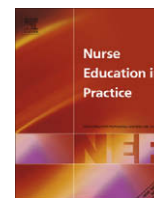




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The use of teaching portfolios to promote excellence and scholarship in nurse education

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SUMMARY

Achieving excellence in nurse education and demonstrating scholarship in teaching is a challenge for nurse educators who find themselves torn between maintaining high standards in nurse education and their own need for recognition and promotion in an environment that primarily favours research and publications over excellence in teaching. The use of a teaching portfolio is a way to display excellence in nurse education and to provide a public display of teaching scholarship. While not a new concept in nursing education, it has some originality in its application to practising nurse educators. However, the requirement for and guidelines on the development of a portfolio for nurse educators (other than those undertaking educational training) has been little explored. The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of a teaching portfolio as a vehicle to demonstrate excellence and scholarship among seasoned nurse educators. The process of developing a teaching portfolio at one university setting is outlined, so that other teachers are enlightened to the potential benefits of this activity.

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Introduction

Continuing professional development (CPD) is a prominent feature of contemporary nursing practice. CPD usually consists of planned activities that improve nurses' knowledge and skills (An Bord Altranais, 1997). Practicing nurses working in some countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA) and Australia are required to furnish CPD evidence regularly to their respective nursing regulatory bodies in order to retain their names on the professional nursing register. In many cases, maintaining a portfolio is a compulsory component of CPD as it provides the evidence supporting knowledge and skill development' (Timmins, 2008).

However beyond these generic requirements for CPD evidence, there is no specific mandate for practicing *nurse educators* to either maintain a portfolio or provide evidence of CPD that is specifically related to their teaching practice. In the University setting the key indicators against which one's worth is recognized is research output (McVeigh et al., 2002), including refereed publications. Status and legitimacy is conferred on research scholarship at the expense of clinical and teaching scholarship (Ramcharan et al., 2001).

For many nurse teachers, research and publication endeavours, to the volume, consistency and standard demanded in the university involves changing attitudes towards priorities, a re-focusing of energy and commitment, and a move towards self-advancement in

the corporate world. While only a reported 7% of nurse educators publish each year (McVeigh et al., 2002), Glanville and Houde (2004) argue that nursing should not be penalized for spending time on issues of teaching and learning as these are crucial to nursing even though it may mean that less time is devoted to research. Educators contributions towards the advancement of teaching can be valued through scholarship (Young, 2002). The teaching portfolio has been identified as a means through which educators are enabled to conceptualize and publicize the *scholarship* of teaching and promote teaching excellence (Lyons, 1998). A teaching portfolio is a structured written record of teaching endeavours supported by the inclusion of examples of the outcomes of teaching and according to Lyons (1998, p. 3) "...fully realized only through reflective writing, deliberation, and serious conversation".

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of scholarship in teaching as a means of promoting excellence in practice. This paper also aims to demonstrate the potential benefit of a cohesive scholarly approach to the documentation of teaching through the use of the teaching portfolio. The process of developing a teaching portfolio in one university setting is presented, so that other teachers are enlightened to both the process and potential benefits of teaching portfolios.

Excellence in nurse education

Excellence in nurse education requires nurse educators who are "inflamed by nursing education" (Valiga, 2003, p. 276) and are infused with a passion for students, teaching and learning (Valiga,

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2003). Nurse educators, who are nurses, are professionally accountable for promoting excellence in nurse education and this is a challenge in an environment that primarily rewards research and publication. They therefore face competing tensions between maintaining high standards in nurse education and their own need for recognition and promotion. Maintaining high standards in education means that nurse educators must retain their focus on teaching as a priority and develop a critical approach to their teaching. This critical approach requires educators to develop awareness of their practice, to be able challenge their own assumptions and values, and be open to public scrutiny (Tabak et al., 2003). It also requires nurse educators to reflect on their own teaching styles and analyze and challenge the structures that constrain the development of a teaching style that facilitates the use of appropriate classroom techniques. The use of a teaching portfolio allows for this critical reflection to take place. It also allows for public display of teaching endeavours, permits scrutiny and thus the development of excellence in teaching.

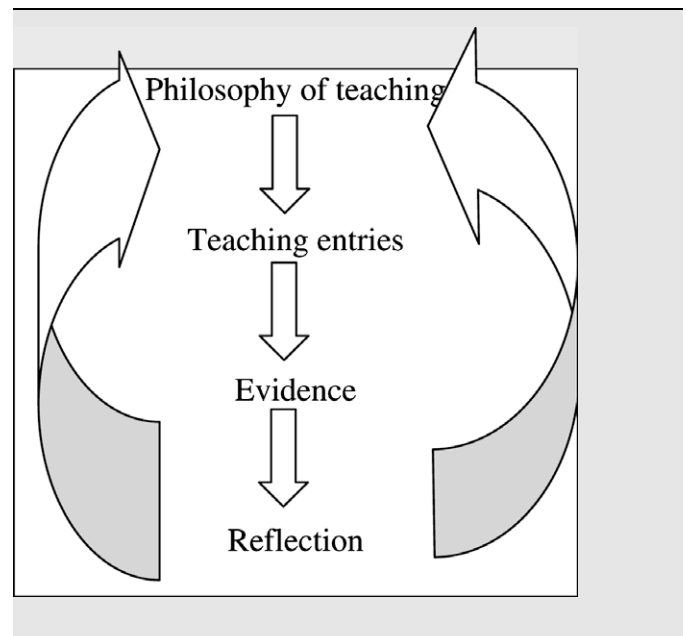
Excellence in education also means being innovative and moves beyond merely adding new content, or reorganization of existing content to “thinking in totally new ways about our approach to education, the outcomes towards which we strive, and the ways in which we collaborate with students in the learning process” (Valiga, 2003, p. 276). While the development of a teaching portfolio may in itself be innovative, it also promotes the use of new and alternative ways of teaching. Although some authors view excellence in teaching as synonymous with scholarship (Menning and McGrew, 2000), in general the meaning of the term scholarship as it relates to teaching is not always clear to educators (Kreber, 2001; Nicholls, 2004).

Scholarship

Scholarship in teaching was first proposed by Boyer (1990) who argued that the traditional view of scholarship as one of basic research was both limited and restricting and did not reflect the full range of academic work (Boyer, 1990). When applied to academic work Boyer (1990) posited that scholarship not only applied to discovery as in research but also teaching as “...teaching at its best, means not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well” (Boyer, 1990, p. 24). Therefore, scholarship in teaching holds the promise that teaching can have equal status to research (Kreber, 1999) and is therefore a means through which nurse educators can reconcile the competing demands of university life. The scholarship of teaching has three core aims, firstly a means through which the status of teaching may be raised; secondly a means through which teachers may come to teach more knowledgeably and finally a means through which the quality of teaching may be assessed (Trigwell and Shale, 2004).

Kreber (2002) proffers four conceptualisations of the scholarship of teaching. Firstly teachers conduct and publish research on the teaching of their discipline, secondly teaching as excellence; thirdly teachers make use of the literature of teaching and learning to inform their own practice and finally a combination of all of these in addition to other scholarly elements such as reflection. A teaching portfolio enables educators to achieve all of these aims as the publicizing of teaching is a key component of portfolio use. It enables teachers to display findings about personal teaching, explore evidence of student learning, invite peer review and provide reflective critique and critical analysis of one’s own teaching. This is a step beyond traditional methods of teaching evaluation, which are usually from the subjective view of the student and used to modify teaching, assessment and course structure. These are useful for quality review purposes and course development but they do little however, to focus or motivate nurse educators towards ongoing scholarly activity related to teaching.

Table 1
The teaching portfolio structure and process.



In order to provide evidence of scholarship in teaching nurse educators are required to subject their teaching endeavours to evaluation. Menning and McGrew (2000) outline the criteria for evaluating scholarship as identified by Glassick et al., 1997 as the need to demonstrate: (a) clear goals for educational endeavours, (b) adequate preparation, (c) appropriate use of methods, (d) evidence of having attained significant results from endeavours, (e) effective communication and (f) reflective critique. The teaching portfolio therefore not only provides a mechanism for the demonstration of scholarship but also a means through which it can be evaluated.

The teaching portfolio

The development of a teaching portfolio can be a challenging activity as simply putting the whole package together in itself can be a daunting experience (Cerbin, 2001). This is due to the disparate sources of much of the evidence for the scholarship of teaching. It is captured in a range and variety of locations such as student files, examination results, personal notes, student evaluations, course reviews and teaching materials. To recognize and retain innovations in education requires documentation in formats such as journals or conference presentation (Glanville and Houde, 2004), and collection and retention of other evidence such as student grades and evaluations. These documents are then used to provide supporting evidence of teaching experiences and organised within the framework of a structured portfolio.

Structure of the portfolio

The first phase of developing a portfolio requires the development of a philosophy of teaching. This sets the scene and outlines what an educator views as important. This is a personal account based on personal preferences and ideas, and informed ultimately by past educational experiences and teaching experience. It is an honest extrapolation of one’s values and beliefs about education and personal educational aims. This is followed by the substantive portion of the portfolio comprising a series of ‘entries’. Entries are accounts of teaching experiences, which are descriptions and

analysis of events experienced by the teacher and can be positive, negative or a combination of both. Each entry is supported by evidence (such as student evaluations, student grades, student or peer testimonies or peer review of teaching methods). This is followed by a personal reflection on each entry whereby the teacher learns about the strengths' and weaknesses in his/her own teaching and considers how it can be integrated into future teaching practice. The process of portfolio development is a cyclical one and is recognized as an important consideration for the documentation of the scholarship of nurse teaching and thus needs to be considered in more detail. The structure and process of portfolio development is illustrated in Table 1.

The portfolio process

This process aims to support teaching staff in their efforts to deepen their awareness and their effectiveness in teaching and in their students' knowing and understanding. It is both a mode of inquiry and a means of documenting teaching. The portfolio includes a professional history of achievements and contributions to teaching and research. It is created through entries and supporting evidence. Entries are teaching experiences and can be described according to a conceptual framework such as (a) the teaching design (b) the enactment of teaching and (c) the results of teaching (Shulman, 1988). This allows for succinct description within each category. Thus the teaching portfolio can explicate the vision, design, interactions, outcomes and analysis of teaching (Cerbin, 2001).

The portfolio is usually presented in three parts which reflect the portfolio process (Table 1). The first part describes an introduction to and description of a personal teaching philosophy. The second outlines and reflects upon entries (discrete teaching experiences) and the final section provides a reflection on the process so far. Through reflection and analysis outcome/results are also extrapolated in an attempt to display the scholarly activity of teaching. As this work represents the beginning of a journey, rather than the end, the accumulation of entries and reflection is on going. The application of this process in one university setting will now be explored using examples from personal experience so that the richness of such an experience can be illuminated.

The portfolio experience

A new course was provided within Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in 2005 entitled "Developing a Teaching Portfolio with Reflective Practice". The course was set up to promote scholarship in teaching. For this course scholarship in teaching referred to inquiring into and reflecting on teaching practices and subjecting this to peer review and public display via oral presentation and written portfolios. It was delivered in ten sessions over the duration of three terms. Each session varied in length from 2 to 4.5 hours and included a session on writing a philosophy of teaching statement, presentations on how to complete a portfolio, a creative workshop run by an artist and participant presentation of their portfolio work to peers. The course which involved the completion of a portfolio was facilitated by staff from the Centre for Academic Practice and Student Learning (CAPSL) and guest facilitators. One guest facilitator (Nona Lyons) had extensive experience with the use and development of portfolios in the USA and also wrote a text on this topic (Lyons, 1998) attended most sessions and oversaw the running of the course.

Personal facilitators, who were experienced academics, were also provided to oversee the progression of the participants on the course. There was no summative assessment as the course was designed for professional development purposes only. However, during the process feedback was given on the progress made

in preparing the portfolio. The course was available to all academic staff and the authors of this paper were the first nurses in the organisation to partake in such a journey.

Participating in the course facilitated us to begin to recognise, value and document the scholarship of teaching, which up until this point was less than visible to us. This lack of visibility of teaching scholarship is reflected in Cerbin's (2001) explanation. Firstly, one can proceed through a time period in university with nothing tangible to show for it. Unless a peer-reviewed publication is noted during that time, all other scholarly activity (i.e. teaching) is unaccounted for. In addition, the remembrance of teaching experiences is subjective and not necessarily informed by evidence. The opportunity to participate in the development of a portfolio means that we now had a vehicle for documenting the scholarship of teaching and our personal growth in teaching. Embarking on this journey as part of a larger multi-disciplinary group also afforded us the time for peer review and reflection. The first task in preparing the portfolio was to develop a statement on our personal philosophy of teaching.

Developing a statement on philosophy of teaching

This was the most challenging phase of the portfolio development. Although on the surface this appears a simplistic notion it required a deep reflection on personal beliefs and values. It was a time-consuming but rewarding experience. We observed that our beliefs were deeply enshrined in our value systems as nurses. This meant that our philosophies involved facilitating the growth of professional nurses to develop both personally and professionally. This was grounded in personal understandings of what it means to be a competent nurse. Examples of specific objectives that emerged within the philosophies were:

- Explaining concepts, theories and discipline knowledge in a way that students can easily understand them.
- Providing guidance and advice to students on how to learn and become life-long learners.
- Informing students of the standard that they are required to achieve in order to be successful in the course of study.
- Instilling professional beliefs and values in students.
- Ensuring the delivery of accurate, up-to-date professional discipline specific information to the students to ease their transition from academia to practice (i.e. instil confidence in their knowledge and abilities).
- To be there for them so that they can express their concerns.
- To advocate on behalf of the students

The philosophies also emerged to espouse the high standards of nursing and a requirement for excellence drawn from experience within healthcare where nursing practice demands excellence in all aspects and failure can result in serious consequences. These high standards and high ideals served to influence the developing teaching philosophy in a positive way.

The articulation of a teaching philosophy is the bedrock of the portfolio. By uncovering personal beliefs about teaching it makes it possible to support these beliefs by relevant entries, which are accounts of teaching experiences usually supported by evidence. We found the extrapolation and articulation of our unique philosophies of teaching a rewarding experience and were surprised by the extent that our professional standards influenced them.

The entries

During the course we were encouraged to submit five entries to the teaching portfolio and each of these took a substantial amount

of time to develop. The entries described by Shulman (1988) refer to teaching experiences. They are given a label, the context is described and a rationale for inclusion is included. They are firmly linked to the personal teaching philosophy and may demonstrate an enactment of the philosophy or a contribution to the development of it. For us the entries focused on issues such as student difficulties in grasping concepts such as statistics at postgraduate level and the challenges that students pose when they have difficulty producing work to the level expected in course outcomes. Following the entry a reflection upon it is included and implications for practice are outlined.

Evidence was an important component of the entries and evidence in this context was a new paradigm for many in the group. The facilitators encouraged the use of student surveys and examination results to support entries of teaching. This, it emerged was like Cerbin's (2001) private detective trail. The evidence (student surveys, examination results), we found, were not contained in one place within the university or connected forever to our teaching, but lay dispersed in their natural destinations. The uncovering of past events and considering them in the light of new evidence is one of the hallmarks of scholarship in teaching (Kreber, 2002). We discovered that our entries allowed us to reflect on past teaching. This was very informative. For example one particular entry resulted in a realization that although espousing a student-centred approach, this wasn't reflected in the evidence gathered. This was one of the unforeseen and remarkable aspects to the course as it provided experiential evidence of the benefits of portfolio use as a vehicle for self-evaluation. It also demonstrated the incredible honesty and self-awareness that can result from portfolio use.

The course is currently offered to all interested academics but is now offered over a six week period. To date six courses have been facilitated by CAPSL and a total of 95 academics of which 18 are from the nursing department have completed the course. While participants who have completed the courses have identified a number of expected outcomes such as increased confidence, ongoing development in teaching such as writing learning outcomes, consideration of whole course design and seeking feedback from peers (Hanratty and O' Farrell, 2007), unexpected outcomes at both individual and institutional level have also been identified (Hanratty and O' Farrell, 2007). The unexpected outcomes include success at achieving teaching awards and how the process has benefited participants in seeking promotion. For TCD, the course has provided the drive to provide opportunities for all academics to discuss aspects of teaching and learning. Opportunities that are currently facilitated by CAPSL include a summer lunchtime reading circle to promote discussion on issues relating to academic scholarship. The teaching portfolio is now integral to the ongoing professional development for academics in TCD and the inclusion of a statement of teaching philosophy and evidence of scholarship in teaching is integral to the promotional procedure and career advancement.

Reflection on the process so far

Participating in this process provided us with an opportunity to structure evidence and publicly displays our teaching. In hindsight, there was little cohesive evidence (other than in our heads) of success in our teaching to date. Evaluations and results were filed away in diverse places. While research output (publications) may have demonstrated some activity, there was little evidence of our scholarly activity in teaching. Now that we have experienced the benefit of 'putting it all together' in the form of a teaching portfolio to publicly display the scholarship, we think it is necessary and beneficial for nurse educators to consider the process as part of ongoing professional and personal development.

Conclusion

Nurse educators have a particular interest in the quality of educational processes and developing excellence in teaching and practice. In their endeavour to achieve recognition in a university environment that has traditionally prioritised research activity it is crucial that the nurse educators embrace the scholarship of teaching as a legitimate scholarly activity. Rather than shifting priorities away from teaching, nurse educators need to devote energy to documenting the good work that they do, and into collating this in teaching portfolio format.

Individual scholarship in teaching is often fragmented and teachers may retain isolated recordings of summative assessments and evaluations, there is often no coherent scholarly approach to the documentation of teaching (Cerbin, 2001). The teaching portfolio is one mechanism through which nurse educators can demonstrate scholarship as it provides a vehicle for a public display of teaching scholarship (Shulman, 1998). In order to achieve recognition for excellence in teaching nurse educators must take cognisance of the criteria for assessing scholarship in teaching and must be prepared to provide evidence to support the fact that they are achieving excellence.

Both nursing staff and students are actively involved in portfolio development in many areas of contemporary practice. It is essential that nurse educators lead by example in this area and begin to consider, regardless of the level of seniority, the development of a personal teaching portfolio. Recording scholarly activity in teaching can have a twofold effect. In addition to being a receptacle for the documentation of teaching achievements, the portfolio can support ongoing professional development as it provides documented evidence of continuing professional development in nurse teaching through reflection on a series of teaching entries. This reflection can result in new understandings, new knowledge and ultimately better teaching. Rather than having evidence of the outcomes of teaching in disparate array the teaching portfolio encapsulates this evidence, thus making it easy to subject to peer review and for nurse educators to demonstrate scholarship in teaching.

Ultimately those individuals, who are charged with making decisions and judgements about individuals' contributions to academia, need to demonstrate a commitment to valuing teaching by giving equal status to scholarly activity in teaching and the scholarship of teaching.

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