Riding the wave to reduce the theoretical and practical divide

By Suzy Bowdler, Tracey Moroney, Shahla Meedya and Wendy Nielsen

Nursing graduates have identified a divide between their education's theoretical and clinical components, making them feel unprepared for their transition into clinical practice.[1,2]

Nursing students are unique because, demographically, they range from school leavers to mature-age students with varied life experiences. Personal experiences ground learning and thus, from which undergraduate nursing education is built. It is important nurse educators recognise this when creating curriculum to develop nursing students' learning.

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) is a practical framework that recognises knowledge as its own entity and a relatively new framework. It can analyse educational practices[3] but only rarely in nursing.[4] Importantly, LCT recognises the learner's previous knowledge and experiences.[3–5] Among the dimensions of LCT,[3] semantics can guide curriculum design for nursing education.[4,5]

Semantics focuses on meanings specified in the language used.[3–5] There are two components of the semantics dimension: semantic gravity is the context-dependence of the language, whilst semantic density refers to the complexity of the language used.[3–5]

Cumulative knowledge development occurs when existing knowledge is recognised. Learners are moved through learning activities that become increasingly abstract to build contextualised meanings and use increasingly technical language such as medical terminology compared to 'everyday' language.[3–5] These knowledge-building moves can be profiled on a Cartesian plane in a semantic profile.

Increasing or decreasing the waving pattern of the semantic profile moves the learner up or down levels of complexity. Ideally, both semantic density and semantic gravity 'wave' on the Cartesian axes.[3–5] Achieving this 'semantic wave' pattern is the aim of a content module for nursing students in the current curriculum project.

The waving semantic profile deliberately moves students between their prior conceptions and experience to connect to explicit technical knowledge to reduce the gap between personal and field-based knowledge. So, the new knowledge is contextualised as the learner creates new understandings that build on practical application of the knowledge.

Nursing education has traditionally taught theoretical and practical knowledge separately,[1] and we hypothesise this contributes to the gap students currently identify. In other fields, such as engineering, curriculum design that builds semantic waves has helped students move productively from the laboratory setting into practical work.[4]

Our work aims to develop similar transferable knowledge between theory and clinical practice for nursing students.

Authors

Suzy Bowdler is a Lecturer in the School of Nursing and a PhD candidate.

Tracey Moroney is Professor of Nursing in the School of Nursing

Shahla Meedva is Senior Lecturer in the School of Nursing

Wendy Nielsen is Associate Professor in the School of Education

All are at the University of Wollongong NSW, Australia.

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