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### **Active Learning in an undergraduate setting – reflections, key learning and recommendations**

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#### **Abstract**

*Background:* Healthcare anywhere in the world is a dynamic environment. It requires effective and fast thinking workers who will keep the patient central amid all the change and diversity. Registered nurses are pivotal to this workforce as one of the only constants – they are present 24 hours a day. Emerging registered nurses need to be equipped with leadership skills, knowledge and behaviours to ensure patient safety and effective nursing care is provided. These facets need to be developed in undergraduate nursing students to help them to manage themselves, their environment and their patients/clients as they prepare to transition into the workplace. Active Learning is a concept frequently used in the practice development world. The integration of critical thinking with creative use of multiple intelligences embodies Active Learning in action (Dewing, 2008, p 273). Use of this style of learning in undergraduate education is not well documented in literature.

*Aim:* This paper looks briefly at the introduction of Active Learning in an undergraduate curriculum, but focuses on the author's reflection and key learning surrounding its implementation and its impact on teachers/facilitators. It then makes recommendations from the reflection and learning to enhance the use of Active Learning in undergraduate settings.

*Concluding questions:*

- How can Active Learning be integrated meaningfully into undergraduate education?
- How can an educator facilitate Active Learning effectively in classrooms?
- Is practice development a requirement to implement Active Learning?

**Keywords:** Active Learning, practice development, facilitation, teacher, education, student nurses

#### **Background**

When considering the high volume and pace of change in healthcare, it is imperative that leadership skills, knowledge and behaviours are developed in undergraduate nursing students to help them manage themselves, their environment and their patients/clients as they prepare to transition into the workplace. Such skills, knowledge and behaviours generate a sense of confidence, along with a sense of value of themselves and the role they play in patient/client care and safety. Engaging with and contributing positive influence to environments of practice is required for more effective workplace cultures (Manley et al., 2008; Casida and Pinto-Zipp, 2008). However, it is a challenging process to immerse student nurses in leadership knowledge and skills and then individualise this to empower them with confidence in their own leadership abilities. Active Learning was the model chosen to engage students and to enable and increase individual critique, reflection and application of leadership to self. 'Active Learning is an approach for in-depth learning that draws on, creatively synthesises

and integrates numerous learning methods.' (Dewing, 2008, p 273). Multiple creative approaches to learning theory, synthesising material and practical application were used with undergraduates to introduce and explore aspects of leadership pertinent to students nearing transition to practice. The aspects that were deemed suitable included:

- Personal and organisational values
- Leadership theories
- Individual and organisational culture
- Teams and team building
- Leadership attributes and behaviours
- Enabling behaviours and language
- Coaching and facilitation
- Change and conflict management
- Emotional intelligence
- Self-management – including self-awareness, stress strategies and personal care
- Listening skills

These elements of leadership were chosen and developed following a review of literature sources, as well as consideration of experiences and tools used in practice development workshops and forums.

Facilitators were used so that student learning could be enhanced in the Active Learning framework within a classroom setting, rather than using a more traditional didactic approach involving tutors. This facilitation model fitted with the practice development framework, supporting transformation of people and practices (Manley et al., 2008), and seeking to deepen learning by empowering students to have some autonomy in their approach to learning (Andreson et al., 1995). Building on previous conscious and unconscious learning is an important element of facilitation; it helps the adult learner to feel valued. Facilitation enables the learner to draw on life experiences, apply principles personally and then build further to extend the breadth of knowledge and skills (Kolb et al., 2001). This positions learning as a continuous process established in experience and developed from that point. Active Learning promotes this model by using multiple intelligences to help the student make sense of concepts through their own experiences, thereby improving retention and assisting 'social transfer of knowledge and skills into practice' (Dewing, 2010, p 23). Examples of facilitation tools used to enhance Active Learning are pictured in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Examples of facilitation tools



Evaluation is an important aspect of all new practices, helping to determine relevance and impact. The introduction of Active Learning into the classroom was evaluated at a formal and informal level by the author (Middleton, 2012). Evaluation responses confirmed its importance; recurring themes that emerged regarding how Active Learning influenced the students are shown in Box 1.

#### Box 1: Recurring evaluation themes

- Behaviours
- Influence
- Professional competency
- Confidence
- Career development tools
- Innovation
- Use of multiple mediums conducive to deeper learning

Changes were evident in students' appreciation of themselves as leaders using Active Learning, as shown by the comments below.

*'I felt it empowered me in a way that I felt more confident in my ability to make changes and influence others.'*

*'I feel I have been given information and techniques to go forward with my career ...'*

*'Use of multiple mediums for education, such as craft, discussion and reading, was effective.'*

*'This environment encourages critical thinking... provides a conducive environment to learn in... innovative in presenting subject...'*

*'This will enhance my practice as a registered nurse next year.'*

## **Discussion**

'Educators can have a powerful influence on the experience of students and should provide a solid foundation to shape positive learning experiences for those considering a career in nursing' (Horsfall et al., 2012, p 933). I believe Active Learning provides the opportunity for this to happen, consistent with my experience over the past three years within classroom learning in a university setting. On reflection there are a number of aspects of the process that have had associated key learning. My key learning is discussed below, with recommendations for others who may consider using Active Learning as a model in education in a university or clinical setting.

### ***Reflective model***

The reflective model I used to consider the impact of Active Learning on students and on educators, including myself, was Driscoll's model of reflection (2007) developed from Borton (1970) – 'What? So what? Now what?' Using a reflective model allows a healthcare professional to draw meaning from situations and apply this to behaviour antecedents and outcomes, thereby providing opportunity for challenge and change (Walsh et al., 2002). I felt this was important when considering implications for self-learning and extension, as well as making appropriate modifications to enable better teacher/facilitator and student engagement in the Active Learning model. 'What?' encompassed the implementation of Active Learning into the curriculum and the engagement of students into this model of learning. The 'So what?' aspect involved the process of considering what learning arose from the process of reflection. Finally, the 'Now what?' is discussed as key learning and recommendations.

### ***Key learning and recommendations***

Active Learning has helped student nurses to see value in their own leadership ability, responsibility and appreciation within the Bachelor of Nursing curriculum at the University of Wollongong. Leading patients and teams in healthcare is the registered nurse's responsibility and so emerging registered nurses need exposure to and experience in leadership skills and attributes so that they may enter the workforce equipped. Continuing change in the healthcare setting is a reality that transitioning registered nurses will face and need to be responsive to, so exposure to the facets of leadership along with practice development approaches will enhance the likelihood of success in the clinical environment. Active Learning has effectively exposed students to these practice challenges and helped develop leadership skills to meet them. But what is required of the educator? Four key areas of learning and recommendation will be explored below to address this question, with the educator referred to as 'teacher/facilitator'.

### ***Teaching philosophy***

Teacher/facilitators should be consciously aware of their teaching-learning philosophy, this being highlighted as a valued element of teaching (Beatty et al., 2009; Horsfall et al., 2012). The opportunity to bring Active Learning into the classroom has helped me consider my teaching-learning philosophy further, exploring what teaching and learning look like and how they can be most effective. Being clear about teaching philosophy enables reflection and review (Horsfall et al., 2012); teaching-learning clarity is a key recommendation for all teacher/facilitators, university and clinical, so that the learner's journey through any level of education is smooth. Transparent and open teaching-learning can promote a more enjoyable process of education for all parties. Recommendations for implementation and practice are for all teacher/facilitators to be clear about their personal values and match them to practice. A critical companion is valuable to lead and enable meaningful conversations and challenge the teacher/facilitator to develop a teaching-learning philosophy, and then take that philosophy and move it into practice.



### ***The role of facilitation***

A key learning around developing clarity in my own teaching-learning philosophy was to understand the role of facilitator as opposed to expert imparter of knowledge (Johnson-Farmer and Frenn, 2009). Although facilitation has always been my natural style of education, I realised during the process of Active Learning that clarity over how and why to be facilitative is essential when working with students. I realised that all the following are essential aspects of facilitating Active Learning in the classroom:

- Establishing ways of working
- Identifying individual and group values
- Being clear in communication of activities
- Being transparent in critical discussions
- Using multiple intelligences to engage all learners in the process

Johnson-Farmer and Frenn (2009, p 269) are clear in articulating that 'it is the teacher's responsibility to create an environment that is student and learning focused and conducive to meaningful engagement'. Horsfall et al. (2012) reinforce this message and go on to assert that student engagement in classroom activities and processes reflect teamwork and build trust, further enhancing learning. Lerret and Frenn (2011, p 382) argue that the teacher/facilitator's 'relationship with students is more important than professional competence'. This points to the value of constructing an environment that is student centred, in which students perceive the facilitator's genuine interest in them. These clear messages promote facilitation as a valuable method for teacher/facilitators when engaging students, particularly since the linking of activities to practice is the key to all learning in the classroom. Explicit links and critical discussion must occur to contextualise and connect theory to practice (Johnson-Farmer and Frenn, 2009).

For teacher/facilitators to work in a facilitative manner and have positive influence in the learning setting, I believe they need a relationship with a coach to build confidence and create the opportunity to explore and reflect on their own practice in a safe environment. Recommendations for practice involve initial role modelling for new facilitators so they see the effectiveness and worth of this model of education delivery in action. Coaching for facilitators irrespective of their level of experience is another recommendation. Coaching helps to ensure consistent delivery of material to students and provides a means of helping facilitators understand what is working in their approaches and to encourage more of that, along with improving performance (Greene and Grant, 2003).

### ***Choice of facilitator***

The incorporation of multiple senses, intelligences and approaches in the Active Learning model enriches opportunities to engage all students meaningfully (Diekelmann and Scheckel, 2003). An important element of using multiple intelligences is ensuring the teacher/facilitator is enthused. This quality was found by Lerret and Frenn (2011) to be vital in helping students to achieve beyond the norm, by bringing challenge, motivation and inspiration. Recruitment of appropriate personnel is crucial; it is recommended that all teacher/facilitators involved in Active Learning within classrooms or in practice are genuine practice developers. That is, people who believe and work within a person-centred framework and who look for ways to 'embed new and more effective and person-centred ways of working within teams and workplaces' (England Centre for Practice Development, 2012). Using the model of Active Learning with practice developers was a smooth process, and hence building enthusiasm in teachers/facilitators was easy in my setting due to shared values and commitment to person-centred learning. The recommendation, following reflection, is to provide consistent encouragement to teacher/facilitators throughout the period of Active Learning in action. Students can be critical and harsh when they do not have comprehensive understanding of where they are headed using the Active Learning model; teacher/facilitators must seek to engage all students appropriately using multiple intelligences and various techniques to engage students and help them to see meaning in activities. Teacher/facilitators also require encouragement, along with coaching, to ensure they maintain the big picture and remain enthused about delivery in creative methods.

### **Practice development in action**

Being a practice developer is necessary to engage meaningfully with Active Learning. Practice development is outlined as 'a continuous process of developing person-centred cultures, enabled by facilitators. Learning brings about transformations of individual and team practices, sustained by embedding [practice development] processes and outcomes in corporate strategy' (Manley et al., 2008, p 9). When reflecting on use of the model of Active Learning with undergraduates, I realised how practice development should and can infiltrate all aspects of teaching and facilitating. As a practice developer, I realised that learning and 'learning about one's learning' (Dewing, 2010, p 23) were equally important. So the process of students learning about leadership is just as important as their learning about how they learn best, using Active Learning 'to achieve a high level of learning, resulting in improved retention and social transfer of knowledge and skills into practice for the benefit of the workplace culture and ultimately for patient care' (Dewing, 2010, p 23). As Dewing (2010, p 23) states, 'Active Learning opens up multiple possibilities'.

When learning is kept close to lived values it becomes a way of being, allowing the learner to see value in lifelong learning in any situation or setting. This was a profound learning for me, ensuring that I look into applying the model of Active Learning in other subjects more meaningfully and deliberately. As an academic educator, I realised the burden of teaching didactically is no longer required. It is the impact and influence of the teacher/facilitator on the student that needs to be recognised. How learning is facilitated is the imperative of the student's journey and transition from theory to practice. I would recommend removing any anxiety (as much as possible) that may be associated with stepping outside the norm of traditional education and implementing creative learning and use of multiple intelligences. Facilitating the optimum conditions for learners not to be fearful or judgemental about new and creative approaches is vital. Allow innovative means of education to occur to help students benefit from diversity and creativity in learning. Active Learning opportunities can provide learning of great value.

### **Concluding comments**

The intention here has been to articulate key learning following reflection on Active Learning in an undergraduate setting and to recommend actions to enhance its use. Active Learning has provided holistic learning opportunities to students and has enabled teacher/facilitators to grow their own skills and teaching-learning philosophy. The model of Active Learning has scope to be expanded in undergraduate settings, where it is a valuable model for developing curriculums and subjects.

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