stimulating (Dundes, 2001), allowing students to articulate ideas better (Lantis, 2004), empower students to take responsibility for their own learning (Firmin et al., 2007), and it also forces the students to 'think on their feet' (Moody-Corbett, 1996). Amongst the reasons why debates are popular in the classroom is that they enhance the learning experience for students by making the content personal (Lantis, 2004).

Students feel the experience benefits their critical thinking skills (Steiner et al., 2003), helping them retain factual information (Koklanaris et al., 2008), and increase awareness of important issues in the field (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva, 2008). Studies comparing debates versus lectures as teaching strategies find that students exposed to debates perform better on assessments examining comprehension of concepts (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva, 2008). Instructional strategies such as debate and case studies are better suited to the development of students' higher order thinking skills than traditional instructional strategies such as lecture (Roy and Macchiette, 2005). Critical thinking skills used in a debate include defining the problem, appraising the credibility of sources, identifying and challenging assumptions, recognising repugnance, and prioritising the relevance and prominence of various points within the overall argument. In addition to critical thinking skills, debates also demand the development of oral communication skills, which are vital for success in most careers (Combs and Bourne, 1994). Debate involves not only determining what to say but how to say it (Roy and Macchiette, 2005, p. 265).

Using a debate to assess

Assessment has long been recognised as the single most influential factor in shaping, what and how students in higher education choose to learn (Brown and Knight, 1994; Ramsden, 2003). The quality of learning outcomes depend on the quality of assessment (Ramsden, 2003; Koh, 2008), and assessing learning is an integral component of the teaching and learning process and a contentious topic amongst educationalists (Wellard et al., 2007). Students are assessed in an effort to measure their learning, to provide constructive feedback for further development, to measure the quality of education and ascertain eligibility for registration. As assessment greatly influences learning (Nicol and Freeth, 1998; Byrne and Smyth, 2008), students match their learning behaviour to assessment methods (Alinier, 2003), and not to what educators declare is important (Brown et al., 1997; Byrne and Smyth, 2008). The authors believe that structured student debates have great potential for promoting competence in practice and in-depth knowledge of substantive topics relevant to practice. Like other interactive assignments designed to more closely resemble real world activities, issue-oriented debates actively engage students in course content. Debates also allow students to develop and exercise skills that may translate to practice activities. Most importantly debates help to stimulate critical thinking, by shaking students free from established opinions and helping them to appreciate the complexities of the topic under study. Involving students in debates challenges them to learn and grow in the fashion described by Dewey and Kolb. Whereby learning occurs through an openness to divergent ideas in combination with the ability to synthesise disparate views into a purposeful resolution (Kolb, 1984). With the development of reflective thought occurring in the transition from holding fixed, static ideas to an attitude of doubt and questioning prompted by exposure to alternative views in social discourse (Dewey, 1939). Learning and reflective thinking are based on active engagement with a specific problem or issue and participation in a debate stimulates clarification and critical evaluation of the evidence, logic, and values underlying one's own position where students must understand and accurately evaluate the opposing perspective.

To initiate preparations for the debate, students were provided with a module and assessment introduction (see Table 1). The students were assigned to a four person debate team, a lottery system was utilised to identify the "pro" or "con" view and the specific debate question was chosen by the academic staff. Students had to develop arguments to support the view they were assigned, whether or not they actually support that view. The debate topics related to the module and specifically to the role of the intellectual disability nurse in supporting people with intellectual disability through the use of allied therapies. To support the process and

assist students prepare for the debate performance criteria was developed to identify the range of performance and requisite components required (Table 2). Any reference materials used while preparing for the debate were attached to the back of the speech and notes, which students submitted to the academic staff for a grading percentage after the debate. General guidelines on the expectation and rules were delivered as part of the assessment guidelines given to students and Table 3 identifies a sample of these.

Table 1: The introduction covered the following information regarding the debate

- The debate topic.
- Student allocation to teams.
- The expectation that each student would play a primary role in the debate for his/her team.
- Teams would have in-class time during tutorial sessions to prepare and discuss the debates.
- Tutorial sessions would be facilitated by the academic staff delivering the module.
- The debate would take in the last week of the module.
- The debate would take place within a local intellectual disability service.
- An open invitation would be extended to staff and interested parties to attend the debate.

Table 2: Performance criteria

	Excellent	Proficient	Average	Poor
Preparation	Prepared a broad scope of information. Deep, critical analysis of the given topic. Information is collected from a wide range of sources. Present perspectives which effectively contribute to development of arguments	Satisfactory preparation of information and analysis for the given topic. Issues relating to the topic are well covered.	Demonstrated preparation for the basic information of the given topic. Little evidence of analysis was shown.	Failed to prepare only the basic and essential information of the topic provided.
Organisation and Presentation	Logical flow in the presentation of arguments. Organised in a coherent manner. Powerful and persuasive presentation.	Generally clear flow of arguments. Presentation is persuasive manner but minor problems.	Able to give the basic framework of the presented ideas. Lacked persuasive power.	Information not appropriately digested. Lack of focus. Lack of logical flow.
Use of Arguments	Plenty of very strong and persuasive arguments.	Many fairly strong arguments but some not persuasive	Arguments are generally on the right track but not convincing and strong enough.	Arguments are not significant or persuasive to the debate topic

Rebuttal	Excellent defence and attack against the opposite side. Able to identify the weakness of the opposite side.	Satisfactory defence and attack against the opposite side. Attempted to find out weakness of the opposite side.	Failed to defend some issues. Some successful attack against the opposite side.	Fail to defend issues. Unable to attack the opposite side in most of the issues.
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On the day of the debate, the two teams sat facing each other in front of the audience. The debate began with each team making an opening statement and introduction during which initial arguments for the pro and con sides were presented. The debate proceeded commencing with the opening address, individual speakers, concluding argument and questions session. The staff and guests became the “audience” and could actively participate by asking questions and making comments in addition to team members asking questions of the other team and make arguments for their side. The students were encouraged to present information based on research rather than simply expressing personal opinions.

Table 3: Expectations and rules for the debate

- You are a member of your selected team.
- Be sure that you work together so that all members of your team have an adequate background of the positions and arguments that you will be proposing.
- There will be an opening statement made by each team. This should state your team’s position and the arguments/solutions you will be proposing.
- You should ask questions of your opponents. You should have these on a separate sheet of paper or on note cards for easy reference. The questions should be specifically directed to your opponents and should be concise and clear.
- You can have answers prepared for anticipated questions. Imagine that you are from the other teams and determine what questions may be asked of your team.
- You should have a final conclusive argument/statement drawn up but you should take notes during the debate so that you may refer to these in your final presentation of your team’s views.

Rule 1. There are two teams. Each team consists of speakers.

Rule 2. The speaking time is divided equally between the two teams.

Rule 3. Each team has a conclusive argument speech.

Rule 3. No new arguments may be introduced in the conclusive arguments.

Rule 4. The Audience will judge.

The debate process would involve a number of activities/skills on the part of the student which can be broken into six areas; interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation (Table 4).

Table 4: Activities/Skills necessary for debate.

- Identify and clarify the issue identifying and assessing the underlying values inherent in the topic (Interpretation).
- Gather and organize information about the issue (Analysis).
- Evaluate that information for accuracy, applicability and evaluating the relative merits of different viewpoints (Evaluation).
- Draw conclusions from the evidence interpreting the values and positions of others and conveying one’s own point of view in a convincing manner (Inference).
- Explain conclusions logically in the form of a debate recommending, advocating, and

- defending a particular point of view (Explanation).
 - Critically appraise and examine one's performance and contribute to the team (Self-regulation).
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Student reflective comments

In reflecting on the assessment my first thoughts were of initial 'shock', mainly due to the fact that this was an assessment method that I was unfamiliar with and had not engaged in previously as part of my third level course or prior education. This shock was fuelled by the feeling of 'not knowing what to expect'. However the introduction and explanation by the lecturer regarding the expectations for the debate did reduce my anxiety. In addition the tutorials provided to individual groups allowed us ask questions of the lecturer, identify our key points and gain guidance on our argument regarding its relevance and use of academic support. While these were of great support there was always a level of 'anxiety' as I had no prior experience. However this anxiety enabled me to be more disciplined in my approach by, focusing on the task at hand and engaging more with the literature for this module than I may have done in the past. This process facilitated me to look more critically at the literature, identify opposing perspectives, supporting information and possible alternative points of view for rebuttal. Additionally the group tutorials allowed the group focus on the topic and as a group we had to plan the tutorial agenda. This process enabled team working and sharing of ideas and information within the group and as the tutorial was student lead and facilitated by the lecturer. We were provided with many opportunities to work effectively as a group, develop our arguments, plan our rebuttal and for anticipated rebuttals. This focused us very early in the module as discussing the ideas with the lecturer and within the group ensured we were 'on the right track' and that we were clear in our line of argument and where we needed to develop our argument.

Being part of a group can be both beneficial and challenging; generally I do my assignments in my own time, in my own home, in my own way, from my own thoughts and understanding. However this assignment forced me into 'a new way of working' where as a group we had to meet a number of times in preparation for the debate. These meeting focused on sharing ideas, gathering the different views/perspectives on the topic, discussing each idea, identifying key ideas to be further supported from the literature, forming an agreed lines of argument and practising our debate. The group process enabled me to gain more confidence in working in groups and in expressing my point of view to group members. This may have occurred due to the nature of the group in that we all were developing on each others argument and supporting each others main point. Also I was very much aware that this was a safe environment to express my view as we were all on the 'same side' and needed each other to discuss, challenge and disagree with views expressed, as would be the case in the debate. Nonetheless it did give me greater confidence through working in this safe environment that did translate to the actual debate were the opposition team were challenging, disagreeing and on the 'opposite side'.

All these factors enabled me to feel more confidence in airing my views and communicating with others. The fact that the debate was open to nurses/nurse managers who would be assessing us on the day made me think more about relating the theory to practice and my future role as a nurse. More importantly I began to consider how I communicate and the knowledge I have to support my ideas and how they all impact on my professionalism. I came to realise that the skills I was gaining were purposeful as I could see there relevance to advocating for clients, operating in an evidence-based approach and conducting oneself in a

professional manner. Overall the experience was engaging, enlightening, fun and interesting, with the skills developed transferable to my future practice such as; working in a group, expressing opinions/ideas, arguing a point of view and challenging other views. This will assist me in my advocacy role, teamwork role and evidence-based practice role as, I now have begun to develop my ability 'to entertain an idea even without accepting it'.

Discussion/Conclusion

Students learn best when applying what they are learning and a variety of instructional strategies need to be used since students learn in different ways. Student engagement is linked positively with critical thinking and grades (Carini et al., 2006). Debates cultivate the active engagement of students, placing the responsibility of comprehension on the shoulders of the students (Snider and Schnurer, 2002). The students' approach dramatically changes from a passive approach to an active one (Snider and Schnurer, 2002) and "students place a higher value on learning by participating than on learning by being lectured at and receiving information passively" (Berdine, 1987, p. 8). Debates are opportunities to interrelate with the subject itself and let the lecturer stand back for a while; and students teach each other" (Walker and Warhurst, 2000, p. 41). One of the most widely documented benefits from debate is the enhancement of critical thinking skills (Colbert, 1986; Freeley and Steinberg, 2005). They have been found to be representative of a learner-centred education additionally, it has been confirmed that debate can foster better development of skills in interpretation of data. Many universities and programmes are placing more emphasis on learner-centred instruction (James, 2006; Ware, 2006). The debate scenario can be used to demonstrate the inclusion of learner-centred activities, and it can work well within traditional classroom settings to foster student critical thinking and learning (Joung, 2003). Students learn more effectively by actively analysing, discussing, and applying content in meaningful ways rather than by passively absorbing information (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). Therefore, students benefit when instructors utilise instructional strategies that promote active engagement by "students doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell and Eison, 1991 p.2). Providing opportunities for students to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach course content (Meyers and Jones, 1993). There is more information now than ever before, and the pace of change will likely continue to be rapid in future generations; therefore, educators must focus less on teaching facts and more on teaching students how to use information. Although debate certainly requires the mastery of content, it also demands the mastery of critical thinking skills which can be applied to changing situations and new information (Snider and Schnurer, 2002). In addition to critical thinking skills, debates also demand the development of oral communication skills, which are vital for success in most careers (Combs and Bourne, 1994). Debate involves not only determining what to say but how to say it (Roy and Macchiette, 2005). Debating can be effective in facilitating discussion in large student groups as well as enhancing students' personal skills and critical understanding (Moon, 2005; Kennedy, 2007). Debating practices offer a useful means to actively engage students and give them the responsibility of comprehension (Snider and Schnurer, 2002). Due to their nature, debating exposes students to look further than just what they think or believe, encouraging them to question others' views to determine their standpoint. These fundamentals relate to the concept of critical thinking and student independence both of which are strongly linked to students playing a more active role in their learning. Students learn more effectively when they apply what they are learning (Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Meyers and Jones, 1993) and place a higher value on participation during learning than on learning by receiving information passively (Berdine, 1987).

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