A novice teacher’s reflections on lecturing as a teaching strategy: Covering the content or uncovering the meaning

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Summary The lecture is the most widely used teaching strategy in adult education programmes. While it has advantages, it is criticised for its lack of student engagement and inability to stimulate higher-order thinking. The aim of this paper is to detail a novice teacher’s journey using the lecture as a teaching strategy. The use of an action research approach provided the teacher with a framework to research own learning. In addition, the collaborative process inherent in action research resulted in students being invited to evaluate the teaching. The journey takes the teacher from a teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning to a student-centred approach. The influence of the teacher’s own educational encounters is explored. In common with many novice teachers, the focus on content delivery and difficulty asking questions are two key issues. The gradual implementation of strategies to allow for more student engagement is discussed and advice is offered to the novice teacher.

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Introduction

This paper explores my learning experience as a novice teacher. Like most teachers, I adopted the strategies I experienced during my own education regardless of the learning styles of the students or the appropriateness of such strategies for the subject being taught (Prosser et al., 2003; Gidman et al., 2000). The didactic lecture was the dominant mode of teaching during my own educational experience. The teaching was teacher-centred with the student taking little ownership of learning. Furthermore, there was an expectation that the teacher had all the answers and independent discovery was not undertaken by the student. This was in contrast to the philosophy and approach to learning which I experienced when I started the post-graduate diploma in clinical health sciences education (teacher training). A variety of teaching...
methods were used and student involvement in learning and in the evaluation of teaching was actively encouraged. However, when I tried to incorporate these strategies into my own teaching I discovered it was not as simple as it first appeared. Using an action research framework, I uncovered an understanding of how I could facilitate student engagement with the lecturer and the subject content thus progressing from the didactic to the interactive lecture.

**Literature on lecturing**

The lecture is the most common teaching strategy used in adult education programmes (Bligh, 1998) and is widely used for the delivery of the theoretical component of nurse education. Bligh (1998), in reviewing almost a hundred studies comparing lectures with other teaching methods, concluded that lectures are as effective as other methods for teaching information, but are ineffective in stimulating higher-order thinking and cannot be relied upon to inspire or change students’ attitudes favourably. The limitations of lectures are related to the way students learn (Nicholls, 2002). Student learning occurs through active engagement with the subject matter and therefore, lectures are ineffective for such engagement (Ramsden, 2003; Billings and Halstead, 1998). Furthermore, transmission of information and its transformation into knowledge are not the same (Race, 2007). For this transformation to occur, students need an opportunity to engage in deep processing of the subject matter.

Teaching methods where active discussion is used are found to be more effective when retention of knowledge, transfer of knowledge to new situations, problem solving and attitude changes are measured (Horgan, 1999). Sustained and unchanging low-level activity such as listening to a lecture lowers concentration, while at the same time requiring concentrated effort to follow lecture content (Biggs, 1999). The attention span of students under these conditions can only be maintained for 10–15 min, after which time learning drops off rapidly (Bligh, 1998). Over-reliance on lectures can lead to student dependence with the result that they come to expect all the information to be handed to them on a plate (Quinn, 2000).

The lecture has some advantages such as the ability to convey information to a large number of students. In addition, it may be useful when introducing a new topic, it can provide a framework of theories and ideas and the teacher may integrate subject matter better than students (Nicholls, 2002; Quinn, 2000). A well planned and presented lecture may succeed in gaining student attention (Curzon, 2004). While the traditional didactic lecture has been criticised for failing to facilitate active student participation, it still has an important role in that it can co-exist with other strategies and can be enhanced by providing an opportunity for greater student dialogue and reflection (Jones, 2007).

**Methods**

Action research in education settings provides a practical means of exploring your own practice (Mc Niff, 2002). It is, therefore, useful for the novice teacher in allowing research into own learning. It consists of a succession of cycles or spirals which are initiated by a practical problem and include elements of understanding or theorising, bringing about change through action and the carrying out of some form of formal or reflective research activity (Rolfe, 1998).

An evaluation-understanding-action framework as described by Rolfe (1998) was used to guide this project (Table 1). The process, which consisted of three cycles, commenced with self-evaluation of my teaching and feedback from the course assessor. This provided an initial understanding of the problem. In addition, data was collected from a variety of sources to inform my understanding of the problem and guide future actions (Higgins, 2000). In subsequent cycles and in keeping with the collaborative process inherent in action research, students were invited to provide feedback and evaluate my teaching. One group completed a simple questionnaire which asked them to state three things they liked about my teaching and three things they disliked and the other engaged in a discussion forum with me. A reflective diary and review of lesson plans provided a further perspective on the situation.

Student evaluation of teaching is an inherent part of the curricular process and every effort was made to ensure that ethical standards were adhered to. The nature of the project was explained to the students and they were informed that they were not obliged to take part in the feedback. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Following the evaluation and a simple content analysis of the data two main themes emerged, namely my focus on lecture content and a difficulty in asking questions. Each cycle concluded with an activity that increased my personal learning and
ultimately brought about a change in my practice (Table 1).

**Focus on lecture content**

Curzon (2004) states that the preparation of a formal lesson depends on the consideration of three major factors: the students, the subject matter and resources and constraints. Therefore, the teacher needs to consider the students’ academic standard, the intended learning outcomes, the main areas to be included in the lesson and teaching strategies. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the available resources and bear in mind such matters as the time of day the lesson will take place and where it will take place. My focus was firmly fixed on one factor: the subject matter. This approach stemmed from a number of personal needs. Firstly, the perceived need to focus on content coverage i.e. the desire to cover the entire course in detail with the students. This is common among novice teachers as many new teachers focus on teaching rather than learning (Young and Diekelmann, 2002). Secondly, it allowed me control the session thereby preventing students from asking “difficult” questions to which I might not know the answer.

My approach to teaching and learning was consistent with what was described as the banking concept of education (Frier, 1987) in which the teacher deposits the information in the student without dialogue. Ramsden (2003) suggests that the notion that lecturers ensure that content is covered is false, with the ground being covered for the lecturer, but not by the students. I equated good teaching with presenting organised content. While presenting information in a logical manner may make it easier to for students to understand the subject it does not ensure student learning (Bligh, 1998). I had not considered how students learn and the factors that affect student learning as my concerns were entirely focused on covering content. Students learn more when told less and it is what the students learn, not how much the lecturer covers that matters (Morss and Murray, 2005; Bligh, 1998).

I discovered that I was nursing the students and not teaching them (Hendrey and Farley, 1996). By “spoon-feeding” the students I was not providing them with an opportunity to actively engage with the subject matter. I was not promoting or encouraging autonomy in the students, and furthermore, I did not trust them to take responsibility for their own learning. Yet, I was attempting to educate them for a profession that required them to take responsibility for their own actions in providing patient care. Shell (2001) in her study on perceived barriers to teaching critical thinking found that content coverage was a major barrier to the development of students’ critical skills. In order to promote independent learning, the students need to engage in acts of discovery for themselves (Rogers, 2002). I was so busy “covering the material in the lecture” that I was missing the chance “to uncover it” (Horgan, 1999, p. 85). Like many lecturers new to teaching I felt that if I was not “doing the work” all of the time I was not giving value for money (Corder, 2002).

Linked to the obsession with covering content was the over-use of information packed acetates and handouts. All the information was supplied to the students as the end product. The stimulus to engage with the subject matter and take notes

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
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<th>Understanding</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Dissatisfied with teaching strategy</td>
<td>Self reflection feedback from: assessor</td>
<td>Engaging in teacher-centred approach. Focus on content. Little interaction with the students</td>
<td>Literature review: on lecture as a teaching strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Still focusing on covering everything and trying to tell the students everything I knew on the topic</td>
<td>Self-reflection feedback from assessor questionnaire from 25 post-graduate student nurses</td>
<td>Lack of understanding of how students learn</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Student interaction remains limited</td>
<td>Self-reflection. Open discussion and feedback from 27 post-graduate student nurses</td>
<td>Use of lower order questions. Desire to control situation — lack of confidence</td>
<td>Planned questions incorporated buzz groups, brainstorming and group work into sessions</td>
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was removed as most of the information was provided directly in the handout. In addition, I lost sight of the complexity of the issues and the time required for concepts to be built up, because I had become so immersed in the topic (Bligh, 1998).

One session of 1 h duration had thirty power point slides. With the focus firmly fixed on content, I was afraid I would forget to tell the students something. I was also aware of most students’ obsession with receiving handouts and I believed if I provided them with information packed handouts, they would be satisfied with the session. Race (2007) suggests that students may be tempted to switch off mentally if they receive everything important that is covered in the lecture. He states that handouts should be learning tools not as in my case compendia of information. Note-taking has an important role in the learning process. It arrests memory decay (Bligh, 1998). Furthermore, it involves deeper cognitive processing, more thoughtful and active listening involving paraphrasing, interpreting and questioning, as well as integrating new material into one’s bank of prior knowledge (Nilson, 1998).

Widespread reading on a topic and attempting to cover it all in class was a strategy employed by me to avoid being asked questions by students. This was a great fear for me – what if I am asked something and I don’t know the answer? Perhaps this stemmed from my view of the education in terms of the ‘mug and jug’ theory with the teacher having all the answers and the students as passive recipients in the process. This reflected my own experiences during nurse training. Nicholl and Tracey (2007) stress the importance of realising that there is always a possibility a student will pose a question to which you do not have the answer regardless of how familiar with the topic or how well prepared you are. New teachers are unlikely to pursue tangents or welcome questions in class; however, as they develop confidence in their ability to lecture, they increasingly concern themselves with students’ interests, skills and abilities (Young and Diekelmann, 2002). In addition, I was terrified that if a question related to the topics I had taught appeared on an examination paper and the students did badly, the finger of blame would be pointed at me and I would be perceived as an incompetent teacher.

Difficulty asking questions

The ability to use questioning effectively is an important step towards becoming a competent lecturer (Nicholl and Tracey, 2007). Questioning is important in order to establish the student’s knowledge base and therefore, provides a means by which the lecturer can build on existing student knowledge. It enables the lecturer to involve the student actively in the learning process and ascertain their level of understanding of subject matter. It can be used to regain class attention and probe higher level thinking (Curzon, 2004).

The challenge for me was to ask questions at an appropriate level in order to ascertain students’ knowledge and also incorporate their responses into the session. In keeping with many teachers I used knowledge-based lower order questions which do not encourage critical thinking (Philips and Duke, 2001). Feedback from students indicated that they did not like it when I pursued this tangent. Testing students’ factual knowledge in public will almost invariably provoke an undesirable reaction, because no one likes to be placed in a position where they may display their ignorance (Bligh, 1998). Asking students for their personal opinions or reactions can overcome this as their answers could not be right or wrong and they can feel respected if their opinions are considered worth hearing. However, there are occasions when it is necessary to question a student on factual knowledge. Nicholl and Tracey (2007) suggest that the lecturers can overcome this difficulty by creating an environment where students freely ask questions both from lecturer and peers and students do not feel threatened if the response is wrong. From my experiences this comes with increased confidence as a lecturer and greater understanding of how students learn.

Action

A review of the literature on lecturing highlighted its limitations as a teaching strategy. In addition, further exploration of the literature on how students learn emphasised the importance of involving the students in the learning process. A number of activities can be incorporated into a lecture to combat some of its limitations (Race, 2007). I realised that the content of the lecture should be a continuation of what the student had previously learned and build on the student’s existing stock of knowledge (Curzon, 2004). The use of buzz groups, brainstorming and questioning were employed to varying degrees at the start of the lecture to establish what the students knew, to engage the student with the student matter and to build on prior learning.

In order to overcome my difficulty asking questions, I formulated the questions when planning the lecture and noted when I would ask key
questions. Questions were prepared at different levels, some at knowledge, comprehension and application, synthesis and evaluation level. Firstly, this enabled me to identify questions at different levels. Secondly, it provided me with a fall back question if a student did not respond at comprehension or application level and it was necessary, therefore, to ask a question at a lower level (Reece and Walker, 2000). Bloom’s taxonomy (1956) provided a useful guide to formulating questions at different levels and linking them to the learning outcomes.

During the lecture concentration levels can be resorted by changing activity after about 15 min (Biggs, 1999). Getting the students to break up into groups and engaging in problem solving exercises proved a useful strategy. Questions were introduced throughout the lecture to monitor student understanding of the subject matter and to provoke discussion. Discussions provided a means by which students could explore their own ideas and confront the views of others. This can enhance student recall and understanding (Huxham, 2005). These activities were gradually introduced and successes in implementing them were built upon.

Lesson planning forced me to look at all the elements involved in the preparation of the lecture, not just content. I had to devise lesson plans with clear learning outcomes and provided a realistic expectation of what can be explored during a teaching session. Corder (2002) suggests that as a vague rule of thumb one should aim for one to three learning outcomes per hour of class contact time. I discovered that the information packed acetates and handouts were symptomatic of my focus on lecture content and as I developed strategies to overcome this, the problem in relation to acetates and handout resolved.

Discussion

Own learning

I had been totally misguided into thinking that the provision of comprehensively prepared lectures and handouts and attempting to tell students everything I knew was good teaching. I was encouraging a ”surface approach” and not a ”deep approach” whereby the student could engage appropriately and meaningfully with the task (Biggs, 1999). Bligh (1998) goes as far as to state that the teacher has a duty to try to wean students away from craving dogma towards a rational independence of thought. I have come to realise that encouraging students to accept responsibility for some of the learning may result in a deeper approach to learning and enable them to become life-long learners. This is particularly important for nurses because they operate in a rapidly changing health care environment where constant revision of what is relevant knowledge is necessary. In helping nurses to ”learn how to learn” it is more likely that individuals will be able to cope with change, and perhaps be more effective change agents themselves (Milligan, 1997). I did not realise that lecturing is a skill, a strategy and a practice and as a skill it is learned over time (Young and Diekelmann, 2002).

The collaborative nature of the action research process was challenging. This can be attributed to my level of confidence as a teacher at that time. Initially, I did not want to hear what the students thought of my teaching as my primary focus was the delivery of information. Reflecting back, I can now admit that I considered that I knew best and I did not really consider that the students might have a valid contribution to make to the evaluation to my teaching. On some occasions, I found it difficult to get feedback from the students and when I did get feedback, I felt it was too positive. How could I have expected the students to provide open and frank feedback, when I had interacted very little with them during the teaching sessions? As my confidence increased I interacted more with students and found it much easier to ask them to evaluate my teaching.

Importance of reflection and feedback for novice teacher

Self-assessment is a powerful technique for self-improvement and the facilitation of professional growth (Lea and Callaghan, 2008; Ross and Bruce, 2007). By reflecting on teaching sessions at the time of the event or as soon as possible after the event, I was able to identify positive and negative aspects of my teaching and explore different techniques to improve subsequent sessions. Outside observers such as experienced peers or college lecturers can bring both expertise in the subject matter and/or pedagogy that is likely to supplement both teacher and student opinions (Ross and Bruce, 2007).

Advice to novice lecturers

It is important for novice lecturers to realise that lecturing is a skill and therefore, develops over time with practice. Initially, lecturers may be too critical of their own teaching and compare themselves unrealistically to more experienced peers. At the outset novice lecturers may focus almost exclusively on lecture content and student handouts.
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This is part of the normal development of the lecturer. As confidence develops, lecturers can broaden their focus, incorporate different elements into the lecture and draw their attention to the needs of students as learners (Horgan, 1999). By regular self-reflection and student evaluation of teaching, the lecturer can monitor progress as new techniques are incorporated into teaching repertoire. Without this reflection and evaluation there is the danger that the lecturer will still remain focused on delivering content in an “efficient” matter without engaging with students.

Learning to accept that you cannot know the answer to all questions also comes with experience. By acknowledging that you do not have all the answers, you are being a good role model for students. While there may be the initial temptation to “waffle around the subject” students often realise this and your credibility may be damaged. You can manage the difficult question by throwing it open to the class or ask the student to find the answer. It is important to ensure that the question is addressed in subsequent classes and that you have the answer to the question (Nicholl and Tracey, 2007). Preparation of key questions before the session can help overcome difficulties in asking questions. However, it is important to understand that these questions may need to be changed during the lecturer depending on students’ responses (Reece and Walker, 2000). Finally, self-reflection and student evaluation should be a part of every teacher’s toolkit.

References


