Intellectual disability nursing assessment: student reflections

Owen Doody, Paula McInerney and Lynda Linnane

Assessment is central to any educational programme and is designed to facilitate the collection, review, monitoring and, ultimately, judgment of student learning (Lambert and Lines, 2000). Assessment is also used as a measure of the quality of the education received, and in the context of nurse education signals, that the student has acquired the necessary skills and knowledge for professional practice (Wellard et al, 2007). Educators and those involved in designing curricula need to ensure their assessment practices and instruments are well designed and valid.

However, as no single assessment can hope to evaluate students’ learning fully, it is often necessary to use a range of strategies throughout a curriculum, particularly in a practice-based discipline such as nursing. Assessment at modular or unit level often becomes focused on tests or tasks that allow the student to demonstrate learning through achievement of specified learning outcomes. For educators, the challenge is to select a particular assessment method that has educational relevance as its key determinant (Rowntree, 1987; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nitko and Brookhart, 2011), and that is appropriate to the content and style of learning (Burksaitiene and Tereseviciene, 2007).

The second and third authors are students enrolled on a Bachelor of Science (BSc) 4-year degree programme for undergraduate nurse education, which was first introduced in 2002 and is provided in universities and colleges of higher education throughout the Republic of Ireland. As first impressions count, and directly influence the ability of students to adapt to a new learning environment (Andrew et al, 2009), the challenges presented by university life need to be considered (Edward, 2003). To recognize these challenges, there should be an introduction to university life for students, which is related to their specific course, thus introducing the student to their new discipline, as well as the academic expectations of the institution (Durkin and Main, 2002).

In this article, the second and third authors, who are first-year student nurses, provide a reflection based on their first assignment for their intellectual disability module as part of their 4-year undergraduate degree course. The reflection was encouraged and supported by the lead author, who was the university lecturer delivering the module and assignment, after being influenced by the recognition that many students leave programmes because of “events that occur in the first year” (Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001). This reflection is guided by Gibbs’ (1998) cycle that follows six steps (Figure 1), each of which will be discussed, commencing with a description of the experience, the feelings encountered and an evaluation of the experience followed by its analysis, the drawing of a conclusion, and the identification of an action plan for the future.

Figure 1. Gibbs’ (1998) cycle

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Abstract

Nursing students, Paula and Lynda, reflect on their first academic assessment of their 4-year intellectual disability nursing course. The reflection is conducted by the second and third authors of this article, and is guided by Gibbs’ (1998) cycle, highlighting the positive and negative aspects of their ‘workbook’ assignment during their first academic semester. Overall, the use of the workbook as an assessment method enabled the students to discover the importance of time management, attendance at lectures, database searching, referencing and academic writing. The assignment enabled the students to be more prepared for clinical practice placement, and develop a basis for future learning and knowledge of intellectual disability.

Key words: Reflection ■ Academic writing ■ Education ■ Assignment ■ Time management ■ Assessment

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Description
When the student authors started their new course as first-year intellectual disability nursing students, this was a time of great excitement for them. After the initial orientation within the college and department, the group of intellectual disability student nurses were introduced to the timetable and course modules. Some sharing of modules would occur with the other nursing students (e.g. general, mental health), and there would be one specific module on intellectual disability in the first academic semester.

At the first intellectual disability lecture, the lead author introduced himself and the module, explaining the structure of the semester, the content of the module and the assessment method. The assessment consisted of ‘a workbook’ assignment, rather than an exam or essay, and was to be completed during the semester before placement. The workbooks were distributed and the presentation date and format were identified. The workbook consisted of core topic areas (Box 1) related to the module, and was supported through lecture content and discussion.

Feelings
As first-year students on the first day in lectures, the student authors felt a little bit overwhelmed when they received the workbook. However, the news that there was an assignment, rather than an exam, was good, as their general feeling was: ‘How bad could an assignment be when we have a number of weeks to complete it?’

First impressions of the workbook upon reading through the assignment were of being ‘very much out of our depth’ and the student authors began to question their ability, as the workbook would require vast amounts of detail and knowledge on topics they had not heard of before. However, after reading through the full workbook, there was hope that, as the module progressed, the student authors would be better equipped to approach the assignment. The lead author informed the group of the importance of asking questions, and attending lectures and the practical clinical skill labs in supporting students to complete the workbook. While the student authors felt anxious about completing the workbook, the lead author’s advice and willingness to accept questions created a more hopeful expectation that this was an achievable task.

However, on commencing the assignment, there was a feeling of being ‘a little overwhelmed’ fuelled by the frustration and uncertainty around how much information was required. The difficulty was in knowing when one was ‘giving too much or too little’ detail in the answers provided to each question. Also, the aspect of finding information and using the ‘databases’, as they were called, seemed daunting, as the student authors did not know what they were or how to use them.

When discussing the workbook with fellow students, confusion arose as the interpretation of questions varied, leading the student authors to discover the importance of using their own initiative and seeking clarification during class. While the questions were focused on client care, it was difficult to balance the responses/answers between a practical knowledge and academic point of view. This was compounded by the student authors’ lack of practical experience, and the fact that finding academic literature was a new task for them and one that is difficult to master.

While the student authors’ skills of retrieving academic literature did develop over the weeks, it is a skill that takes a considerable amount of time, and one that will require further development to exceed the basic competence level achieved.

Evaluation
When the student authors first received the workbook, they felt a sense of relief that there would not be a written exam at the end of the semester. They felt this provided a real opportunity to do well on the assignment, given that there was a semester to complete it. As the student authors had little knowledge of academic writing, referencing or databases, they had an uneasy feeling looking through the assignment criteria, and wondered whether they could achieve completion as the skills required were all new and would need to be developed. However, support was provided in the form of a talk and workshop, run in conjunction with the nursing department and the library, relating to sourcing information, finding published materials, using the library and searching the databases. This was found to be most beneficial.

The workbook questions encourage students to question the care and quality of life of people with an intellectual disability, and the weekly lectures and practical clinical skill labs covered the topics within the workbook. In addition, the lead author provided extra notes, and additional reading lists and encouragement to research the topic. Through doing the workbook, the student authors felt more prepared for clinical practice placement, but underestimated the amount of time and work involved to complete the workbook. Generally, the workbook enabled the student authors to take responsibility for their learning within the module based on one’s own learning style and time constraints. Looking back, they feel there was a logical development within the workbook that coincided with the lectures.

However, the student authors often tried to complete sections that were not addressed during a given lecture in an effort to get ahead. In doing this, the student authors would not have gained the basis of the topic, resulting in a lot of

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additional time searching and reviewing information, only to discover later on that their interpretations may not have been entirely accurate.

**Analysis**

When the actual work to complete the workbook commenced, the student authors were pleased that the lead author had chosen this assessment format in favour of an exam scenario. This enabled the student authors to become familiar with academic writing, searching the literature and referencing materials. In completing this assignment, the student authors came to the realization that attendance at lectures, practical clinical skill labs and knowledge from lectures were essential in developing their understanding and learning.

During the lectures and practical clinical skill labs, the lead author provided notes and direction to further information and reading, which facilitated completion of the workbook assignment. However, there was a lot of extra reading involved owing to the student authors’ uncertainty around how much information was actually required. The authors now realize that giving a workbook to first-year intellectual disability nursing students enables many different areas to be addressed, but its undertaking was difficult and occupied a lot of time.

The first semester is challenging for students, as there are many new experiences to come to terms with, such as databases, referencing, academic and professional writing. Each one of these is difficult to master and takes a considerable amount of time. Engaging in this active learning while also doing an assignment is an additional source of pressure. The student authors found that in the first 2–3 weeks, a lot of knowledge was gained; however, they had forgotten to write down and reference a lot of the information that was found. This resulted in the student authors having to search through bundles of printed articles for information and references, which took more time and was often unproductive and frustrating.

Attendance is important, and was especially so in this case, as it was the first semester, and given the nature of the workbook assignment, students engaged with the module. However, there was often a feeling that if students did not attend, they would miss something essential so they ‘had to be there’. While the student authors did experience this feeling of having to be there, this was more related to the discussion that occurred during module time on the topics that they ‘could not miss’, as these discussions were what supported understanding of the topic. The lecture and the notes were vital and provided knowledge and further reading, but it was the class discussion, along with the points and questions raised that enabled the student authors’ understanding of the topic to develop.

Having their first clinical placement early in the course (weeks 9–12), the student authors realized the importance of having an understanding of a broad range of topics relevant to intellectual disability nursing. Their lecturer (lead author) felt the workbook was something that they could refer back to and build on over their 4-year programme, and while on placement as there were many aspects within the workbook related to clinical practice. If the student authors had been given an essay assignment, for example, there would have been an opportunity to concentrate on a particular aspect of intellectual disability nursing. However, this may not have afforded the same opportunity to gain the knowledge acquired on a range of topics through completion of the workbook. Also, if the assessment was a written exam at the end of the semester, students may not have achieved the same level of knowledge by the time they were entering their placements; they completed their workbooks before their clinical practice placements and in the case of an exam, study may often be postponed until nearer the exam time.

**Conclusion**

The student authors were amazed at the amount of effort and time it took to answer the questions in the workbook. On reflection, there was a naivety in the student authors’ thinking, as they expected the workbook to be an easier route than the exam scenario. Upon completion of the workbook assignment, the student authors were impressed with the amount of knowledge they gained since starting the course. The workbook assignment was an effective learning tool as it demanded extra reading and highlighted that although lecturers can provide guidance and support, essentially, it is up to the students to put the work in after the lectures.

The student authors did not appreciate the time involved in searching databases and journals for specific information, however, taking notes during lectures did provide essential key words and author names to use in their searches strategies. Attendance at lectures is essential to engage with the topic areas, gain an understanding, identify other sources, and ask questions. As all the topic areas were relevant to understanding intellectual disability, the workbook is a resource that can be kept over the 4 years of the course, providing useful information and references on topic areas for future modules and/or assignments.

**Action plan**

As the student authors underestimated the time involved with both searching databases and completing the workbook, they would approach future assignments of this nature differently. Work on the workbook would be started promptly to enhance the learning process, and the student authors would ask more questions during class time. As the schedule of lectures for each module is provided at the start of the semester, they would also start reading before classes to gain an understanding of the topic being discussed, which could then be developed during class by seeking clarification and asking questions.

There is a lot to be gained from the workbook assignment; however, the submission date before commencement of the clinical practice placement may need to be considered. Having a submission date at the end of the placement may facilitate the incorporation of personal experiences within the workbook, rather than quoting others through research without having actually experienced a student nurse-client relationship. On the other hand, moving the submission date may have created a distraction to the practical element of learning in the clinical practice placement. The level of engagement within the classroom may also be stifled if the submission date is extended, as there is a tendency to put things off until the last minute.
Overall, the workbook assignment enabled the student authors to engage early and effectively with academic writing, referencing, literature searching, and their involvement in class discussions and asking questions. These are essential skills that can be developed through each semester and module within the 4 years of the course. The module, assignment and reflection have assisted the student authors to identify time management as a key area for consideration in all future assignments. It is intended to address this area by early identification of the topic area, attendance and engagement in classes, searching the literature for relevant authors and information pertinent to the topic and reading the subject matter.

While it is recognized that many factors have facilitated learning in this module, it is noteworthy to identify the support and feedback process as a key element in developing understanding, reassurance and motivation to complete this assignment. Additionally, the value of the learning experience was further compounded by the lead author’s facilitation and encouragement to reflect and share the experience with present and future students through the write up of this reflection for publication.

Conflict of interest: none


**KEY POINTS**

- When entering third-level education, students are expected to learn to write academically
- Time management and class attendance are essential to completing an academic assignment
- Finding and reading relevant literature are essential for academic writing
- The workbook should enable students to be more prepared for practice and develop the basis of their learning