

Student transitions – an embedded skills approach to scaffolded learning in a nursing curriculum

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***Abstract:** A scaffolded learning and embedded skills educational framework was adopted by an intersectorial Victoria University teaching team for the foundational unit of study 'Frameworks for Nursing Practice'. The scaffolded learning and embedded skills approach is espoused as recognising the unique learning needs of students (Devereux & Wilson 2008; McWilliams & Henderson 2008; Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2006; Kift, 2009) who are transitioning to higher education studies from a variety of entry points. This approach aims to improve academic performance and student retention rates. A quantitative student evaluation (n=227) of the unit of study in 2009 has revealed that students are appreciative of the scaffolded delivery format and cite that the model has supported their learning needs. Student and staff focus groups will be held in June / July 2010 to gain further qualitative data in conjunction with a quantitative analysis of first year performance and retention rates.*

Background

In recent years, universities in Australia have been exploring a variety of supportive educative frameworks which have potential for easing the transition process for an increasingly diverse cohort of undergraduate students entering into higher education in order to increase retention and completion rates. There will be an increasing need for academics to acknowledge transitional pedagogies in tertiary education environments, as by 2020, it is proposed that 20% of all undergraduates will be selected from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). The knowledge, skill base and attitudes to learning, which have been acquired from non- tertiary settings, often inadequately equip first year degree students to effectively comprehend and transcend the academic rigours of tertiary level studies. Transitional education models propose a range of teaching and student support strategies which aim to engage, and retain, first year students by making curriculum design and delivery explicit. The utilisation of a scaffolded, embedded skills approach to academic skill development has

been proposed as beneficial by several educators (Devereux & Wilson 2008; McWilliams & Henderson 2008; Green, Hammer, & Stephens, 2006). The embedding of academic skill acquisition – such as essay writing and information literacy - into curriculum delivery in a scaffolded, sequential manner, within foundational units of study, is an educational model which recognizes the unique learning needs of first year students. As Kazlauskas & Applebee (2007, p. 485) state: “simply telling and showing students what they need to do to bridge each [knowledge] gap does not necessarily provide the learning support that many students need..”. Kift (2009, p. 1) has also recently outlined six ‘first year curriculum principles’, which are:

- Transition
- Diversity
- Design
- Engagement
- Assessment
- Evaluation & Monitoring

These six principles aim to ensure that transitioning students are supported in multiple ways; recognising that first year students must be: ‘inspired, supported, and realise their sense of belonging; not only for engagement and retention, but also as foundational for later year learning..’ (Kift, 2009, p.1). The adoption of an educative framework which addresses these six first year curriculum principles; and which also incorporates a scaffolded, embedded skills approach to academic skill development is well aligned with current best educational practice for transitioning tertiary sector students.

Development and implementation

At Victoria University, one such educative model was developed and deployed within the Bachelor of Nursing curriculum. A scaffolded, embedded skills approach to academic skill development was utilised for the delivery of a foundational unit of study - Frameworks for Nursing Practice (HBN1101). This educational approach aimed to ensure that students acquired a range of introductory academic skills and professionally relevant competencies in a scaffolded learning (classroom and online) environment. In order to achieve the application of a scaffolded learning/embedded skills model, collaboration was sought with staff from a range of disciplines such as: Learning Support Services (essay writing and numeracy); Student Careers Development (graduate capability development and e-portfolios); e-learning support (online Learning Directory /online numeracy mastery module/ Lectopia /Turnitin); and Library liaison (information literacy/academic referencing). The collaborative development and

teaching efforts ensured the expanded capacity to embed academic skills such as: literacy; numeracy, information technology and academic referencing/information literacy into the unit delivery.

Assumptions guiding unit of study design and delivery:

- Educators assumed little, if any, prior knowledge of information literacy and developed computer lab class plans which taught students how to use:
 - *the internet* for academic purposes
 - *Harvard style* referencing aligned to unit assessments
 - *Database searching* aligned to unit assessments
- Educators assumed little, if any, prior knowledge of essay writing and developed tutorial and computer lab class plans which taught students how to:
 - *Analyse essay topics* as applied to unit assessment by identifying content; process and limiting words. Staff workshops were held prior to assist the consistency of teaching across groups
 - *Paraphrasing* selected article sections with examples of student and teacher attempts in class
 - *Created explicit marking guides* displaying criteria for each grade level achieved in unit assessments
- Educators assumed that students would have limited competency in numeracy and developed a maths mastery package which included:
 - *Practice tests* – as many times as preferred
 - *Face to face numerary workshops* organised for those assessed as not yet competent
- Educators assumed that students would have competing time demands between study and work and family commitments:
 - *Developed an online Learning Directory* for the unit of study which outlined all tutorial and computer lab class plans with step by step; week by week advice.

Impact and student response

A quantitative student evaluation (n=227) of the unit of study in 2009 has revealed that students are appreciative of the scaffolded delivery format and cite that the model has

supported their learning needs. Student and staff focus groups will be held in June / July 2010 to gain further qualitative data in conjunction with a quantitative analysis of first year performance and retention rates. Ongoing robust evaluation, and future improvement, of the scaffolded, embedded skills teaching approach will better align the unit of study delivery to best transition pedagogy practice (Kift, 2009).

The planned 'Nuts & Bolts' session will outline the practice – based initiatives undertaken in the 'Frameworks for Nursing Practice' unit of study, aligned to the 'six first year curriculum principles' as described by Kift (2009). The practice – based initiatives undertaken in the unit of study span all six principles and include a variety of methods – including scaffolded approaches to assessments and awards for class presentations. Following the unit of study presentation, the focus of the Nuts & Bolts session will move to audience participation in order to explore additional ways the scaffolded, embedded skills teaching approach could be utilised by first year educators.

Questions / Issues for audience

- What do you consider the benefits of a scaffolded, embedded skills teaching approach?
- How could the scaffolded, embedded skills teaching approach be improved?
- In what ways could you utilise the scaffolded, embedded skills teaching approach for your practice?

Session Outline

- Power Point presentation of the Frameworks for Nursing Practice unit of study scaffolded learning and embedded skills educational framework as aligned to the 'six first year curriculum principles' (Kift, 2009) **10 minutes**
- Audience participation in order to explore additional ways the scaffolded, embedded skills teaching approach could be utilised by first year educators. Above listed questions will guide this discussion:
 - Audience could be evenly divided into groups to consider the above three questions with butcher paper / pens provided **10 minutes**
 - Facilitated discussion of each group's ideas / responses **10 minutes**

References

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