

## **Spend a day in my head': an innovative assessment using creative design**

### ***Abstract***

*Introduction:* Moving away from traditional modes of assessments can be risk-taking but rewarding. Using creative art as part of an assessment in nursing can engage students in a powerful way. Students are encouraged to think 'outside the box' and to reflect deeply on content material.

*Purpose:* To report on the learning outcomes from using creative design in assessment of a mental health subject for second year nursing students.

*Method:* Students (n = 169) were asked to imagine what it would be like to spend a day in the life of a person with a mental illness. They were also expected to design a poster on which they could display this experience. To complement the poster display, students had to provide a written discussion about these experiences from the perspective of the person with the mental illness, as well as a synopsis on their expectations from loved ones, health practitioners, community and society. Data was collected from the assessment items using Bigg's (1995) structure of observed learning outcome (SOLO) taxonomy; students teaching and learning end of term evaluations (quantitative and qualitative), and tutors' feedback.

*Results:* Students focused on a range of mental illnesses. They identified specific concepts and themes relating to their choice of mental illness and illustrated these in their posters to demonstrate their understanding of the impact on health, functioning and connectedness. The majority of students' essay (n = 41) according to Bigg's (1995) SOLO taxonomy were scored at 3 (the multi-structural level) which indicated that they were making some connections between different concepts related to the essay question. However, even more students were scored at 4 and above (n = 67) indicating being able to make connections at higher levels,

showing significant understanding of mental illness, and being able to generalise and transfer the underlying knowledge about mental illness and the impact of this in one's life.

*Conclusions/Discussion:* For many students, the creative exercise engaged them at a profound and personal level. More effort is needed to include innovative assessment strategies to promote and enhance student engagement. Use of innovative assessments that incorporates art creation shows much promise for teachers.

## **Introduction**

Assessments are significant to teaching as it allows academic staff to determine what and how students are learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). Through assessments, students articulate their thoughts, demonstrates grasp of concepts, and how problems are analysed and solved. In nursing education, assessments are supported by content in tutorials and laboratory activities which provide for discussion and practical situations related to real life, respectively. In mental health nursing, content does not easily lend itself to practical application. Moreover, many students find the important concepts difficult to conceptualise and frequently see these as unrelated to general nursing. Lecturers, more often than not use traditional assessment strategies such as multiple choice, essay question or short answer questions which are safe, tested and match the expected learning outcomes for the subject (Nasri, Roslan, Sekuan, Abu Bakar, & Puteh, 2010). Few in mental health nursing subjects would consider innovative assessments as a potential for a powerful and rich learning experience. Many lecturers feel it is not worth taking a risk even though students have shown to prefer innovative assessments as a fairer means of evaluating student learning (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2002) compared to traditional modes as it allows students to think ‘outside the box’ (Emmanuel, Collins, & Carey, 2010). The purpose therefore, in this paper is to report on the learning outcomes from using creative design in assessment of a mental health nursing subject for second year nursing students.

## **Literature review**

It is important that nursing students have a sound understanding of mental health to address the varying mental health issues and conditions affecting their patients. The challenge for teaching is to prepare students in developing foundational knowledge in this specialty area regarding mental health problems, their related treatment and management strategies;

applying therapeutic nursing interactions and developing specific skills such as interviewing and assessment. In the typical tertiary setting nursing students however, do not have prior exposure to mental health conditions before undertaking the mental health subject which can make learning difficult. Moreover research has shown that nursing students have a negative view of people with mental illness (Hoekstra, van Meijel, & van der Hooft-Leemans, 2010) and that mental health as a specialty area is consistently ranked low by nursing students with many lacking interest or have a fear of mental health nursing (Buxton, 2011). This is of grave concern for according to the Australian Health Workforce Advisory Committee (2004) there is a growing shortfall of nurses undertaking mental health nursing which is leading to problems with current and future demands both in the hospitals and community. A contributing factor is identified in the literature to be in the tertiary sector and the learning experience for students (Clinton & Hazelton, 2000; Mullen & Murray, 2002). Teaching strategies such as assessments needs to be frequently examined and tailored to how best students learn and think; and how they become engaged.

Assessment as defined by Huba and Freed (2000) is the process of information gathering and discussion on a particular question so as to demonstrate a development of understanding relating to what the student knows and what they can do with that knowledge; which then eventuates in a completed work which is then graded/marked and used for subsequent learning. Holland (2002) adds another dimension by describing assessment as a conversation between the student and the teacher about a topic related to the discipline using appropriate language which demonstrates the student's level of engagement and understanding. Traditional assessments are simple, easy to develop, less costly to deliver, more objective in the measure of achievement and therefore reportedly more reliable and valid in regards to a student's knowledge and skill (Agrey, 2004). Despite this, they do little to motivate and

prepare students to become self-motivated, self-directed and life-long learners, and involve little or no fun (Nasri, et al., 2010). Innovative modes of assessment such as the use of creative design create new opportunities for dialogue and inject fun into learning. However, these modes usually involve more paperwork and demands more of the lecturer's time (Nasri, et al., 2010). Based on student feedback, trends in the tertiary sector are shifting towards innovative assessment modes which involve the embracing of 'assessment of learning' and 'assessment for learning'. This gives students the capacity to re-engage in the development of knowledge content through connections with the real world. The enhanced learning experience is through critical thinking and creativity.

Creativity in the use of creative design in assessment involves art. Art is closely aligned to nursing as it allows for the aesthetic expression of feelings, emotions, and meaning through the form of music, poetry, literature, film, visual art and role play (Blomqvist, Pitkala, & Routasalo, 2007; Cappiello & Vroman, 2011; de Guzman, Carungcong, Castillo, Castillo, & Castro, 2009; Welch & Welch, 2008). Aesthetic expression as a significant way of knowing was first identified by Carper (1978) (1978). Johns (1995) emphasised that aesthetics formed the foundations from which other ways of knowing can be developed. Nurses, through art can build on self-awareness and appreciate the human responses of others (Price, Arbuthnot, Benoit, Landry, & Butler, 2007). In the tertiary sector, nursing education successfully uses creative art through imagining and reflective journaling (McKie, Adams, Gass, & Macduff, 2008). Chan (2012) argue that art has a positive effect on nursing students. This creativity through art is the expression of creative intelligence which involves synthetic reasoning and the ability to make connections between new knowledge and understanding in novel and intuitive ways (Sternberg, 2008). It allows for the presentation of an idea or object in an original way using critical thinking and reflections. The creativeness is in the ability to

redefine problems, analysing solutions, overcoming obstacles, tolerating ambiguity and maintaining perspective. As pointed out by Lindstrom (2006) students' creativity gives life to the students' work, allows for decisions to be made regarding their work, and highlights their strengths and weaknesses. This involvement leads to lifelong learning, an essential attribute for educators when creating context and assessment for learning.

Increasingly educators are using creative art/design to enhance learning. Four studies showed educators art/design as a teaching strategy. Buxton (2011) used drama to simulate nurse-patient interaction in regards to a mental health condition within classroom setting. Students evaluated such drama presentations favourably in that it helped decrease their fear and built their confidence when dealing with mental health patients. Another study by de Guzman et al. (2009) used a selection of films to examine the essence of caring in geriatric nursing. Through content analysis and appreciative inquiry a model was developed comprising of three themes (carer, caring, cared for) which gave rise to the nexus between living, learning and loving in geriatric nursing. McCaffrey and Purnell (2007) developed a subject focusing on the 'Arts in healing' to help understand what it is to be human. Findings showed various ways nurses integrated their new understanding in their practice. Welch and Welch (2008) used drama whereby students attended a play as part of the clinical experiences in an undergraduate nursing subject. Findings from interviews showed that the learning experience from viewing the play had a more effective impact compared to other form of instructions. However, none of these studies use art/creative design in assessment. One study by Emmanuel et al. (2010) used mask design as part of an assessment strategy for first year nursing students. Few or no studies have used creative design as part of an assessment strategy when teaching mental health nursing.

## **Method**

In 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the nursing program 143 students enrolled in the mental health nursing subject. To enrol, students had to successfully complete the subject on communications in the previous year. The mental health subject focused on the different ways individuals respond to emotional and social trauma as occurs in life crisis, social disharmony and mental disorders. The assessment pieces included an essay (weighted 40%), an end of term examination (weighted 60%), and completion of 2 weeks of clinical practicum (weighted as nongraded pass). were asked to imagine what it would be like to spend a day in the life of a person with a mental illness. In the essay students were asked to demonstrate human responses to emotional and social trauma which can results in a mental health disorder. They needed to a. explore this experience by taking a journey over a short period into the life of a person with a mental health disorder b examine how the disorder interfered with life in the mainstream c. portray the experience in a poster d. discuss the portrayal and what the person might want from nurses and the community so that an independent, safe and sustainable life can be maintained. Marks were given according to the criteria shown in Table 1.

Data collection involved evaluating the assessment items based on Bigg's (1995) structure of observed learning outcome (SOLO) taxonomy. Scores for evaluation was based on the criteria 1 = prestructural (providing unconnected information); 2 = unistructural (simple connections made significance not clear); 3 = multi-structural (some connections made but multi-connections and significance not obvious); 4 = relational (connection at different levels obvious and significance for the whole coming through); 5 = extended abstract (able to make connections, as well as beyond the immediate to generalising and transferring important principles).

Other data sources include students evaluations of teaching and learning (quantitative and qualitative), and tutor' feedback. This data collection was part of a quality assurance activity to evaluate student satisfaction and interest in mental health nursing as a potential specialty area for third year and in the first year of graduation. Scoring was undertaken by 3 members of the teaching team with appropriate cross checking to ensure consistency and equity.

## **Results**

Of the 143 students enrolled, 138 (96%) completed the first assessment item. This cohort comprise of recent high school graduates and mature age students; mostly females; more than half who work part-time; and at least a third of whom are primary carers for their family. Most of the students reside in the local community that is considered of low socio economic status. Of the 138 students, 4 (2.8%) students withdrew from the subject, 11 (7.7%) had yet to complete the final examination, whilst 11 (7.7%) had not achieved the required grade. Students chose to focus on a range of mental illnesses and identified specific concepts and themes in their poster display to illustrate the impact on health, functioning and connectedness. Figure 1 and 2 are samples of posters.

The majority of students' essay (n = 41) according to Bigg's (1995) SOLO taxonomy were scored at 3 (the multi-structural level) which indicated that they were making connections between different concepts related to the essay question. See Table 2. Slightly less numbers (n = 36) were scored at 4 and 5 (n = 31) indicating that students were able to make connections at a higher level and between different concepts such as human responses and experiences, emotional and social trauma, mental health disorders and role of nurses.

An example of connections made and being able to see the significance of the mental health experiences is highlighted below from one student's work.

*the poster an image of a 17 year old girl, who will be referred to as "Sally". Sally is sitting in the middle of a railway track, which symbolizes the suicidal thoughts that she is experiencing. Her world around her is colour but she is black and white, which depicts that she is depressed and disconnected from society. Her parents are on the side of the tracks wanting to reach out and support her but don't know how to help. Sally's peers are also on the side of the tracks representing not only the victimisation that is contributing to her depression, but also the fact that peers are an important element of adolescence. The nurse represents the mental health services that are available to help Sally and her family. Essay sample #5*

In another excerpt, another student wrote:

*Women suffering from postnatal depression often feel physically exhausted. This is portrayed in the poster by the image of a mother trying to catch some Z's. Exhaustion can become overwhelming, and decreases the mother's capacity to participate in other physical activities. The mother can find herself blaming her baby for her exhaustion, which can cause resentment towards her child. Essay Sample #10.*

Response from student evaluation of the innovative assessment was at 35% (n = 50). Students (n = 41, 82%) scored good to excellent when asked how well the assessment task made them think about what they had to learn so that they could understand it better. Twenty seven students (54%) reported good to excellent for how well they felt the assessment tasks progressed from simple towards more complex tasks, and built on work done in previous

subjects. Overall, 35 (70%) students felt the assessment strategy was more than good. Thirty students (60%) felt that the assessment item engaged them at a personal level scoring good to excellent. Similar results were reported with students (n = 45, 95%) indicating that since completing the assessment, the importance of therapeutic communication in mental health nursing has become clearer.

Tutor feedback indicated that many students looked forward to the non-conventional assignment whilst a few complained that they were not creative enough and therefore felt disadvantaged. However, the tutor reported 'once the students got into it, there was no stopping them'. Informal discussion along the corridors, in the classroom and one on one interaction indicated that for many students the creative exercise had engaged them at a personal level in a profound way.

## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that students rise to the opportunity when challenged in an innovative way. For many students, the creative exercise engaged them at a profound and personal level. When creative design is used in mental health nursing assessments students effectively demonstrated their conceptualisation of the mental health experience. This outcome confirms Roberts (2012) discussion about the value of art particularly in the education of mental health professionals. Students' empathic understanding of those with mental health conditions was portrayed in the poster and transferred in the written work. It is important to note however, that the assessment was formative in nature and therefore one cannot make assumptions beyond the completed exercise. Future research would need to look more closely at the overall effect of using creative design in assessments.

The findings support the literature that the use of creative art in teaching can lead to deeper learning. Cappiello & Vroman (2011) used film to explore the interactions between theory, science and personal values so that nursing students could learn about sexual and reproductive health concepts. Unlike their problem and case study approach in the classroom, this present project looked at individual assessment with students exploring their own perceptions and views related to the topic. Buxton (2011) used drama to simulate nurse-client relationships to expose students to real life clients within the classroom setting to help students allay their fear and anxiety about their oncoming clinical practicum. In our project the student had to explore their thinking about the mental health experience for the client and illustrate this visually so that their biases and insights could be articulated. Evaluating this combined work of creative art and written discussion had a strong drive to learn for students. As pointed out by Boud and Falchikov (2007) assessments are potent tool for learning and guides students into effective approaches to study.

The findings were based on a quality assurance activity and reflective process required of academic staff for the purpose of continual self development in teaching and learning. Therefore the findings cannot be extrapolated to other situations with assurance. A more rigorous research approach would be needed. However, one could surmise that the innovative assessment had contributed to a transformed view of mental health nursing and mental health issues. In addition, creative design may not be a style of learning suited to all students. Few students could not make the link between the content within the poster design and the written work.

More effort is needed for innovative assessment strategies to promote and enhance student engagement. Use of a creative assessment approach that incorporates art creation shows much promise for teachers. On the down side, it can mean more work for the academic side but can be more fun (Nasri, et al., 2010). To keep in touch with 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), teachers need to explore innovative forms of assessment. Although traditional modes of assessments have their place, innovative assessments such as use of creative design provides the variety and also can enhance the learning in such a way that better prepares the student for the real world. Kearney and Perkins, (2011) point out that if teachers can assign authentic, innovative, creative assessments wherein critical thinking skills can be demonstrated, then success for the future of mental health nursing can take place.

### **Conclusion/Implications**

More effort is needed for innovative assessment strategies to promote and enhance student engagement. Use of a creative assessment approach that incorporates art creation shows much promise for teachers. More uptake by academic staff can broaden the range of learning experiences for students and prepare students for the real world. For staff who are apprehensive about change, linking up with other academic staff within their own or other faculties who share similar interest, may prove beneficial. Interest groups in this area can increase one's creativity about assessment redesign but also give one confidence about implementing change in assessments of undergraduate nursing subjects. Students need to be encouraged to think outside the box when planning assessment items. Creating and visualising understanding of a topic such as mental health issues gives students a better sense of reality, understanding of the human experience, and allows for the interpretation of how students can interact and provide care for those who have mental health illness.

Poster portrayal	Poster presented identifying important features; innovative and creative design which demonstrates sound understanding of human responses in crisis
Introduction and conclusion	Issues to be covered clearly identified in introduction. Conclusion logical and clearly summarizes main points
Discussion	Linked to poster portrayal. Comprehensive and coherent. Related to human responses in crisis. Applies relevant theoretical lens.
Structure	Logical development of ideas. Arguments well developed and sound.
Referencing	Arguments supported by references. Appropriate use of referencing format.
Editorial features	Spelling, page numbering, front sheet complete,

Table 1: Marking criteria



Image 1: My life as a schizophrenic



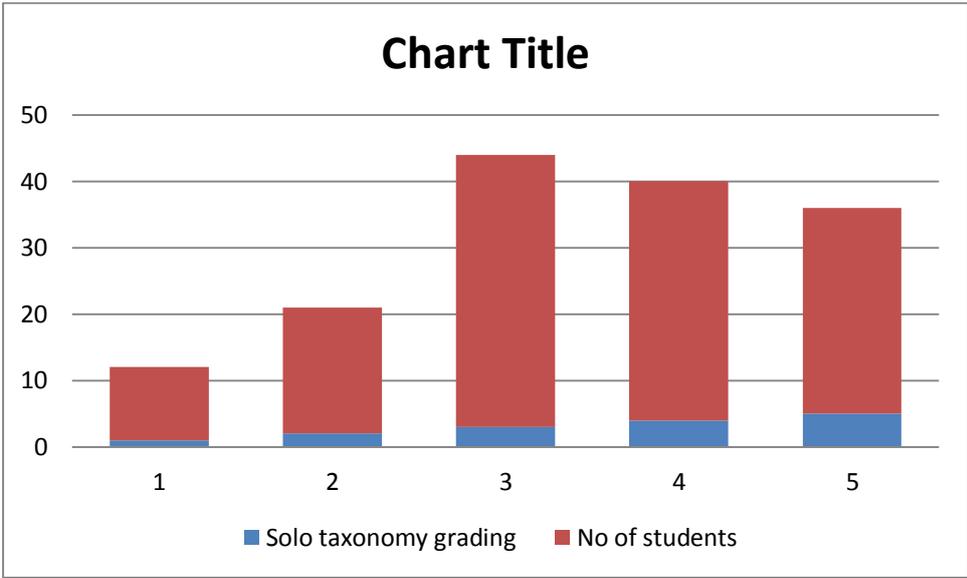


Table 2: Solo taxonomy grading of understanding from assessment item.

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