Supporting sustainable student learning throughout a three-year program using ePortfolios

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Over the past decade a paradigm shift has changed the focus of education from creating a teacher-centred instructional environment to creating a student-centred one. As a result, curricula are changing to better accommodate individual student learning and university responsibilities. Grades are no longer proof enough of learning: multiple stakeholders in education and the workplace want documentation that provides evidence of the entire process of learning. To answer these calls, our latest faculty curriculum focuses on learning outcomes as a way of measuring what students have learnt and are able to do when they finish their degree. Outcomes assessment therefore sets out to measure the knowledge, skills and attitudes that each student gains from their university experience. Writing assessment criteria that capture these abilities is challenging, but crucial if students and faculty are to receive feedback about individual learning. This paper gives an account of the assessment to date in one first-year undergraduate subject that maps assessment criteria to faculty graduate attributes using an ePortfolio. Progression of students’ abilities will be followed throughout the second and third years of the program. The ePortfolio is used here as both a learning tool and a means of aggregation. Using ePortfolios, students can actively participate in assessing their own learning in individual subjects and across subjects and years. This helps them to assess their own strengths and weaknesses and monitor their growth and development over time. It also allows them to tell their own stories and make connections between their formal coursework and their informal, experiential learning.

Keywords: ePortfolio; graduate attributes
Theme: assessment for sustainable learning within and beyond the course

Background and aims
Assessing and tracking student learning outcomes within one subject can be accomplished relatively easily, when well planned. However, the true challenge involves providing assessment tools that: support deep approaches to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1984; Gibbs, 1992); are learner-centred (Ramsden, 1992); facilitate student involvement (Falchikov, 2005); provide the learner with lifelong skills (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Boud, 2010); as well as offer teachers the ability to track the progress of student learning outcomes for an entire program (Thompson, 2007). The purpose of this case study is to describe and evaluate how one first-year subject in an undergraduate nursing program is beginning this process. This is being done through innovative ePortfolio assessment tasks designed to enhance early student awareness of, and important skills
necessary for, acquiring and sustaining professional development throughout the three-year program and into the workplace.

The literature is generally positive about the benefits of ePortfolios (see, for example, Cambridge, 2001; Lorenzo & Ittleson, 2005; JISC, 2008; and Hallam et al., 2008). Research has shown that ePortfolios can “enhance” learning outcomes for students (Jafari & Kaufman, 2006; Stefani, Mason & Peglar, 2007) and that ePortfolios are more likely to be successfully valued by students when they are used for assessment (Stefani, Mason & Peglar, 2007). The result is that globally the use of ePortfolios is becoming integrated into student-centred learning within undergraduate programs. Precisely how to successfully embed or implement them into our program is still being examined. A recent paper by Housego and Parker (2009) argues strongly that successful implementation requires not only setting relevant assessments but also changing faculty assessment practices. This project has begun the process of change by introducing assessment criteria in the first year of a course; these criteria provide the means for students to set learning goals, monitor and regulate their progress toward these goals and develop their self-assessment skills.

Description of the practice and evaluation methods

The focus of this paper is an assessment designed for a first-year Bachelor of Nursing subject at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), called Professional Identity. The subject content is designed to assist students to be responsible practitioners, and provides them with knowledge of the skills and tools required to achieve a professional disposition. Assessment is progressive, and each student is provided with an ePortfolio so that they can begin to learn how to assume responsibility for and make judgements about their own progress. The classroom tutorials provide formative feedback and support for the students in deciding on their goals, and grading is done at intervals that assist students in working towards their final reflective paper about their learning.

Focus groups and a questionnaire involving 450 nursing students were completed in November 2010. These explored to what extent the subject assessment tasks has assisted the students in monitoring and regulating their progress towards meeting their semester goals and developing their self-assessment skills. Particular attention was placed on obtaining feedback about the assessment criteria, which have been designed to focus on learning objectives rather than performance objectives. This paper presents the insights gained thus far from teaching and assessments, as well as preliminary feedback from students.

Next steps

Individual criteria have been written in order to provide feedback for the students (and the faculty) on students’ progression in terms of the abilities of critical thinking, knowledge and expertise, literacy and reflection. Adaptation of these criteria for second and third year is required and is currently underway, so that students can ‘self-regulate’ their progress throughout the program and leave with the skills necessary for contemporary nursing practice. The successful implementation of ‘sustainable criteria’ will need to be supported and valued throughout the program by the students and the faculty.
Conclusions and implications for practice

With the introduction of a national continuing competency framework in 2010, nursing graduates in Australia will be expected to maintain evidence of their ability to provide safe and competent practice. As Andre & Barnes (2010) state in a recent paper, there is a danger that if nursing graduates have no experience of self-regulation, they will finish their studies believing that minimum standards are adequate in practice, when the continuing competency framework will measure them against an expected higher level of competency rather than a minimum. Universities have a responsibility to provide students with the means to support themselves in their learning processes in the contemporary workplace, particularly in light of the emphasis on ‘work-readiness’.

References


