

# DEVELOPING ETHICAL PRACTICE THROUGH PROBLEM BASED LEARNING IN NURSE EDUCATION

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*Professional nursing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century requires that practitioners are not only competent but also accountable for the nature and quality of their practice. Integrating professional ethics into the students' everyday experiences presents a challenge for nurse educators. Evidence suggests that nurses are ill-equipped to make ethical decisions and when asked to identify ethical issues, nurses consistently relate to the 'big dilemmas' of health care and their feelings of inadequacy and disempowerment in seeking acceptable resolutions. It is our contention that, whilst these dramatic dilemmas are important, professional ethical practice requires that students must learn ways of recognizing and resolving ethical issues in their everyday experiences. Perfect solutions cannot be taught. This paper outlines a project aimed at more effectively preparing students to meet the ethical demands of nursing practice through the development and implementation of problem-based learning (PBL) as a key learning strategy within the Pre-Registration curriculum. Learning ethics and ethical practice is a partnership in which there should be no moral superiors. PBL enables this to be meaningful, grounded within the reality of practice and to start from the students' existing knowledge base. PBL promotes learner autonomy, critical thinking and clinical reasoning which are essential to the development of professional and ethical practice. To learn ethics students should be provided with the opportunity to learn ethically.*

## INTRODUCTION

Professional nursing within the United Kingdom in the Twenty-First Century requires that practitioners are not only competent but also accountable for the nature and quality of their practice (United Kingdom Central Council (UKCC),1992; UKCC,1996; Department of Health (DoH),1997; Royal College of Nursing, 1998; DoH, 2000). The very nature of clinical practice and the demands of the nurse-patient relationship inevitably involve a significant moral component. Every day nurses encounter a range of complex situations that require the skills of clinical reasoning and decision-making. In many of these decisions there will be an ethical component. Perfect solutions to ethical questions and dilemmas cannot, and should not, be taught. However, there is also an expectation that when exercising professional judgement the practitioner has an obligation to do what is 'right'. If this expectation is to be realised, the nurse educator has a concomitant duty to facilitate the exploration of values and the development of moral reasoning. This paper explores the value of introducing problem-based learning (PBL) as a key strategy for learning ethics within a pre-registration nursing curriculum.

Evidence from our experience and the literature suggests that nurses are ill-equipped and ill-prepared to make ethical decisions (Johnstone, 1994, Yarling And McElmurry 1986, Holly 1993). In addition they are unable to articulate the breadth and fundamental nature of ethics in practice. When asked to reflect upon their experiences and identify ethical issues, nurses consistently relate to the 'big' dilemmas of health care, for example, death, dying and complex treatment decisions. Such dilemmas often result in nurses experiencing feelings of frustration and disempowerment in their attempts to seek acceptable resolutions (Quallington 2000). The discomfort caused by such experiences can result in an over emphasis on the 'big' dilemmas of health care within the nursing curriculum; whilst these are important to debate these are not the primary concern of everyday nursing practice. If nurses are to consistently perform morally 'right' actions, it is essential that they are provided with the opportunity to develop ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning (Holm 1997).

### **PBL AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP NURSES AS CRITICAL THINKERS.**

Ethical practice is difficult to learn effectively, particularly during the early stages of pre-registration courses when students have limited experiences and cannot be expected to have developed, and rely upon, the 'expert intuitive practice' described by Benner, Tanner and Chesla (1996). However, the fact that the student nurse often comes into nurse education not yet being socialised into the norms of the profession may enable them to see things differently and to question practice in ways that others may not.

Chenoweth (1998) found that both nursing students and nurse educators believe that critical thinking is essential to the improvement of professional standards, the stimulation of enquiry and the promotion of sound reasoning in practice. Good nursing practice is not merely the safe, competent application of learned knowledge and skills, there is an additional dimension which requires evaluative reasoning processes. To fail to engage in moral reasoning exposes the patient to the risk of faulty assumptions, missed implications and inappropriate judgements that may lead to inferior care. In their approach to teaching ethics, nurse educators should not be seen as the 'moral superiors' and their responsibility is more complex than the provision of a set of answers to moral problems. What is relevant is that they provide the opportunities for learning and developing new skills that enable the student to arrive at appropriate answers and to be able to make decisions for themselves.

Our experience of teaching ethics in the nurse curriculum has been problematic. Modular structures and large student groups have resulted in ethics being confined to the exploration of specific issues in isolated sessions resulting in limited opportunity to develop ethical reasoning skills. The review and revalidation of the pre-registration nurse curriculum at University College Worcester, England in July 2000 provided us with the opportunity to radically rethink our methods and approaches to learning ethics. In addition, the implementation of PBL as a learning strategy within the nurse curriculum reflects the values for learning and teaching held by University College Worcester as is evidenced in the Learning and Teaching Strategy (UCW, 1999-2002). This Strategy places great emphasis on the importance of working collaboratively with students in order to foster lifelong learning through the development of learner autonomy, subject specific and transferable skills in a learning environment that is both dynamic and responsive. Quality teaching is seen as essential to effective learning and the enhancement of the student experience, thus the provision of staff development is seen as a priority.

## WHY PBL FOR DEVELOPING ETHICAL REASONING?

Problem Based Learning (PBL) is a philosophy of learning that claims to develop students' independent learning skills and their ability to hypothesise, make judgements and use knowledge effectively in the critical reasoning process (Sadlo et al, 1994). PBL also engenders autonomy in learning by encouraging students to identify and fulfil their own learning needs and to become active and creative in the learning process rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Exploring 'problems' generated from the reality of practice through PBL requires the student to engage in a process of deductive and analytical reasoning that closely resembles the processes of reasoning in clinical situations. Students are required to ask questions: *What do I know? How do I know I know that? Do I truly know it? Is it so, or does it merely seem to be so? What do I need to know?* Such an approach encourages students to develop a sense of 'intellectual humility' (Paul and Heaslip, 1995), that is the willingness and opportunity to acknowledge differences, one's ignorance and thus identify learning needs. Equally, ethical reasoning requires more than an intuitive response. Whilst intuitions may direct an individual to think and respond in a particular way, this may not take account of the diversity of values and contextual differences that should be explored when making ethical decisions. Learning ethics, therefore cannot rely on the presentation of 'right' answers to commonly encountered situations, the kind that might emerge from a formal content-led teaching session. Instead it must equip the student with a set of skills that enable them to recognise and find resolutions to ethical issues in practice and to make decisions that can be ethically justified.

Burns and Glen (2000) remind us that clinical decision making in nursing is more often composed of contextually defined value judgements rather than the application of a learned set of knowledge and skills, the focus of which may still be biased towards a biomedical approach where resolution of clinical conditions and longevity of life are primary goals. For example, when faced with a collapsed patient, the initial decision of whether or not to resuscitate is more often based solely upon the practitioner's technical ability and the patient's medical condition and predicted likelihood of success of any intervention. What may not be taken into account is the additional ethical dimension of the patient's situation, where weighing of the potential harms and benefits of such an intervention and consideration of whether this accords with the individual patient's wishes would be essential if respect for patient autonomy were to be preserved. The fact that clinical decisions are made 'about humans', demands that ethical analysis should be an essential component of the decision-making process. Practitioners must be aware of the primacy of patient and client values in their care which will inevitably conflict, at times, with the practitioner's personal values and beliefs and those which are dominant within the profession. It is also important to recognise that ethics is not only pertinent in such critically significant incidents but that moral considerations should pervade all aspects of practice. Ethical sensitivity is not something that can be turned on or off in response to the feelings of discomfort which so often alert the nurse to the need for ethical deliberation (Quallington, 2000).

Our aim in revising the strategies used for learning ethics and moral reasoning is to engender the recognition in students that morals and ethics are integral concerns of all aspects of nursing practice. In recent years, there has been a shift in UK Health Care policy which has stressed the need for the consideration of autonomy as a primary guiding principle (Department of Health (DoH),1997; DoH, 2000). Whilst, on the face of it, this principle has been adopted, in reality the legacy of paternalism is still endemic within health care and practitioners may still be found to pay lip service to the respect of autonomy in their interactions with clients. It is our belief that autonomy and respect for autonomy are not only central to clinical practice but should also be afforded primacy within the learning process. It

is hoped that the promotion of autonomy and independence in learning through the use of PBL will consequently encourage students to value autonomy in their practice.

## **CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PBL**

As novices to the process and implementation of PBL, its introduction into the pre-registration nursing curriculum presents us with a number of challenges:

- **Caution and anxiety of the staff in the face of change**
- **Tutors who are novice PBL facilitators**
  - requirement for staff preparation and development
  - the need for open-mindedness to new approaches
  - staff preparedness to expose their vulnerabilities in reverting from 'expert teacher' to 'novice PBL facilitator'
- **Group Size**
  - Intakes of approximately 100 students, posing resource issues, e.g. availability of rooms, numbers of facilitators required alongside additional teaching commitments
- **Resources**
  - On-going development across all courses at the University maintains a constant demand upon rooms
  - Timetabling of rooms is a central activity
  - Time for development and piloting of new PBL resources
- **Constraints on Curriculum Design**
  - competency-based driven curriculum
  - requirements of professional bodies

Although all of these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable given the enthusiasm amongst staff to implement PBL. However, they do need to be addressed with careful planning, sensitivity and recognition that, during the change process, staff development and peer support are essential if we are to avoid dissonance, frustration and undue anxiety which could result in the diminished use of PBL and a reversion back to formal, teacher-led activities.

## **PROJECT AIMS AND OUTCOMES**

In September 1999, we secured limited funding to conduct a small project entitled 'Development of Problem Based Learning (PBL) as a key learning and teaching strategy within nurse education,' on behalf of the Learning and Teaching Centre at University College Worcester. The main aim of the project was 'To explore and develop the implementation of problem based learning as a strategy to support learning and teaching within the new

Diploma in Higher Education (Nursing).’ On completion of the project, we intended to achieve the following outcomes:

1. The development of Faculty staff in the use of PBL techniques as a new learning and teaching strategy.
2. The identification and creation of relevant ‘problems/triggers’ and resource materials to support the implementation of PBL
3. The implementation of PBL through a pilot study, in order to trial and refine PBL methods and materials prior to formal incorporation in the new Diploma in Higher Education (Nursing) in September 2000.
4. The evaluation of project outcomes and development of an action plan for dissemination of good practice and expansion into other courses.

PBL was acknowledged as a learning and teaching strategy within the development and validation of the Diploma, however the project was unfortunately delayed due to the necessity to incorporate new UK Government guidelines ‘Making a Difference’ (Department of Health, 1999) for pre-registration nursing courses, resulting in a subsequent re-validation and delayed start date. The new programme, which will incorporate PBL, will now commence in February 2001. Acknowledging that this will inevitably delay any project evaluation, it has, however, provided opportunity for further staff preparation and the development of resources to support the PBL process. Module teams have been formed and each is currently working on ways to integrate PBL into their modules.

Given the constraints caused by revalidation requirements and the resulting delay in commencement of the new programme, alongside changes to our Faculty commitments, the project had to be refocused. Our personal contribution and responsibility is the development of a First Year module, ‘The Context of Nursing’, that introduces the student to the nature and context of nursing and to provide them with the opportunity to explore their own beliefs and values and those that are commonly held within the nursing profession. This also prepares students for the further exploration of ethics throughout their nursing practice. This module will now form the main focus for the pilot study within the project. Any evaluation of the effectiveness of PBL as a means of learning ethics will need to be an on-going process following commencement of the course.

We were conscious that we could have developed ‘problems’ or ‘triggers’ based purely on our own perceptions of the ethical dilemmas and challenges that can be faced by students experiencing practice for the first time in conjunction with qualified staff from the curriculum planning team. However, we recognise that this may be coloured by our own insights, knowledge and experiences of practice which may not necessarily reflect a true picture of the ‘students’ reality’. In order to more completely ground the module in reality, and to have a greater appreciation of the student perspective, we have reflected on issues and concerns raised by students and we are now in the process of organising reflective focus groups of learners from existing courses to identify ‘real issues’ that might be experienced by students entering nurse education for the first time. Students have reaffirmed the need to integrate ‘learning ethics’ into the whole curriculum. There are also significant incidents that students face that could be used, with their consent, to bring the richness of their experiences into the development of PBL triggers in this and subsequent modules.

## **USING PROBLEMS TO GENERATE ETHICAL REASONING**

Given the complexity of clinical practice, any problem or trigger identified for use in a PBL

session could potentially stimulate exploration and investigation down many different paths. Whilst recognising that such flexibility is valued as a means to integrate subjects and themes within a professional curriculum, we need to be assured that the ethical component is not lost in the face of other clinical issues. With large groups of students it is inevitable that, in dividing into PBL tutorial groups, not all will be facilitated by staff who have expertise in teaching ethics. Thus, if PBL is to be effective in developing ethical reasoning, it may be necessary to provide a framework to enable facilitators to focus on the ethical component of selected problems if they are to avoid distraction into the other more 'comfortable' dimensions of the problem. Before students can engage in the process of ethical reasoning, the identification of personal values and beliefs is essential as they will inevitably influence an individual's ethical analysis. Although values and beliefs will develop and change through experience and reflection, it is vital that initial PBL sessions provide the opportunity to focus on self-awareness and value-identification. Additionally, we have devised a number of key prompts that may be used by tutors in modules to enable them to facilitate the exploration of the ethical issues within the problems.

### **Facilitating the Exploration of Ethical Issues**

#### **Suggested Key Prompts:**

- **What do you feel? What are your intuitions?**

Examine your feelings against your personal values.

- **What would you 'like' to do in an ideal situation?**
- **What is the specific context, both the immediate and the wider context?**

e.g. key players  
any constraints?

- **What ethical principles are relevant here?  
Which take primacy and Why?**

N.B. Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-Maleficence, Justice, Veracity, Fidelity

**Selection of principles are likely to be determined by values and beliefs which may differ from those shared by others, e.g. patients, clients, relatives, staff**

- **What duties are owed and to whom?  
Is there anyone to whom a greater duty is owed?**
- **What are the potential consequences of actions? For:**

**individuals,  
self,  
wider context**

- **What are the implications for your practice?**

These key prompts could be used to assist in the tutorial process and to guide further student self-directed activity and may be included in the tutor resource pack to accompany each problem.

## **MAPPING THE VALUES AND SKILLS OF PBL WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHICAL REASONING IN NURSING**

Using the process of PBL to learn ethics should also contribute to the development of ethical reasoning and hence ethical nursing practice. The educational values claimed for PBL as a philosophy of learning can be reflected in the key ethical values underpinning nursing. As nurse educators, we believe that the use of PBL as a learning strategy provides an opportunity to learn ethically. If we are to promote the integration of ethics into students' everyday nursing practice and experiences, then it is essential that such integration is also reflected in our approaches to learning and teaching. Table 1 maps the values claimed for PBL against those that we believe to be essential to ethical nursing practice.

<b>Table 1 - MAPPING VALUES OF PBL AGAINST ETHICAL VALUES</b>	
<b>Ethical Values</b>	<b>PBL Values</b>
Respect for autonomy and self-determination	Mutual respect and trust Self-direction in learning
Empowerment of patients, clients, self and peers	Empowerment of learner and development of lifelong learning
Justice and fairness Equity of opportunity Non-discriminatory	Freedom to learn Equity of opportunity for learning
Facilitating self-actualisation Maximising potential	Facilitate self-actualisation in learning
Valuing individuality and diversity Ethical sensitivity	Recognising and valuing individuals' experiences, differences and diversity of contributions to learning
Non-maleficence (not harming) and beneficence (promoting good)	Fostering open-mindedness and curiosity Active learning Receptive and questioning approach to learning in and for practice
Evaluating competing perspectives Freedom to challenge assumptions Emancipation	Reflective scepticism

In addition, the skills development that is associated with the PBL process can be similarly identified in the development of skills essential to ethical reasoning. (See Table 2)

<b>Table 2 - SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR ETHICS THROUGH PBL</b>	
<b>Ethics</b>	<b>Problem Based Learning</b>
Ethical Reasoning	Critical Thinking and Reasoning
Identifying moral issues and finding resolutions to ethical dilemmas in practice	Problem Identification and Problem Solving
Prioritising principles for moral intervention	Selecting learning to meet learning outcomes/ prioritising learning
Justifying beliefs and actions using ethical theory	Evidencing learning
Sharing, exchanging and reaffirming values, beliefs and philosophies	Working and sharing learning with others
Articulation in ethical reasoning processes	Communication and Interpersonal Skills
Critical ethical reasoning and being prepared to challenge assumptions and norms	Cultivates a reflective scepticism
Integration of ethics as a basis for practice	Promotion of lifelong learning

## **CONCLUSION**

A 'good' nurse is not only one who is safe and competent to practice but one who can also account for the nature and quality of their practice. Nursing is grounded in human experience and must therefore reflect and acknowledge the human component of care which can best be demonstrated through ethical practice. This paper has claimed that nurses have not always been well-prepared to engage with the ethical component of everyday practice. Our contention has been that PBL may be a more effective learning strategy to develop ethical awareness and ethical nursing practice.

Learning ethics and ethical practice should be generated through a partnership in which there cannot and should not be any moral superiors. The values claimed for PBL reflect our beliefs about learning ethics and ethical reasoning. PBL acknowledges the contribution that students can make to the learning process by respecting and maximising their potential by utilising their experiences, knowledge, values and intellectual processes. This paper acknowledges that it is not merely the content of the learning that contributes to learning ethical practice in nursing but also the process that is crucial to the development of ethical reasoning.

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