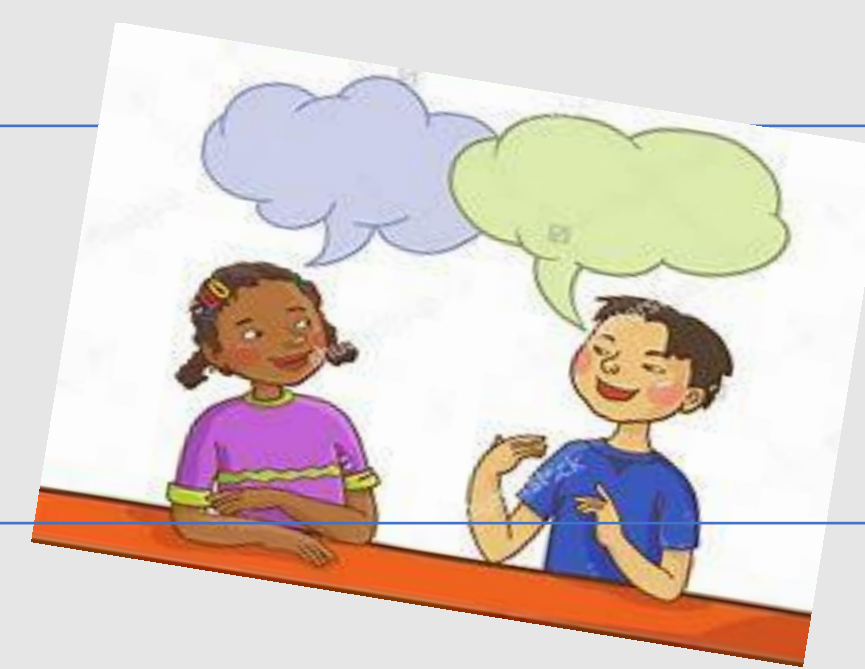
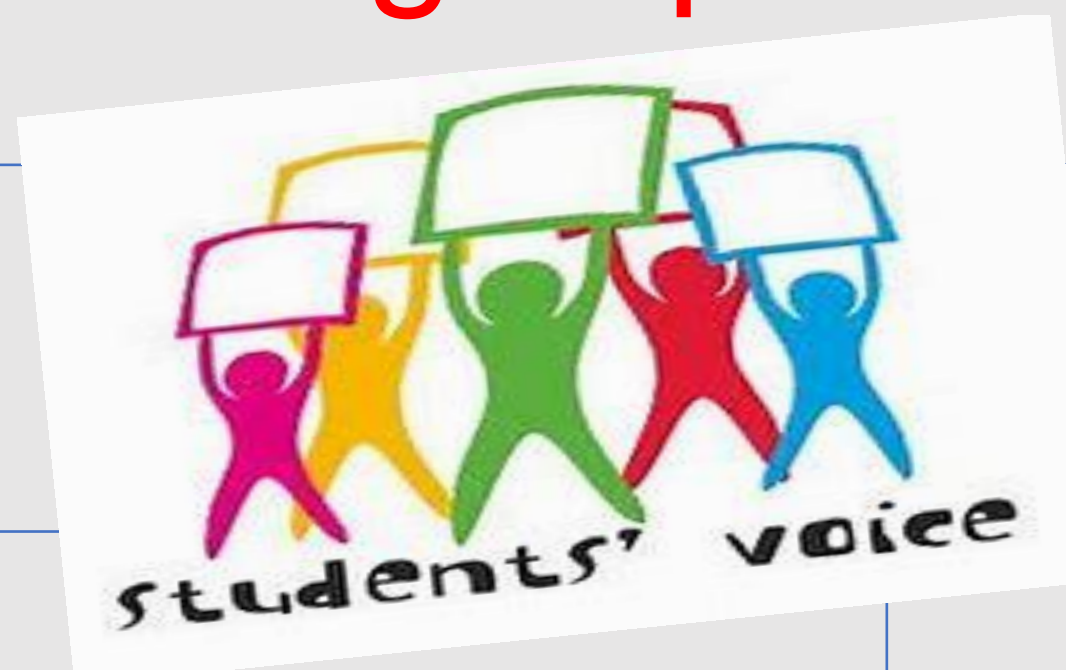


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Improving students' engagement and learning experience through group activities



Introduction, Rationale and Context.

The impact of Group Learning Activities (GLA) on students' engagement, their learning experience and the various designs of group work have been scrutinised in the research in higher education. Previous module evaluations, collected on the last day of the Intensive Care Course taught at Level 6 and Level 7, revealed that my students who were qualified nurses working in Intensive Care, had expressed their dissatisfaction with the "death with Power Point" lectures. The students felt they "could read the books on anatomy and physiology" and did not enjoy our traditional lectures. In response to the students' voice expressed through the evaluation systems and a reflective activity that followed (Blair and Noel, 2014), I looked for an alternative "flipped classroom" strategy which could improve my teaching practice and improve my students learning experience (Berrett, 2012). The purpose of my poster is to evaluate the impact of introducing various group activities with the nursing students, with an emphasis on student's experience and feedback.

Literature Review

Various studies have demonstrated that small-group learning have multiple benefits for the students such as higher subject matter knowledge; communicating and collaborative skills and increased engagement (Kinsella et al, 2017). De Hei et al, (2018) defined engagement as the behaviour of learners who are motivated to learn, work effectively and use their potential by devoting supplementary time to learning, which ultimately increases the quality of learning outcomes required and better enjoyment of the classes (Kinsella et al, 2017). Morris (2016) added that small group activities allowed the students to be in an interactive environment which would enhance their "positive interdependence" as they learn not only to share knowledge but also to listen, to encourage and to demonstrate empathy, which is an essential nursing trait (Quinn and Hughes, 2010).

Extension of the Problem

Running small-group teaching can be more challenging than many educators realize and it is imperative to plan wisely for its implementation (Quinn and Hughes, 2010). The literature reveals a bewildering range of possible types of group activities such as formal and informal groups including problem based learning, case studies, buzz groups (De Mei et al, 2018). Therefore, the teacher must be well prepared and be aware that groups can be structured in diverse ways for different goals (Morris, 2016). Winsett et al's study (2014) also revealed that not all the students found group work engaging as they do not know how to work in small groups whilst others are unaware of the plethora of benefits related to group activities. Consequently, the teacher's roles as a leader, ensuring the main responsibility for the behaviour of the group members, or adopting fluctuating degrees of participation, such as a facilitator, are highly recommended (Winsett et al, 2014; Krain, 2010).

Intervention Phase

In the planning stage of this innovation, I consulted my team members who are also important stake holders to share my learning on the benefits of group activities and it was important to involve them in the implementation of my new teaching practice. Since October 2018, I have introduced various group activities in the form of Buzz Groups, Quizzes, problem based learning and case studies based on real patient scenarios (Quinn and Hughes, 2010). 4 cohorts, which had maximum of 20 students on the Intensive Care Course, were divided in small groups of 3 to 4 students (Total of 90 students).

Evaluation

To assess the impact of my pedagogical intervention, I used both formal and informal methods to collect the data from the 90 students doing the Intensive care course from October 2018. These instruments included "Poll everywhere" at the end of some sessions; post it notes during mid module evaluations and more formally: the questionnaires used at the end of the module for evaluation, where students were all asked the same questions (Denscombe, 2010).

The results from both the formal and informal sources, demonstrated an increasing number of students enjoying the group activities and the more interactive sessions. In the Poll everywhere feedback, students found the group activities "interesting", "inspiring" and "empowering". The other comments revealed that the sessions were "very engaging" and when asked in the End of module evaluation, what would they keep in the sessions, more than 80% of the students replied "Group work". The students' level of satisfaction with the course has also improved with most students stating that they would "definitely or highly recommend" the course to others.

The challenges identified through reflection

There were some evaluations (4 out 90), which demonstrated that some students did not embrace the small group activities and that group work was not their "way of learning". On reflection on my sessions and teaching practice, I also identified other issues as some students seemed to resist participating. In one group, there were conflicts amongst students as they felt it was always the same students leading. Hence, group activities are not always effective and working in groups does not lead to achievement of the learning objectives at all times, particularly if my students resist to contribute in group work. Hodges (2018) states that any problems that hinder students' aptitudes to beneficially engage will lessen the positive results of group learning.

Final Considerations and Recommendations:

Group learning activities is a student-centred way of teaching that has a plethora of benefits as it promotes collaboration, teamwork and positive interdependence through increased interaction with their peers. However, GLAs can have their drawbacks and will not be successful if the teacher is not organised and is not aware that the various styles of group work have different purposes. Knowing their students and which style of group activities will benefit them and improve their engagement and achievement are essential for the success of group work. The teacher can also minimise students' resistance to participate in group work by explaining the goals to be achieved and the roles they must all play in the activities to ensure each member of the group is contributing and improve the quality of discussions. Noting students' behaviours during the groupwork and analysing performance on group assignments can provide insights on how well activities are matched to students' current level of development.

Working on this research has allowed me to understand the importance of responding to students' evaluation and reflection as they can lead to individual practitioner improvement. Finally, since the benefits of having learners work interactively in group work far outweigh their challenges and drawbacks, instructors should consider more active learning such as group work in their curriculum activities to improve students' experience.

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