

Fostering teamwork for health care professionals in the online learning environment

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The inclusion of group assignments as part of teaching and learning in the education of health professionals is an expectation of registration bodies and health care stakeholders. Effective teamwork skills are seen as essential for productive working relationships in multidisciplinary teams and contributing to better health outcomes for staff and health care consumers. The translation of traditional approaches to teaching health care professionals to the online learning environment requires course coordinators to re-examine the relevance, design and assessment of group work. This presentation showcases the development of online group assessments that applies these education principles to the development of an assessment initiative in a multidiscipline health curriculum. It is anticipated that this translation of group work in higher education to the online learning experience will enhance the learning outcomes and experience for health care professionals and better meet the needs and expectations of students and key stakeholders.

Keywords: online learning, group assessment, multidisciplinary teams

Developing collaboration in multidisciplinary health care teams

The preparation of students using group activities has been a long standing expectation of higher education and is a consistently identified attribute of graduates. The use of group activities has shown that there is a significant development of questioning abilities, higher order cognitive skills and promotion of deeper learning in students (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999). Federman Stein (2000) highlight the need for graduates to have the capabilities to work with people of different ages, gender, race and religion if they are to be able to function effectively in the current culturally diverse workplace. Furthermore healthcare employers, professional accreditation organisations and community stakeholders expectations are that healthcare professionals are able to work collaboratively (B-HERT 2002, ANMAC 2006). Health professional graduates are required to be able to establish and sustain professional relationships and demonstrate competency as a member of a team, know how to define their role as part of a team and apply teamwork skills to a range of situations.

This poster presentation will outline a Masters program developed for health care professionals in aged care that acknowledged the importance for graduates. A program outcome identified that graduates should have skills that enhance workplace partnerships and a capacity for working with users, carers and colleagues in health care. Course developers were challenged with achieving these learning outcomes in a program that was mandated to provide an entirely online learning experience.

Group assessment designed for online learning environment

There is general concurrence in the educational literature with regard to the principles which inform high-quality design of group assignments. These principles state that effective group assignments should: align to the learning outcomes; be considered by students as authentic learning experiences; involve analysis, critical thinking and problem solving skills; require students to work collectively and engage in discussion of concepts and ideas and incorporate opportunities for students to reflect (Burke, Jones & Doherty 2005; Ohl & Cates 2006).

The initiative being showcased in this poster presentation was developed for a Masters program in aged care and incorporated two group assessments, a poster and debate. The outcomes of the course were to develop student's capacity to work in partnership with health care professionals, users, carers and service providers. The online group poster assessment was developed to provide an opportunity for students to explore health care issues, policy and practice relevant in the care of older people and develop a deeper understanding for appropriate responses to the needs of this group. The online group debate was designed to facilitate students' development of a deeper understanding of the concepts and practice of rehabilitation care through its associated partnerships

As with any learning activity and assessment the principles of good design emphasise that it is vital for the assessment to be relevant to the course outcomes, differentiate between the rudiments of content, process and assessment and provide clear instructions on the expectations and deliverables required of students (Ohl & Cates 2006). Furthermore the premise for using group assessments as a mechanism for preparing students for the workforce necessitates the inclusion of feedback to students about their development of skills and attributes (Johnston & Miles 2004). Commonly it is also upheld that opportunities for students to reflect on their practice experiences is a valuable component of group assessment (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999).

The design of the group assessments in the Masters program incorporated educational principles by ensuring each of the assessments was closely aligned to the course outcomes. The two assessments were constructed around realistic and authentic aspects of the role and practice of health professionals in a multidisciplinary team. A commonality of the group activities was that both required students to work together across an extended period of time with a number of scaffolded outcomes that involved both formative discussions, summative decisions by the groups and individual reflection on the experience. The integrated components of the assessment activities were supported with comprehensive instructions and regular facilitation by the subject coordinators. Feedback from the students shifted from initial concerns regarding the challenges of forming and maintaining group in an online forum to a general consensus that the experience had deepened not only their understanding of the health care issues, policy and practice relevant in the care of older people but also their skills to work as a productive member of a team. This translation of group work in the Master program in aged care to an online learning experience appears to have enhanced the learning experience for these students and potentially improve their capacity as health care professionals to better meet the needs and expectations of students and key stakeholders.

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