

Active Learning: Using the snowball method to nurture critical thinking

WHAT?

Critical incident

The critical incident refers to the ineffective use of questions and answers during a lecture. This method was used in an attempt to engage student Nursing Associates in an active learning process. The method was ineffective as the students were unable to answer the questions posed to them regarding the evidence base of undertaking manual clinical observations. On reflection, my inexperience of teaching and that of pedagogical methods, resulted in an inability to form an alternative plan in the moment to meet the learning outcomes for that session. This meant I had to back track on the prepared content for the session and lecture the students through the basics of clinical observations and evidenced based practice. The area for development is to learn how to use active learning methods in a more collaborative and inclusive way with the students. The literature review explores how the method of question and answers could be elaborated upon using a snowballing technique to engage individuals and the group.

Review of the literature

Williams (2007) and Jones (2007) argue that snowballing in the classroom emancipates students to self critique, develop a critical understanding of the subject and nurtures an appreciation of the diverse views of the group. Yvonne (2004) together with Wong, (2018) agree that this form of active learning also improves the abilities of the students to question the evidence base in practice and improves the self-efficacy of students in their learning since this technique embraces negotiation in 'peer-working'. Furthermore, Stone et al., (2013) along with Silvana (2018) found that students who were taught using a snowball method of peer working were more likely to meet the learning outcomes of their modules and therefore performed better in their coursework compared to student groups who learnt through traditional lectures. The aforementioned authors argued that the students learnt more from one another because they were critiquing the information to make sense of it, rather than being passively lectured with facts.

SO WHAT?

Intervention

The technique of snowballing builds a strong case for active learning in Associate Nursing education as an adjunct to coaching student Nursing Associates to become critical thinkers. It could be suggested that snowballing be included as a method of active learning in the curriculum for teaching Nursing Associates. The idea being to progress students from functional learners to critical thinkers by year two of their studies. The evidence suggests that snowballing can improve student's self-efficacy for learning, therefore encouraging students to become independent thinkers who are capable of establishing new knowledge by questioning the evidence base, but also have the skills to 'peer-work' and independently contribute to clinical practice outside of the classroom, therefore reducing dependence on registered nursing staff and providing valuable skills for their future careers. The snowballing activity was introduced to the group mentioned in the critical incident (see data for outcome).

According to Jones (2007) the snowballing technique requires each student individually to think about the topic or question posed. The individual then pairs with another student; the pairs then join with another pair to share their thoughts. This process continues into small groups and then into a large group to reflect on the task and answer the question.

Mentor Feedback

LO presented to the students – take your time in this process so students fully understand what they are intending to learn. Consider including an Ice Breaker to explore the learning outcomes next time.

Planning for the snowballing activity was evident – think about your time management of each section.

Excellent student engagement and participation fuelled by good facilitation.

Good preparation evident, a brave attempt at a teaching method/approach (Snowballing) which was new to the Tutor.

Students Feedback

- ✓ 'I enjoyed this way of learning more than just sitting in a lecture listening'
- ✓ 'I prefer to learn in this way, it is more active and I learn more'
- ✓ 'This process of learning helped to understand the bridge between theory and practice, I would prefer to learn like this all the time'

My Reflection

On reflection the snowballing activity was a success with the students. However, I learnt that this activity would work better if I had ensured that the students fully understood the Learning outcomes and that every part of the session had been time managed effectively. In future, I will use SMART lesson planning tools as advised by Savage (2015) and Benes and Alperin (2018) and the four stages of lesson planning as advised by Gill, (2002) and John, (2007) to limit time management errors within my teaching sessions to enable successful facilitation.

Active learning is 'anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing' (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

WHAT NOW?

Conclusion

The foundations of successful facilitation in snowballing and therefore good teaching practice is 'well planned and managed teaching sessions' (Gill, 2002, p.40). It is imperative to utilise teaching plans to ensure realistic time management. Learning outcomes should be SMART and should include the widely endorsed basic elements of Blooms Taxonomy of Cognitive Learning Objectives (Adams, 2004). Time should be given to fully explore the learning objectives, to encourage the students to develop the skills of synthesis and not merely an evaluation of the subject being taught (Anderson and Krathwhol, 2001; Hussey and Smith, 2002; and Brown, 2005; and Adam, 2015). Learning outcomes could be introduced by using an Ice breaker activity before starting the snowball exercise, this can enable the students to explore the LO's in detail to ensure understanding of the teaching content that followed, therefore optimising the outcome of accomplishing the LO's, as defined by Anderson and Krathwhol (2001); Biggs (2014) and Keiffer, (2018). It is important to give adequate time to each section of the snowballing activity, students need this time to fully explore the literature to enable them to transition into learners who can independently question the evidence base to find the answers to the question, therefore encouraging students to become critical thinkers.

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