

Learning and Assessment of Nursing Unit Management Practice Using a Portfolio

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Abstract

During training to become a professional nurse, student nurses are assigned to do unit management practicals in the different units within the hospital; as part of the curriculum outcomes for Nursing Science and Art. Nurse educators used a portfolio as a new and alternative method to assess students' learning of nursing unit management; during preparation for their future professional role as nursing unit managers. The aim of this article is to present the experiences of nursing students regarding the use of a portfolio in learning and assessment of unit management. This was a qualitative, exploratory and contextual study. A sample of student nurses following the undergraduate B Cur degree programme at a specific university was used. A total of seventy (70) final year student nurses participated in the study. Data were collected by means of self-reports in the form of narrative sketches. Manual analysis of the data was done, using thematic approach. The students experienced challenges with regard to compiling the portfolio under the theme of obtaining evidence for the portfolio. In addition, there were themes of benefits of compiling a portfolio and recommendations to the lecturer. The findings indicate that besides the challenges, the students were optimistic with compiling a portfolio for unit management.

1. Introduction

Nurse educators have to continually find new ways to accompany students in order to optimally prepare them for their future professional roles, such as the management of a nursing unit. A portfolio can be used to document a student's learning over time following which course-embedded assessment can be done in the form of a portfolios. A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas of the curriculum [1]. The collection include student participation in selecting contents, criteria for selection, criteria for judging merits and evidence of a student's self-reflection.

A portfolio can be used in tertiary education, to provide an alternative form of assessment that moves away from summative assessments to charting the

development of students' thinking over their course of study [1] [2] [3]. Portfolios are used for different subject specialty such as teacher education, medicine, dentistry and nursing.

In the specialty of nursing, the use of portfolios in nursing education is part of a broader move towards assessing practice competencies [4] [5] [6]. However, the concept and its implementation is still evolving [7]. Portfolios are used in an attempt to assess both the learning that takes place in hospitals whilst at work, and learning in an academic setting [8] [9].

During training to become a professional nurse, student nurses are assigned to different nursing units in the hospital; such as general wards (medical, surgical, pediatrics), midwifery (maternal and child section), psychiatry and high care units including emergency and trauma sections, and operating theatre to obtain clinical practice regarding unit management. The nursing unit is a subsystem of a hospital and a nurse appointed to manage this unit is called a unit manager. Nursing unit management is the process of planning, organising, leading and controlling that encompasses human, material, financial and informational resources in an organisational environment in order to achieve predetermined objectives within the context of a specific nursing unit [10]. Each nursing unit has a unique nursing programme being implemented; and the management of the unit requires certain management skills, regardless of the nature of the nursing unit

In the context of this study nurse educators used a portfolio as a new and alternative method for learning and assessment of nursing unit management during preparation of the student nurses for their future professional role as nursing unit managers. A portfolio was used by University students following a B.Cur programme, in their fourth and last year of training, during which they did unit management, as part of the curriculum outcomes for Nursing Science and Art [11]. There were learning outcomes reflected in the portfolio and specific criteria for reaching the set outcomes. Assessment of learning was targeted at evidence submitted in the portfolio to indicate that nursing unit management outcomes were met as set out for learning of unit management. Nursing management activities expected to be done included

planning, organizing, leading and controlling within a nursing unit. This include duties such as delegation of staff, designing off duties, ordering stock and supplies for the unit, doing doctors ward rounds, patient care and education, nursing education and research, other aspects of human resources management.

Portfolios are beneficial, in that they enhance student motivation and engagement in learning, foster constructive learning, enable dialogue and co-operation between students and their teachers, and provide valid and authentic assessment tasks that are related to the art curriculum [12].

The student nurses were compiling a portfolio for the first time in their 4th year level of study whilst doing nursing unit management. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of nursing students regarding the use of a portfolio in learning and assessment of unit management.

2. Methods

A qualitative, exploratory and contextual study was conducted. A population of student nurses following the B Cur degree programme at a specific university was included. A total of seventy (70) final year student nurses participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the students in their 4th level of study because they had done unit management as part of their curriculum component.

To be included in the study the student nurses had to be in the 4th year level of study, had completed a portfolio for unit management practical, and willing to share their experiences of the use of portfolio in learning and assessment of unit management.

Data were collected by means of self-reports in the form of narrative sketches. The last part of the activities in the portfolio was an instruction for the student to write a statement of not more than 2000 words regarding their experience of compiling a portfolio. Written narratives, which were a part of reflection on the students' experience of compiling a portfolio, were used to compile data as evidence for this study. Reflection is an essential component of a portfolio [8].

The reliability of information inside the portfolio was judged against the reflections of the students. The instruction on how to compile a portfolio and the outcomes of nursing unit management were clearly outlined, which helped to focus the type of information and procedures to obtain information. Relevant literature was used to discuss the findings.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the MREC of the University of Limpopo. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Head of Department of Nursing Sciences of the University of Limpopo (Medunsa campus). The participants provided informed consent following a thorough explanation

of the purpose of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in that the findings are reported comprehensively rather than individually. No names appear in the reports.

Narrative sketches of 70 self-reports of 4th year B Cur students were analysed manually using a thematic approach [13]. Essential features and patterns in the data, such as extracts from the reflections of the students that represented experiences of the same nature were identified and then grouped together to generate themes.

3. Findings

There were 11 males and 59 females participants. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the narrative reflections as follows:

Theme 1: Challenges of Obtaining Evidence for the Portfolio

Gathering information, problems with providing evidence for certain activities, and difficulty in taking the evidence out of the hospital emerged as the challenges related to obtaining evidence for the portfolio.

With regards to gathering information, the students indicated that they felt under pressure of performing activities to meet the outcomes of the portfolio. In addition, with being placed in different specialty units, they encountered different ways of managing the units which brought about confusion of the exact activities to record. The reflections indicated a difficulty of obtaining documents as proof /evidence for activities done, because some activities such as doing doctors ward rounds and checking the emergency trolley needed the students to sign in the relevant books, which could not be reproduced or taken out of the unit.

The reflections indicated that the students kept on postponing the activities of the portfolio till the last minute, which resulted in limited time to compile and complete the portfolio. Legal implications of data collection brought about a challenge of taking the evidence out of the hospital. There was also inability to obtain evidence due to lack of interaction of students with permanent nursing staff members. Additionally the hospital staff was reported not to be up-to-date with this learning and assessment development, and thus could not help because they did not know about compiling a portfolio.

Theme 2: Benefits of Compiling a Portfolio

The findings revealed several benefits of compiling a portfolio as extracted from the students' reflections. Self-discovery of knowledge, achievement of personal and academic growth development emerged as some of the benefits. It was

recorded that information collected through the portfolio was learned at the relevant time for use after completion of training. This encouraged the students to do activities on their own. The students regarded portfolio as a good strategy of learning, as it promoted eagerness to learn in order to achieve the outcome competencies required. The students developed a sense of learning discipline, responsibility and accountability.

Organizing the portfolio provided the students with insight into the workload of a unit manager, including knowledge of the extent of the unit manager's responsibility. This highlighted the weight of responsibility the students would undertake in future as unit managers.

Other activities collected according to the outcomes in the portfolio provided exposure and involvement of learners to administration of tasks in the units. In this way, the practical application of unit management was learned, including human resources management aspects such as risk management, conflict management and organization of work.

Of interest was the students' self-reflection about their own lives. The findings indicate that ignorance was removed. The students got a discovery that 'nursing is not only about patient care but other important things'. This encouraged the students to compile information and do activities to their best ability during their practical sessions of unit management.

Theme 3: Recommendations for the Teacher

One of the objectives was for learners to give recommendations to the lecturer regarding the use of a portfolio for learning and assessment in unit management. The reflections recommended that the lecturer should communicate the use of portfolio with nursing personnel in the hospital; and also its relevancy in order to gain corporation from hospital staff. Some of the narratives recommended that the use of portfolio be started early in 3rd year; and students should be advised to start gathering evidence at 3rd year as some of the activities are done then. Additionally, other students recommended a portfolio to be comprehensive for all levels of training, meaning it should be started from 1st to 4th year.

4. Discussion

The students were required to complete a portfolio for clinical practical, which they did in the different units in the hospital. Whilst each unit is unique, the principles of unit management are the same. The challenges and benefits were experienced with regard to the use of a portfolio for learning and assessment in nursing management. Additionally there were recommendations to the lecturer.

4.1 Obtaining Evidence for the Portfolio

Lack of creativity in compiling evidence was found to be related to limited time to compile due to procrastination. With regards to obtaining evidence for the portfolio, it is indicated that a lack of well-defined guidelines and a clear structure and a lack of examples of past portfolios, can lead to student confusion and anxiety about the scope, nature and value of the task [1]. It is thus evident from the findings of this study that students needed a lot of guidance and support throughout the portfolio process, which involves a lot of time on the part of lecturers or supervisors [14]. Student often have little academic experience with writing reflective pieces, and they need to be nurtured by their lecturers and supervisors [15].

It seems the students were reluctant to complete the portfolio for various reasons as evidenced by procrastination. Literature indicate that barriers to portfolio use include the time needed to complete and to assess the portfolio, uncertainty over the nature and amount of evidence that should be included, the need for effective support and guidance for students, students' lack of confidence and experience at compiling portfolios, and the level of preparation necessary [7] [9]. Concerns over the conflict inherent between assessment use and learning use of portfolios is also raised [8].

4.2 Benefits of Compiling a Portfolio

The findings in this study concur with literature which indicates that if used to their full potential, portfolios have a number of benefits for students. Compiling the portfolio in unit management assisted the students in identifying learning experience, responsibility and accountability of the unit manager. Activities done during unit management provided awareness raising of the procedures done by professional nurses and the roles of the unit manager. Compiling various activities to reach the outcomes gave the students an ideal picture of the responsibilities that are expected of them in the following year after completion of training.

Literature indicates that portfolios help to focus student thinking, provide a means to translate theory into practice, and most importantly, document a learner's progress over time [1] [14] [15] [16] [17]. A portfolio is a way of showing that learning has taken place within the framework of the particular course objectives [18]. This is evident from the idea that practical application of unit management was learned through the development of a portfolio. The students indicated that with regards to achieving the objectives for unit management it was clear that observing and doing are two different things.

The students were encouraged to actively participate in unit activities and also performing duties, without being instructed. The importance of

record keeping and being responsible were learned. This is evident from literature which state that portfolios enable the development of skills in critical thinking, reflective practice, and writing as learning, help students to increase their competence and self-awareness and promote creativity, in-depth understanding of subject matter, and meaningful learning [18]. Portfolios serve to integrate theory and practice, and thereby help students to see the links between the two [8] [9] [19]. The benefits of portfolio use are realised not just through the finished product, but through the actual process of constructing the portfolio [4] [8].

4.3 Recommendations for the Teacher

The amount of support and guidance students received with their portfolio use was not enough for one year as a portfolio provide for continuity in education from one year to the next. This is line with the recommendation by the students that the portfolio be started at 1st year. However, other studies report that students felt that portfolios were very time-consuming, causing them a great deal of anxiety, and were not very effective in developing and assessing their learning and competence [9]. Using portfolios for both assessment and learning creates a conflict. Any assessment reduces the honesty and learning value of reflective writing and of the portfolio. Additionally, students become increasingly demoralized with portfolio use over time with experience.

6. Conclusion

The experiences indicated that the students were optimistic with compiling portfolios for unit management. However, portfolio was used only at 4th year level of training; and for learning and assessment in one subject only. This limits the transferability of the findings to other levels of training and other subjects.

Whilst there were challenges in obtaining evidence to complete the portfolio, the use of a portfolio in nursing management made a positive contribution to the process of learning and highlighted the expectation of the student nurses as unit managers at the completion of training.

As the use of portfolio for learning and assessment is a relatively new idea, and based on the reflections from the students, it is recommended that the use of a portfolio be started at the earlier stage of training, considering that learning builds on each block every year.

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