Using posters and presentations with large classes of health students, Janet Brown

University: University of New England
Faculty: Health & Professional Studies, School of Health
Subject: HSNS 276: Professional Issues in Nursing Practice
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No. of students: 70-100
Year: 2001, Semester 2

Overview
The general aim of this unit of study is to assist second-year undergraduate, pre-registration nursing students to develop professional knowledge, skills and attributes through a strategy designed to encourage effective communication and teamwork. Teamwork is part of the daily working life of a nurse. All nurses will need to develop skills in being a team player. Even those nurses who live and work as sole practitioners in remote areas either work with health workers (eg Aboriginal Health Workers) and/or form a team with their clients. In this strategy, students consider the characteristics of successful team members. They are required to practise these skills throughout the unit by planning, organising and presenting an end of the semester conference to which family, friends, key health personnel and clinical supervisory staff are invited. In effect, the conference offers the students the opportunity to showcase their work.

There are many learning outcomes associated with this strategy. They include:

- Developing interpersonal communication and co-operation skills between students, including conflict resolution and equitable distribution of responsibility and workload in the preparation of the conference presentation;
- Demonstrating effective communication and efficient liaison skills between groups of students who are responsible for the planning, management and staging of the conference;
- Exhibiting excellence in communication with groups and individuals within the university to obtain assistance with staging the conference and learning the skills required to make a creative presentation (for example some students acquired multimedia skills);
- Contacting and communicating in an appropriate manner with community agencies to elicit support;
- Approaching professional organisations to gain support and endorsement for the conference;
- Researching, planning, writing and presenting either a paper or a poster on the conference day. This also required a combination of creativity and public speaking ability.

Teaching modes and organization
The conference day is the culmination of a semester’s work in this unit. The unit is process-driven. There are two hours of lectures per week in which key issues related to developing professional values and ethics are addressed. There are a further two hours of tutorials, taught in four groups of approximately 25 students. The tutorial sessions include discussions, debates, developing skills in team work, communication, public speaking and presentation of researched posters. Each tutorial group takes responsibility for one aspect of the organization of the conference: management, budgeting, hospitality, publicity. They apply their knowledge of effective team work to bringing their team effort to their group conference presentations.

The role of the teacher/lecturer is one of facilitator and guide. Assistance is provided to all participants to develop the skills and support required to develop their project and work
productively as a team. It is made clear to the students at the outset that it is to be THEIR conference. Decisions are made democratically. Very few stipulations are made. For example, everyone enrolled in the unit must participate. The papers must be of a certain length (time) and a paper copy must be submitted after the conference. The poster presentations must be adequately researched and referenced and a minimum size is specified. Criteria for the judging of paper presentations and posters are negotiated with the students.

The students plan, organise and stage the conference as a member of a team. They obtain funds and resources, set the venue, deal with all management issues, invite the guests (faculty, professionals, family and friends), organise the publicity and media contacts and hospitality on the day. Each student (with at least one other colleague) researches, plans, creates and delivers either a paper or a poster. They evaluate the success of the conference.

Assessment
There are two approaches to assessment in this unit. About four weeks after the beginning of the semester students are required to submit a paper on a topic related to professionalism in nursing. They are encouraged to plan this assignment so that it feeds into or assists them with the planning of their conference presentation. The first assignment is allocated a mark out of 40. I provide extensive individualised feedback on all these papers. Where I identify problems I either assist the student myself or refer them to the appropriate support service within the university. I am happy to read drafts of student assignments. They are criterion referenced and students are not in competition with each other in any way.

The second (and major) piece of assessment is the conference presentation (please see criteria below).

Participants who opt to present a conference paper will be required to address the following criteria:

- The paper should be 20 minutes in duration.
- 5 minutes of question-time will follow each paper.
- The paper will address one aspect of the main theme of the conference and be related to professional issues in nursing practice.
- A short (100-150 word) abstract will be submitted at least 2 weeks before the conference date.
- The paper should take into account the potential audience of the conference.
- There is evidence of careful research in the preparation of the paper.
- The paper is clearly organised and well-articulated.
- There is evidence of the use of imagination and creativity.
- The presentation will be supported by appropriate and well-prepared visual aids.
- A written copy of the paper (referenced appropriately) will be submitted to the Unit Co-ordinator after the conference.

Participants who opt to present a conference poster will be required to address the following criteria:

- The poster will be at least 2 metres x 1.5 metres in size.
- The poster will be attended during the breaks and presenters will be available to explain their work and answer questions.
- The poster will address one aspect of the main theme of the conference and be related to professional issues in nursing practice.
- A short (100-150 word) description of the poster will be submitted at least 2 weeks before the conference date.
- There is evidence of careful research and development of the theme of the poster.
- The poster is clearly organised and well presented.
- There is evidence of the use of imagination and creativity.
- The poster will be supported by an appropriate and well documented reference list.
- The paper should take into account the intended audience of the conference.
• The poster will be submitted to the Unit Co-ordinator after the conference with the understanding that presenters may be asked to loan their work for future displays.

Focus issue(s)

Initially students are very sceptical about this form of teaching and assessment. Their main concerns are:
• lack of confidence in presenting a paper or a poster
• the amount of work which it will involve (It's much harder than simply writing an essay, Jan!)
• the possibility that some members of their presentation team will not work as hard as others and yet they will both get the same mark.

How do I deal with these issues?
I run confidence building sessions and we practice public speaking and I provide support and encouragement.
It is a lot of work but the outcomes are proportionately high in terms of relevance and personal and professional satisfaction.
Part of working in a team is learning how to manage conflict and develop ways to ensure that each team member feels valued and committed to the team's goal. Students are guided to sorting out their differences and learning to work well together.

There have been three conferences so far. Each has been a resounding success. I have been delighted with the way students have worked together to achieve the outcomes. A Senior Director of Nursing Services (who opened the conference in 2000) was so impressed with the students that she donated two scholarships to a National Community Health Conference for them. In 2001 the Chief Nursing Officer for NSW opened the conference for us.
We are all on a high after the conference!

Conclusion
There have been some difficulties with implementing the strategy. For example, colleagues with a more content-driven, traditional approach to teaching have been somewhat negative about the initiative at times though most attend the conference and enjoy it. Similarly, some students find the strategy very challenging and have expressed a preference for the more conventional assignment/examination assessment model. However, these students are in the minority.

Students provide a summative evaluation of the unit and the activities. We also ask all conference delegates to evaluate the conference itself (a form is provided in their conference satchel).

Comments from students include:
Jan, it has all been an amazing experience. Thank you
Jan, thanks for making second year more relevant and bearable
Jan, thanks for all your encouragement and support. We did it! Inspirational!
Thanks for the opportunity to do something really special and all your support
Awesome! Who would have thought we could do it!