

The Group-based Assessment Approach in Nursing Education: The Perspective of Nursing Students on Group-based Assessment Process at a Namibian University

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Abstract

Group-based assessments used in the Bachelor of Nursing Science (clinical) Honours programme at a public university in Namibia are usually in the form of assignments and projects. Completing tasks in groups helps students to develop important skills like critical thinking and debating. In addition, it prepares them to work in the health-care environment where collaboration with others is required. That said, nursing students lack cooperation during the process of completing their group assignments or projects. A classroom-based research was conducted using action research as the design. The objectives were to: explore what is causing lack of cooperation during group-based assessment as perceived by nursing students, and to propose, implement and evaluate measures to improve cooperation during group-based assessment task completion.

Themes that emerged as factors contributing to a lack of cooperation are: student motivation, student personal characteristics, lack of planning to approach the allocated task, student learning approaches, communication-related issues, and group composition and allocation procedures. The proposed measures of students to ensure cooperation are: selection of group leaders, determining lecturer roles in facilitating group assessment, improving communication, and involvement of students in the allocation procedures of group members.

All suggestions were successfully implemented. Evaluation of measures to ensure cooperation revealed that students appreciated the group-based approach strategy given its very positive impact on their learning.

Keywords: Group-based assessment, Lack of cooperation; Nursing students, Classroom-based research, Assessment approach, Nursing education, Nursing student perspectives

1. Introduction

The training of nursing students prepares them to become health professionals who can work collaboratively with other members of the hospital team. It is therefore necessary to introduce nursing students to team-based work during their training. A group-based assessment is one of the approaches undertaken to practice collaborative work. The ability of nursing students to work as a member of a team is essential to nursing practice, and this will continue to be the case with increasingly innovative and interprofessional health-care approaches (Smith & Rogers, 2014).

Assessment is commonly recognised as being fundamental to the educative process and is a very significant part of lecturers' roles in higher education. However, designing an assessment system is not easy (Schuwirth & van der Vleuten, 2010) – but, if it has been carefully scheduled, it forms an integral part of the teaching and learning experience for the student. In addition, students perceive assessment tasks as being the key priority of their studies (Hughes & Quinn, 2013). Schuwirth and van der Vleuten (2010) indicated that assessment is never undertaken without a specific purpose. It is generally undertaken for the purpose of formative or summative assessment. Formative assessments are undertaken to provide feedback, while summative assessments are undertaken at the end of an academic year, a term of study, or full course (Wood, 2010). This is because summative assessments are normally concerned with the end result of learning (Bruce, Klopper & Mellish, 2011).

A group-based assessment takes the form of group work. This is defined as a process whereby group membership is assigned to students, or, in some cases, the students divide themselves into groups in order to work on a task (Dimock & Kass, 2008) which is assessed by the teacher or a peer. According to Gagnon and Roberge (2012), group work encompasses diverse strategies like team-based learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and interprofessional learning. In a Bachelor of Nursing Science (clinical) Honours (BNSc) programme offered at a public university in Namibia, group assessments are usually in the form of projects such as community health assessments, drawing posters and assignments.

Group assignments are tasks allocated to more than two students, in order to work together in terms of achieving learning objectives (Bruce, Klopper & Mellish, 2011). In group projects, students work together to investigate a problem or an issue that leads to learning (Bruce, Klopper & Mellish, 2011). Marks are allocated to group assessment tasks, and they normally contribute to continuous assessment marks which also contribute to the final course marks at the end of the semester. According to Dijkstra, Latijnhouwers, Norbart and Tio (2016), all students in one group are awarded the same marks – which are also the practice in the BNSc programme mentioned above. Although group-based assessments are graded, they can be undertaken for formative purposes, because feedback is given to the students. In addition to preparing student nurses to work in the health care environment where collaboration with others is required, completing tasks in groups helps students develop important skills like critical thinking and debating (Quinn & Hughes, 2013).

In the Namibian BNSc programme, students are normally divided up by the course lecturers into groups of five to eight, in order to work on an assignment or a project. The composition and number of group members are determined by the lecturers – and students are not involved. Students are randomly selected according to their seating arrangements in the lecture hall or are divided up alphabetically or according to the course class lists.

It has been noted that BNSc students always look dissatisfied when given assessment tasks to conduct in groups. In addition, they complain to their lecturers about lack of cooperation during the process of completing their assignments or projects. Little is known about the student experiences of group assessment, and what has caused them to be non-cooperative during the task-completion process. This led to the following two questions:

- Why are the nursing students at a satellite campus uncooperative during the group assignment or project task completion?
- What should be done to ensure cooperation during the group assignment or project task completion?

1.1 Study Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Explore what is causing lack of cooperation during group-based assessments – as perceived by nursing students.
- Propose, implement and evaluate measures to improve cooperation during group-based assessment task completion.

This article presents the findings of a study which explored the causes of a lack of cooperation during group-based assessment, as perceived by nursing students in the BNSc programme at a satellite campus of the public University in Namibia. In addition, it also reports on the implementation and evaluation of suggested measures to improve cooperation during group-based assessments.

1.2 Research Context

The BNSc programme is offered at the Namibian university's main campus and three satellite campuses in the northern and southern part of the country. The study was conducted at the campus in southern Namibia. A four-year BNSc undergraduate programme is the only programme offered in the School of Nursing at this campus, which had 38 students registered in January 2015 as a first cohort in this programme. They enrolled for 12 courses – of which three are year courses and nine are semester courses, with four are taught in semester one and three in semester two. Many of these courses use a group-based assessment approach. Students are taught in one lecture hall with a 40-seat capacity and a clinical skills room which is designated for this programme. The research study was conducted in the lecture hall.

2. Study Design and Methods

2.1 Research Design

Classroom-based research was conducted using action research as a research design. Action research is a recommended design option for those who conduct studies for the purpose of bringing improvements (Maree, 2016). In addition, action research is a method to solve every-day problems in educational settings (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009). Therefore, it was an appropriate design for this study. This research has an exploratory component and a problem – solving purpose and therefore followed an interpretative and constructive paradigmatic assumption. The study was guided by the cyclical process of action research (Fig. 1.1). This is a five-step process consisting: practice, reflection, research, plan, and action (Maree, 2016).



Figure 1. The cyclical process of action research

Phase one: Practice

This is where the practical challenge (Maree, 2016) was identified by the students and lecturer, which is a lack of cooperation during the group-assignment process. No data collection was conducted during this phase.

Phase two: Reflection

Awareness of the practical challenge leads to reflection (Maree, 2016) and a focus on the planning of how a problem can be solved. The lecturer started planning for the action research and introduced idea to the students.

2.2 Data Collection

Phase three: Research

During this phase, data were collected using reflective notes from the students and class discussions. The study was conducted during September 2015 to September 2016 – in order to ensure prolonged engagement which is one of the strategies to ensure credibility in action research (Maree, 2016). Students were asked to write reflective notes in English based on the following three components: their experiences of participating in group assignments or projects since the beginning of the 2015 academic year, factors contributing to a lack of cooperation, and measures that can be taken to improve cooperation. All notes were collected by the lecturer for data analysis and the students gave permission for their notes to be used in the study.

Phase four: Plan and Phase five: Action involved planning all suggested measures and how they can be implemented. Suggestions were implemented and evaluations of changes were conducted via discussions with the students. This was done to allow multiple perspectives on collecting data, in order to ensure trustworthiness (Maree, 2016).

2.3 Data Analysis

Analysis of data from reflective notes and discussions was done by coding, and then related codes were grouped to form a theme. Coding is the “process of reading carefully through your data, line by line, dividing it into meaningful analytical units” (Maree, 2016). Furthermore, themes were given names that described them and which are inclusive of all codes under them. To increase credibility, member validation was done by the researcher. In addition, peer debriefing was done by a senior colleague in the field, who assessed the first report of this study – which was also to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

2.4 Participants

All 2015 first-year nursing students (n = 38) were invited to participate in the research and they all agreed to take part. No sampling was done, because the problem was experienced by all students, and all their inputs were needed to seek a solution. Thirty five (35) students remained until the end of the study, as three students had resigned from the programme by the end of September 2016.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Research and Publication Committee at the public university in Namibia, and consent to participate in the study was obtained from participants. Participation was voluntary and did not negatively affect student studies. Confidentiality was maintained during the process, and no names of students were linked to their responses.

3. Findings

Data obtained from student notes were analysed to identify themes, in order to understand the lack of cooperation during group-based assessments among nursing students and the proposed measures to improve cooperation. The table below indicates a summary of the study findings.

Table 1. Summary of the study findings

Two categories of findings	Themes
Factors contributing to a lack of cooperation	Communication-related issues Student learning approaches Student personal characteristics Lack of planning to approach an allocated task Group composition and allocation procedures Student motivation
Measures to ensure cooperation during group-based assessment	Selection of group leaders Defining lecturer roles in facilitating group assessment Improved communication Involvement of students in group member allocation procedures.

3.1 Factors Contributing to Lack of Cooperation during Group-based Assessments

Factors contributing to a lack of cooperation were sought from the students' perspectives – and six themes were developed from the findings, as indicated in Table 1 above. In this section, these themes are individually presented and exact words from the students' reflective notes are listed for each theme. The number of participants is also indicated in the participants' exact words, in order to ensure inclusivity of all responses from the study.

3.1.1 Communication-related Issues

Most participants indicated that poor communication contributed greatly to the lack of cooperation, because sometimes a person responsible for arranging group meetings only phoned some members, and those who were not informed later become uncooperative. At some point, there were misunderstandings among group members – which led to divisions and a lack of communication with others. A few participants pointed out the language barrier as one of the causes of a lack of cooperation – because some students communicated in their home languages. Moreover, some students did not focus on group discussions because they were using their cell phones.

An example of a comment from participants:

“Some students do not like to discuss in English, they discuss in their home language” P30

3.1.2 Student Learning Approaches

Many participants indicated that some students preferred individual work over group-work. In addition, some students had other opinions on how to approach assigned tasks, but these were unsuitable and were not considered by other members. Some participants indicated there are students who do not put a lot of effort into the tasks and others

put in more effort because they believe in hard work in order to obtain high marks. Moreover, some students only focused on the assignment or project, and were unwilling to explore more in terms of the subject content.

An example of a comment from participants:

“I worked with students who did their work individually and never want to come together to discuss. They always reminded me that they prefer to work alone, [and] at the end we compile an assignment but it lacked a flow of ideas because we never worked together.” P18

3.1.3 Student Personal Characteristics

Personal characteristics were pointed out as being the common cause of a lack of cooperation during the process of group assignment or project task completion. Some participants indicated that some students like to give orders, did not listen to others, and got angry when their ideas were not accepted – while some lack self-confidence and are not open to participate. Some students have no respect for others and others have unresolved conflicts which prevented them from cooperating with their peers. The other common problems raised are the laziness and selfishness of some students. In addition to that, some participants felt that inappropriate mannerisms and favouritism among group members contributed to the lack of cooperation.

Examples of comments from participants:

“Some students have bad manners – they can even insult other members, tear the papers or hide the draft that you write as a group” P26

“We couldn’t work together because of personal issues such as proudness, and some students lack self-confidence and are too shy” P6

3.1.4 Lack of Planning to Approach the Allocated Task

Most participants indicated they did not plan before approaching their tasks. This means they did not come up with a schedule which included the timeline with the activities that needed to be completed. Furthermore, some participants had other priorities and abandon the group assessment activities knowing that others were available to finish the task.

Examples of comments from participants:

“I think we did not have a plan – my peers were busy with other activities such as studying for tests and delayed the process of completing assignments” P35

“It seems like we prioritised other activities other than completing the group assignments or projects” P1

Some participants revealed that they did not allocate tasks to each other in their groups, and sometimes there was an unfair distribution of tasks. However, where tasks were fairly distributed some members failed to complete tasks allocated to them.

Examples of comments from participants:

“Some of my group members failed to complete their allocated tasks” P8

“Students fail to finish or do research about a topic given to them by other group members – or as it was agreed upon” P20

3.1.5 Group Composition and Allocation Procedures

Some students blamed the lack of cooperation on the procedures followed when choosing group members. They revealed that factors like place of residence and personalities were not considered when assigning members to a group. In addition, they felt that sometimes groups comprised students who stay at different residences and this made it difficult to work together after classes or during weekends. Moreover, participants indicated that assignments or project groups involved too many people – and this made it difficult to work together smoothly.

An example of a comment from participants:

“We are staying at different places and we don’t really get time to meet. I know it would have been better if I worked with people staying in the same residence with me or [if I was] allocated with people I am free to work with etc ... I wish lecturers would consider them when dividing us” P14

3.1.6 Student Motivation

Some participants indicated there are students who are not motivated and are not interested or serious about their studies. Furthermore, most participants indicated that some students are not committed to attending group meetings and do not contribute to the assignment.

An example of a comment from participants:

"I observed that some of my colleagues are not motivated, and because of that they just can't work well with others"
P16

3.2 Measures to Ensure Cooperation during Group-based Assessment

Participants proposed measures that might be employed to help improve cooperation among students during the completion of tasks in group-assessment work. These proposed measures are indicated in Table 1. Hereafter, each measure is explained in detail:

3.2.1 Selection of Group Leaders

Students proposed that each group should select a group leader in order to equally allocate tasks to each other. In addition, a leader should monitor members and report back to lecturers in case some do not participate.

An example of a comment from participants:

"One student should lead others to ensure that everyone participates in the group work, by assigning a section for each student to complete" P18

3.2.2 Involvement of Students in Group Member Allocation Procedures

Students should be given an opportunity to select who they want to work with. In addition, Members should be allocated based on their residence, and they should be reduced to three students per group.

Examples of comments from participants:

"Students should be allowed to choose group members with whom they will work – so they can give their best to the projects" P1

"Students should not be allocated to a group of more than three, because some become lazy and do not contribute"
P7

3.2.3 Lecturer Roles In Facilitating Group Assessment

Students proposed that lecturers should from periodically find out how students are progressing with their group assignment or projects. They should work closely with a team leader in order to find out which students are not participating, so that they will be awarded lower marks. Students also suggested that they should be allocated time during the class schedule in order to complete their assignment(s) or projects.

An example of a comment from participants:

"Sometimes we are left on our own to work on the assignment and we don't really know what to do. Lecturers do not enquire on how we are progressing" P20

Students proposed that they should be properly orientated to the concept of group-work assessment, which includes advice on interpersonal relationships. They should be given advice on time management and the importance of group work should be communicated to them.

Examples of comments from participants:

"Lecturers should convince the students of the advantages of group projects" P28

"Students must be told the importance of sharing information and how to work in groups" P31

3.2.4 Improve Communication among Group Members

Students proposed that group work meetings should be conducted in English in order for all students to participate. They also felt that each group should have a communication system in place, which means they should agree at the beginning about who should communicate with members to call a meeting and how it should be done.

Examples of comments from participants:

"Always inform others when doing something instead of doing it individually" P20

"Group discussions must always be done in English" P30

3.3 Implementations and Evaluations of Proposed Measures to Ensure Cooperation during Group-based Assessment

Measures proposed to improve cooperation were shared with all students after data were analysed. This was done via discussion with all students in the lecture hall at the campus. A checklist was developed to facilitate the implementation of all proposed changes to the group assessment method. This was followed by a second discussion

in the lecture hall, where the process of group assessment, its purposes and ideas on how to approach it were shared with students. Students were also guided to select their group members and representative in order to start working on the Human Physiology assignment. The last meeting took place after all assignments were collected from students, all proposed measures were revisited, and students had discussed how they implement them. No new issues were raised in the last meeting.

4. Discussion

The group-assessment approach is known to contribute to preparing a health profession student for the role of collaborator – which is a role expected from all health-care practitioners. As a result, group-based assessments are increasingly incorporated into health science curricula (Gagnon & Roberge, 2012; Dijkstra, Latijnhouwers, Norbart & Tio, 2016). It is also worth mentioning that group-based assessment has increasingly been significant in assessing the collaboration competency in health professions' education. It is known that not all students like to work in groups and most students blame this on lack of cooperation (Hughes & Quinn, 2013) – which is also the case with a majority of BNSc students at the satellite campus of the public university in Namibia.

Except for the lack of student involvement in the selection and allocation of group membership, the findings from this action-research study indicated that the causes of lack of cooperation are mostly related to the students – specifically their personal characteristics, learning approaches, and lack of planning and motivation. However, measures proposed in this study mostly required the teachers to be actively involved in the preparation of students, before they embarked on an assigned task. As a method of orientating the students to the assigned tasks, the researcher ensured that measures are shared with other educators who assess students via group assessment. In addition, group assignments are accompanied by clear and expanded guidelines and also an extended time for completion in order to facilitate cooperation and proper planning. All changes were embraced by students and they appreciated the group-assessment approach and its contribution to learning and boosting their continuous-assessment marks – especially for courses like Human Anatomy and Human Physiology which are difficult to comprehend.

Students in the BNSc at the satellite campus reside at different places in the town, which makes it difficult for them to meet. In addition, they have other commitments such as family responsibilities. This accord with Caplea and Bogleb (2013), who indicated that meeting in a group context does not fit with the lifestyles of some students. However, students in the BNSc programme were advised to make use of short time slots available – such as during lunch hours.

According to Gognon and Roberge (2012), students blame lack of cooperation during group work on unwillingness to learn from others, and reluctance to share knowledge and participate. In addition, some students tend to deviate from assigned tasks. However, these issues were not revealed in the current action research study. As a measure to prepare students for their roles as learners and teachers of others in group work, students were guided to observe their own behaviours (Chapman, 2006) and develop self-awareness traits.

The literature on group-based assessment revealed that there should be careful consideration when selecting group members for group assessments – in order to balance the type of students with adequate peer support (Beccaria, Kek, Huijjer, Rose & Kimminis, 2014). Furthermore, lecturers should allow students who feel comfortable with each other to work together, while the other important aspect is to mix learners with different learning approaches (Baccaria *et al.*, 2014). Involvement of students in the selection of group members was also revealed in this study. Students were given an opportunity to choose peers to work with in their assignment, and this worked well. This was facilitated by the fact that students worked with people they have a good connection with and who are accommodated in places closer to their place of residence. Most students prefer to work with peers who are academically good, even though they are not friends, they chose them because of a fear of losing marks (Analoui, Sambrook & Doloriert, 2014)

Smith and Rogers (2014) recommended that nursing programmes should include teaching methodologies that stimulate engagement, which is also part of a team work process in order to build skills required for successful team outcome. For the Namibian BNSc programme, lecturers were encouraged to use group works as teaching strategies – so that students are more prepared for team-based assessment.

5. Conclusion

This article contributes to the understanding of how nursing students perceive the causes of lack of cooperation during group-based assessments. Furthermore, it proposes measures to ensure cooperation, from the student perspective. From this study it is evident that a lack of cooperation was mostly student related. However, with support from course facilitators, students greatly appreciate group assessments and their roles in becoming members of the health profession team.

6. Recommendations

There are several recommendations arising from this study that could help improve cooperation during the group-based assessment approach in nursing education:

- 1) Student nurses should be involved in the selection and allocation of their group members prior to commencement of the task.
- 2) The lecturer should clearly introduce the students to the group assessment process and explain the role of each student, and also what is expected from the assigned task.
- 3) Group assessment should be well coordinated with each group comprising a group leader, and the lecturer should monitor progress mid-way – before the submission deadline.

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Conflict of Interests Disclosure

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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