Empowering Students in Community Care of the Elderly Through Action Learning

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Abstract

This Action Learning Project aimed to empower nursing students' by having them address the information needs of older persons in the community. By identifying the health concepts and service needs of this client group, students engaged in repeated cycles of reflection, assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation. They were facilitated by their teachers to focus on three aspects of their roles in the community – a problem solver, a resource person and an advocate. The effectiveness of the project is appraised by considering two major aspects: (1) learning effectiveness with regard to (a) students' views of own learning, (b) students' views of own involvement; (c) knowledge and skills of transferring knowledge into practice, (d) social skills and attitudes; and (2) process of self-empowerment on (a) addressing the identified problem, (b) taking roles as client advocates, and (c) resource persons. Data were obtained from a close-ended questionnaire, student journals, records from informal meetings and discussion between students and teachers, as well as the teachers' journals and reflections. Most students appreciated the process of learning by tackling the community problems identified by them. They had a deep feeling that they actually could do something for the community when they finally produced health resource guides for their clients. Although many students perceived that the Action Learning Project demanded a heavier workload than a conventional health education project, nearly all of them found it meaningful and worthwhile. It can be concluded that through active engagement in the Action Learning processes and through community participation, students were facilitated to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in the delivery of health services to older persons.

Introduction

Higher education in tertiary institutions has an important mandate of developing students' competence in knowledge and skills in order to prepare them for future leading roles in the society. Since nurses are involved in caring for people in life and death situations, they must be equipped with skills which enable them to be pro-active professionals in such situations. Their educational preparation must therefore involve more than a development of their knowledge base. Nursing students need to be facilitated in the mastery of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in order to succeed in all aspects of life and work (Bandman, & Bandman, 1988). Critical thinking implies the ability to analyse and review issues in multiple perspectives (Corrigan, Hayes, & Joyce, 1995). It demands a higher level of cognitive thought. Students who have more opportunities to explore, reflect and integrate their experiences and understanding are more able to handle complex real life situations.

Action learning, being a process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group with the intention of getting things done (McGill, & Beaty, 1992), provides excellent opportunities for cultivating this aspect of students' abilities. The use of an action learning approach in the project design will enable students to take a reflective role and actively

participate in improving or solving the situation (Mumford, 1984). The project aims at facilitating students' learning through active experience rather than simply providing theoretical input. It is believed that this innovative feature in project implementation will help to foster the development of students' abilities to be problem-solvers, resource persons and advocates.

Background to this Project

Community health projects undertaken by nursing students in 1996/1997 for the subjects Community Health and Gerontological Nursing revealed two notable themes. Firstly, students were frustrated at their inability to change the status quo of the problems they identified. In their projects, they uncovered several important health issues but were unsure about how to follow up with the information at hand. Since identified problems are complex health issues that can only be effectively addressed through policy changes, some students expressed their powerlessness to change the system.

Secondly, students found that older persons were not aware of the variety of health services available to them (Li, Lor, Tsang, Tse, & Wong, 1997; Or, Yip, Wan, Tong, & Yeung, 1997). Only medical consultations and the home help service were the known service items. Though students were surprised at what they found, the situation they uncovered was in fact not a new phenomenon. There might be reasons other than the lack of awareness of available services. However, knowledge of existing services is an *a priori* for service utilisation. A study by Kam (1991) also identified that elderly people in Hong Kong could not benefit from existing community resources because they were unaware of them. These findings highlighted that clients' lack of knowledge of service provision is an area that health professionals need to address. To date, there are limited client-focused information resources. Directories of services are designed for the use of service providers; rarely is health resource information available in a user-friendly format catered specifically to the needs of older persons. The aim of the project was, therefore, to empower students to become resource persons and advocates for older persons in the community by addressing a practice gap.

In the final year of their studies, the curriculum is designed in such a way that students will be jointly assessed for the subjects Gerontological Nursing and Community Health Nursing in a community health project. The two subject lecturers, i.e. the project team, deemed it a valuable opportunity to utilise this Action Learning Project for students' learning and assessment.

Key Concepts Governing the Design of the Project

The conceptualisation of this project stemmed from a set of basic beliefs of the teachers. First, we believed that primary health care (PHC) principles and philosophy must be integrated into the nursing curriculum in order to prepare nursing students to meet the challenges of a changing health milieu. It is crucial that the tertiary education sector prepares nurses to be autonomous, accountable practitioners who communicate effectively and accept leadership roles in practice (Worrell, McGinn, Black, Holloway, & Ney, 1996). Nursing students, therefore, must be empowered by the acquisition of knowledge and skills so that they will be able to actualise their roles. For this particular project, the roles of the nurse as problem-solver, resource person and advocate were identified because these roles are pivotal in the delivering of appropriate care and making changes in the health care system. Clients must be empowered too since clients and nurses are partners in care.

Second, with regard to health service delivery, a gap has been identified - that is that clients lack knowledge of available community services. Nurses have traditionally attempted to help people to attain and maintain health by providing disease prevention and risk avoidance information (White, & Nezey, 1996). To date, the nursing profession needs to be cognisant of its roles and responsibility in addressing gaps in service, and not being simply providers of information. University education should make provision for students to become active partners in community service.

Third, partnership between professionals and the community must begin with recognition that each party's contribution is equally important. Within the PHC framework, health professionals must interact with clients in various settings and encourage them to take ownership of their health concerns. Regrettably, excessive powerlessness is felt by the general population and, in particular, by minority groups such as the older persons. To empower is to enable, to facilitate mastery and to build up confidence. Empowerment is an interactive process that develops, builds, and increases power through cooperation, sharing, and working together (Hawks, & Hromek, 1992). Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) suggest that participation may be an important mechanism for the development of psychological empowerment because participants can gain experience in organising people, identifying resources, and developing strategies for achieving goals. As this project aimed to empower students in caring for older persons in the community, students were guided in the process of participation. They were offered multiple opportunities to serve and interact with older persons and work together towards a common goal.

The framework worked in line with the project objectives which enabled students to:

- acquire an in-depth understanding of health needs and current service provisions for older people in the community;

- critically appraise the merits and drawbacks of health services for older people in the community;

- produce an initial draft of the proposed Health Resource Guide for the chosen community that is client-focused, accessible and appropriate for use by older persons;

- actualise the roles of problem solver, resource person and advocate in nursing for this particular group of clients.
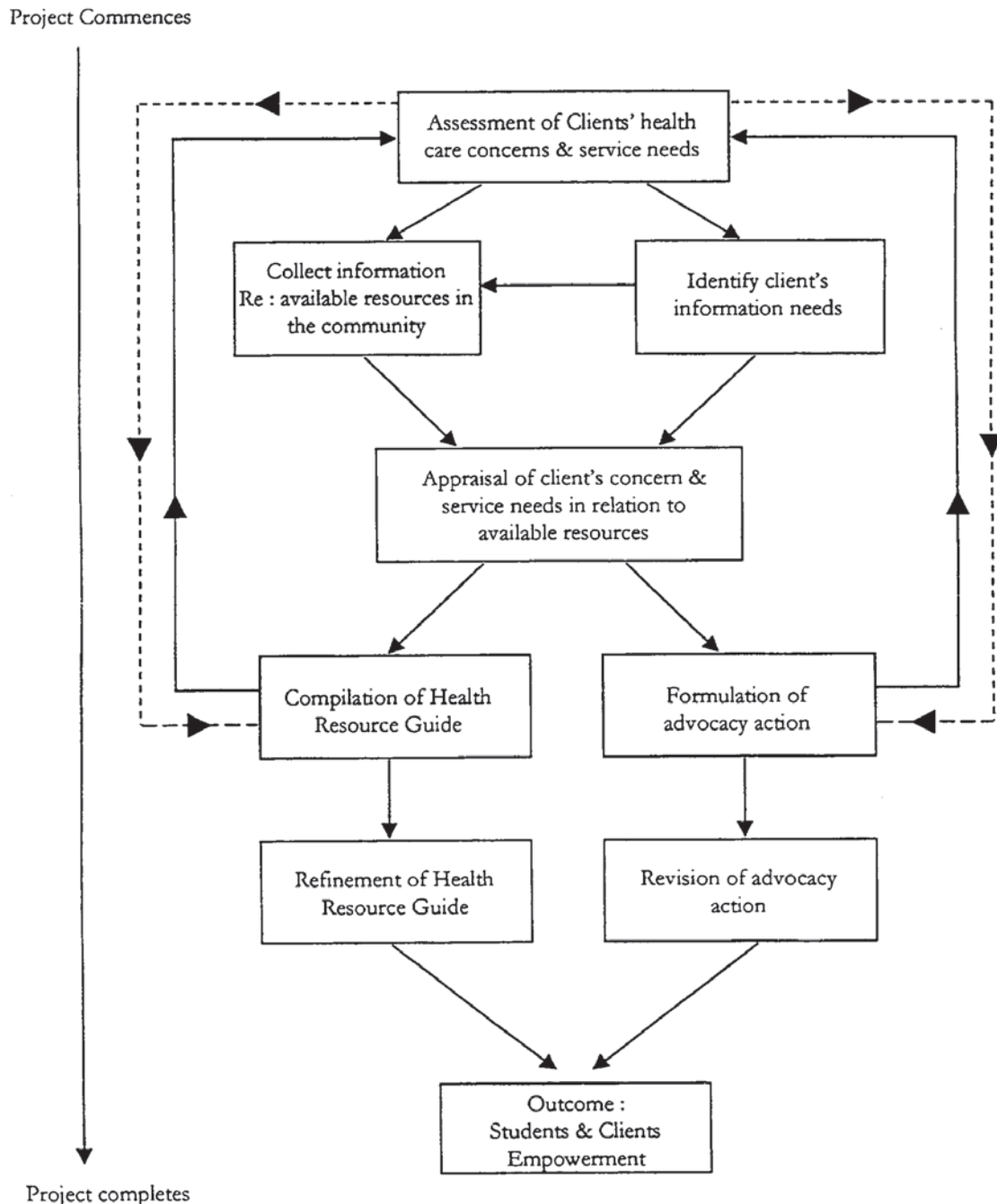
The Project

The project commenced in the fall semester of the 1997-1998 academic year. The entire class of 39 students took part. Students went through the multiple reflective learning loops in this project (Figure 1).

They were facilitated in groups of six to eight students to identify their own areas of interest concerning the health care concerns of older people in the community. Students identified two districts in Kowloon that were relatively heavily populated with older people, namely the Kwun Tong and the Wong Tai Sin District. Direct interactions with clients began with students interviewing older people residing in these two districts. They developed a questionnaire to help them identify areas of concerns of older people in terms of their perception of health information needs. Drawing from the interview data, the older people living in the two districts perceived their most important needs to be in the following areas:

- Financial assistance
- Health services

- Recreational facilities
- Housing
- Community support

Figure 1: Reflective learning loops existing in project design

Project Commences

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┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Assessment of Clients' health       │
│  care concerns & service needs       │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Collect information   │        │ Identify client's    │
│ Re : available        │ ◄───── │ information needs     │
│ resources in the      │        │                      │
│ community             │        │                      │
└──────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────┘

        ┌────────────────────────────────┐
        │ Appraisal of client's concern & │
        │ service needs in relation to    │
        │ available resources             │
        └────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Compilation of Health │        │ Formulation of       │
│ Resource Guide        │        │ advocacy action      │
└──────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Refinement of Health  │        │ Revision of advocacy │
│ Resource Guide        │        │ action               │
└──────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────┘

              ┌──────────────────────┐
              │ Outcome :            │
              │ Students & Clients   │
              │ Empowerment          │
              └──────────────────────┘
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Project completes

Students then began to solicit and collect related data on health resource information accordingly. At this stage they actively sought service information from and about the community. To give an example, students who were responsible for producing the guide about housing would contact service agencies and government departments for information about this area. Subsequently students organised, analysed and compiled the data to prepare an initial draft of a Health Resource Guide. By engaging in a series of actions and reflections in relation to

what they had been investigating, students were able to critically appraise issues related to health policies and service delivery. Issues that students had identified led them to question the existing policies and systems. A related example would be students who investigated issues and information about housing, questioned the promotional efforts of the Housing Department in making their policies known to older people. They began to formulate plans for appropriate acts of advocacy. This process was an integral part of the requirements for this project.

Students met with their clients for a second time to collect feedback about the initial draft of the resource guide. Clients commented on the layout, artwork and the font size of the draft resource guide, and students made amendments accordingly. Moreover, information collected in the second cycle of client interviews also helped students to rethink and revise their advocating behaviour. Their advocacy role was expressed in terms of a project paper that could take a variety of approaches, for example, a proposal to community centres, a newspaper report, a client or a service department interview. Related actions such as forwarding their project paper to agencies concerned were encouraged but not essential.

Project in Action

Students were required to write bi-weekly journals related to their experiences. The following were themes and quotes extracted from students' biweekly journals. Ideally they should have submitted five journals for this project. Eventually the teachers collected only four sets of journals. Submission of journals was voluntary and, as expected, there were more journals at the beginning of the project.

Themes from the First Set of Journals

Initially students voiced their confusion about the project. They had never previously taken part in an Action Learning Project and were unsure as to what was expected of them. Even with guidelines, instructions and discussion, they felt uncertain about the correct way to approach this project. Other concerns expressed in their journals included an appreciation of the co-operation and negotiation needed in group work. Students started describing the processes in which they engaged. Many of them commented on the importance of mastering communication skills when working with older people. Being the ones who asked permission and favours of clients (for example, asking permission to conduct an interview) was a novel experience for them. Such a reversal of the power relationship was not what they were used to experiencing in the hospital setting. They were glad to gain some first-hand experience of the way of life of older persons and also to gain knowledge of community services.

Themes from the Second Set of Journals

As students continued working on their projects, they talked about the problems which they had encountered, such as obtaining interviews. Sometimes people were suspicious and not as friendly as students had imagined they would be. They also complained about the workload inherent in the project design. But it was noticed that the tone of the journals changed. The tension identified in the first set of journals disappeared and students obviously became more comfortable and confident. They began to think about the life situation of older people and wondered why that was so. On the one hand they were better able to appreciate the clients' perspective, but on the other, they expressed surprise at the passivity of those older persons they met in tolerating adversity in life or unfair treatment from people or the system around them. There was also some evidence of critical appraisal of issues related to health services. They learned about resources in the community and became more resourceful. More importantly, they wanted to be resourceful as nurses.

One student commented,

> This (referring to the project) enhances the knowledge and understanding of the resources available to the elderly and helps me to make suggestion to the needed client.

Another remarked,

> As a nurse, I think we should know well about the availability of community resources that are suitable for the client, so that the client's need can be well fitted and ... promote optimal care even after discharge.

Students' Third and Fourth Sets of Journals

Findings from students' third and fourth sets of journals showed many similarities and therefore they are discussed together. Drawing nearer to the end of the term and closer to the project deadline, many students claimed that they were overwhelmed. The number of students who submitted their journals dropped significantly. However, from those which were submitted, it was obvious that by working through the logistics of the project, students actively thought about which services were needed for the elderly and whether the existing approach, or their proposed ways of addressing needs had been effective. Students illustrated creative thinking as well as deep thinking. A number of students proposed that the next project could be to produce resource guides in the form of audiotapes as many elderly people could not read. One student questioned his/her own beliefs in service provision for the elderly.

> It is indeed questionable whether I should advocate for a comparatively minor group - the elderly - at the expense of the rights and benefits of the majority regarding the usage of community facilities.

The answer to, or the debate concerning this question is not the focus of this paper. This statement is quoted to illustrate that by learning through action in life outside the classroom, students started to challenge their core beliefs about human, services, and equality. Such a deep questioning of their own values could never have been achieved in a classroom project.

An outstanding theme from journals of these sets is the frustration experienced by students as they attempted to collect information from service agencies, and in particular, government services in order to complete the resource guides. One student's comment said it all.

> ...We had tried filling up any missing data by further making many phone contacts with the service-providers and reference to their publications. However, making phone enquiries to government departments was especially a frustrating experience. It was extremely rare that I could obtain the information I wanted by making just one or two calls. The officials just kept on making referrals to me by giving me another and another phone numbers. I was like a ball which they kicked around on the phone line. I wondered how there could be so many phone numbers within a single department and how they could be so useless to the public.

Reflections Upon Project Completion

To reduce the workload of the students, they could choose to decide whether they would write a project report or an advocacy paper. Just less than half (19/39) chose to write a project report. Information presented in the following was collected from students' comments in their project reports. Generally speaking, many students wrote that they now knew the elderly better and had become more aware of their needs. Many students were pleased that they now had increased knowledge of community affairs and gained deeper knowledge of community services. They

became more cognisant of potential barriers when providing services to older people. The following quotes from students serve to illustrate and summarise their experience and gains in the project.

> ...It also gave me confidence to interact with the elderly. I found myself paying more concern and awareness to elderly issues. When I met the problem or read bad news in the newspaper about them, I would not just leave it alone but thought why such problem happened and what can I do for them.

Some also mentioned that they had developed a different perception of the roles and practices of a nurse. The project team regard this element as significant learning for graduating students.

> In this Action Learning Project, valuable experiences and reflection were gained. As a nurse in the future, I learnt to take an active role in introducing community services to our clients, our neighbours, relatives or elderly persons in need. Besides, it is also my responsibility to empower them in order to facilitate them to live a dignified, respected and secured old age.

> Actually the elderly could live in the community happier and nurses had an ability to improve this poor situation. For the elderly, nurse can assist them to build up a positive self-image, try to strength their weakness ... Nurses encourage and explain to elderly about the significance of participating the welfare and activity ... Also nurses explain the ageing process, teach them how to adapt their new stage of life ...

Findings from the Questionnaire

The evaluation of students' learning included the students' journals as described above, brief records of tutorials, informal feedback and a completed questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the term to collect students' perceptions of what they had learned. Self-evaluation of students was adopted, as it was not possible to observe each and every student in action during the project. Self evaluation, as part of nursing education, also helps nurses to become self-assured and more capable of evaluating themselves and their patients (Johnson, 1979). The following represents some quantitative data which supports findings from students' journals. The quantitative data provided, supports the findings of the qualitative data. Together they provide a more comprehensive picture of how the students performed in the action learning approach.

The questionnaire contained 23 positive questions and 20 negative questions and took into account the project structure, project process and project outcome. Seven questions covered the project design in relation to the learning approach, objectives and method, 15 questions related to the process of reflective learning, own learning and work demand. Twenty one questions related to project outcome in terms of student empowerment, and focused on enhancing problem solving skills, acting as client advocate and resource person and personal development. Thirty-eight of the total thirty-nine students completed the questionnaire. The results are summarised as follows.

Feedback on Project Structure

The majority of students (76.3%, n=29) understood the concept of Action Learning that was integrated into the project design. However, less than half of students (42.1%, n=16) were clear about the learning goals and objectives of the project. More than half of students (60.5%, n=23) felt the project work was relevant to the subject matter taught in classes and most of them (65.8%, n=25) understood their roles in the project. Less than half of students (42.1%, n=16) felt the workload of the project appropriately reflected the subject credit value. Twenty one percent of

the students (21.1%, n=8) felt there were adequate resources for the project, and fifteen (39.5%) agreed that project guidelines were adequate.

Student Feedback on Project Process

Reflective Learning Process.

Nearly all students (89.5%, n=34) agreed that by conducting the project, they had opportunities to explore older persons' health resource issues in a self-directed manner, and to understand the needs of older clients in the community. Twenty-two students (57.9%, n=22) agreed that the project provided opportunities for them to address issues from multiple perspectives. Nearly half of the students (n=17) agreed that the project made them continuously reflect on what they learnt. The majority of students (65.8%, n=25) agreed that teachers facilitated their reflective process. Eleven students (28.9%) had difficulty in following the Action Learning cycle.

Own Learning Process

Less than half of the students (42.1%, n=16) enjoyed the learning process of the project although almost three-quarters of the students (73.7%, n=28) agreed that they had adequate support from their teachers throughout the project. Twenty-three students (60.5%) agreed that the project allowed them to be actively involved in their own learning. Over two thirds of the students (68.4%, n=26) agreed that the project enabled them to build on the nursing knowledge base, and almost 80% of students (n=30) agreed that the project facilitated the acquisition of interpersonal and communication skills.

Work Demand

Almost half of the students (42.1%, n=16) agreed that there was not sufficient time for them to conduct their projects. Eighteen students (47.4%) gave neutral responses to the question asking whether the project demanded a workload that was beyond their coping ability. Half of the students (52.6%, n=20) agreed that the project demanded knowledge that was appropriate to their academic level and nearly half of the students (47.4%, n=18) disagreed that the project demanded skills that were beyond their ability.

Feedback on Project Outcome

Developing Problem-Solving Skills

Twenty-three students (60.5%) agreed that the project enhanced their problem-solving abilities. Twenty-one students (55.3%) responded that they were able to explore in depth the informational needs of older persons in the community. Thirty-three students (86.8%) agreed that the project helped to develop their awareness of social health issues. Twenty-three students (60.5%) agreed that by doing the project, they believed that they were able to improve health service utilisation of older persons by satisfying their health service needs.

Enhancing the Client Advocate Role

Twenty-four students (63.2%) responded that they had more confidence in expressing their opinions with clients and other professionals in the community after completing the project. Just over half of the students (52.6%, n=20) agreed that the project assisted them to learn how to be a client advocate. Almost two third of students (60.5%, n=23) and almost three-quarter of students (73.7%, n=28) agreed that the project enabled them to critically appraise issues in Gerontological Nursing and Community Health Nursing respectively. Twenty-six students (68.4%) agreed that

after undertaking the project, they believed that they were able to advocate for older persons' needs in the community so that their utilisation of health services could be improved.

Enhancing Resource Person Role

Over three-quarter of students (78.9%, n=30) agreed that the project enabled them to mobilise resources in the community. Twenty-nine students (76.3%) agreed that the project enabled them to actualise their roles as resource persons for their clients. Half of students (n=19) agreed that their Health Resource Guides met clients' health information needs.

Developing Self

Only twelve students (31.6%) thought that they were more capable of providing health care for the elderly clients in the community after completing the project. There was a fairly even distribution of the responses: 'agree', 'unsure' and 'disagree' to this question. Over half of the students (52.6%, n=20) was unsure whether the project was able to assist them in the integration of theory with practice. Twenty-seven students (71.1%) responded that they developed the skills of valuing or responding to new viewpoints throughout this project. Thirty-four students (89.5%) and thirty-one students (81.6%) respectively, responded that they learned to 'share' and 'listen' to their classmates throughout the project. Sixteen students (42.1%) and twenty-three students (60.5%) respectively, agreed that the project allowed them to actualise their own 'potential' and 'initiatives'.

Discussion

Factors Affecting Students' Learning Experience

Overall, student feedback on the learning structure, process and outcome was very positive. Students in general agreed that such an approach offered them opportunities to explore, in depth, the knowledge they perceived as relevant and put it into practice. Students, when deciding the contents of the resource guide were required to perform a needs assessment of the potential users - the elderly group in the community. During the processes of discussion, clarification, preparation for client interviews and setting of questionnaires, students felt the reflective cycles in conducting this project cultivated their problem-solving abilities. Such processes of cognitive reinforcement made them feel more capable of taking action to mobilise resource utilisation among elderly clients.

Despite the actual benefits perceived by most students, some students complained that the reflection cycles took up most of the time and they felt frustrated sometimes if they could not reach an easy conclusion since they were very much aware of the shortage of time. Because of this self-exploration process, they sometimes felt lost, and would like to have had more support from teachers. They would ask for more direct guidance and directions when working on the resource guide. This was particularly expressed in the students' first two journals. This experience might explain the contradictory results of not enjoying the process of participation although most of them claimed that they had had a rewarding experience. Some students stated that if they had known that action learning demanded such cyclical processes of reflection and action, they would rather have chosen a simple direct project such as giving a health talk, which would be far simpler.

The majority of students (76.3%, n=29) agreed that undertaking the project was a rewarding learning experience. It was interesting to note from the students' reflective journals, that although most of students had positive learning experiences and benefited in terms of personal

growth and practice skills, more than half of the students (55.3%, n=21) were unsure whether they would choose action learning as a project format if there was a choice again. These findings highlighted the importance of project design in terms of workload and scheduling, as these factors might affect students' willingness to participate in an action research project even though they were aware of the benefit of the learning process.

Basically observations and evaluation of the teachers, corroborate students' comments and feedback. Upon reflection, the teachers agreed that they could have instituted more active facilitation at the beginning of the project, for example, to conduct more regular meetings and tutorials with the students and provide more information or materials concerning various aspects of the project. It was also a new venture for the teachers too so there had been a period of exploration on the part of the teachers. There were considerations about how much input to provide and when to avoid providing too much direction and too many suggestions. Moreover, the teachers underestimated the impact that working on a novel project would have on the anxiety level of final year students. Towards the second part of the project, both teachers and students were more at ease with their roles and expectations.

Another major issue that accounted for the seemingly heavy workload of the project was the students' difficulty in imposing a limit on their own work. The nature of the project called for a strong commitment from the students because they had to complete a draft of the guides before the end of term. Unfortunately the heavy workload of the students was in part self-imposed. Their commitment, or the high aspiration they had for the project drove them to look for unnecessary details and place effort on areas that fell outside of the scope of a resource guide.

Impact of Action Learning on Student Empowerment

Most of the students agreed that by participating in group work, they expanded their knowledge base and developed their skills in addressing health informational needs of the elderly group. Not only did group work provide them with opportunities for bridging the gap between theory and practice, but it also increased their confidence in expressing their own opinions with clients and other professionals in the community. In most cases, students found that the Action Learning approach helped them to develop their problem-solving abilities, facilitating them to actualise their client advocacy and resource person roles. This was particularly true when a draft copy of the Resource Guide was ready - a product they owned after much effort and hard work. In addition, through regular group meetings with professionals in the community or with their fellow students, they found that they had also learned to share and listen to classmates. They also developed skills of valuing and responding to new viewpoints. These interpersonal skills are important attributes for nursing graduates. It is interesting to note that although students expressed that the project enhanced their ability to utilise community resources, address the needs of elderly people, and act as advocates for them, they still did not find themselves more able to provide health care in the community. (It would be worth discussing this further in focus groups to explore the underlying reasons.) This was understandable as in this project students were addressing the health information needs of older people. Health needs of older people in the community is a broad and complex issue. The nurse who can act independently to address these needs must master higher levels of competency to fulfill the various roles. Students might think that they were still lacking skills in handling other situations, since the project focused only on a specific health need issue within the community.

Steps to Consider When Conducting the Action Learning Project

It is important to continuously monitor student progress especially if it is the first time students are undertaking such a self-directed mode of learning. Clarification should be made as soon as possible in all circumstances. Results showed that most negative experiences arose at the initial

stage of the project. The findings reflected that some students felt unclear about the goals and objectives of the project. Some students stated that they did not understand their roles. Additionally, some perceived that there were inadequate resources, such as travelling allowance, to conduct the project. As the project design was new to the students, they believed that more teacher facilitation and guidance was required at the initial stage. This should be considered in future project plans. Teachers may be required to give a clear written and/or verbal outline that includes details of the action learning approach. Students needed to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the concept of Action Learning and the underlying methods of learning and roles undertaken by each participant. One student stated that they were not too sure whether they could ask questions in relation to how to conduct the project, they thought that they should have a plan before they asked questions and had spent most of time in deciding the project focus.

Students might need a 'warm-up' period to 'get into' the cycles of self-exploration and needs identification in order to identify their project focus. Time was one of the major concerns identified in the student feedback. As students only have four months to complete this project, the reflection cycles demanded a higher intensity of commitment from students to explore and assess client needs, and to prioritise issues and make appropriate decisions. This could be quite demanding for students who are used to the traditional approach to teaching and learning.

The Resource Guides

By working on the project, students produced the basic framework and collected core data for the Resource Guides. The material was later compiled and edited with the help of a project assistant. Seventy-five sets of the Resource Guides were printed and these were distributed to libraries, centres for the elderly, community nursing services units, and patient resource centres of hospitals within the two districts where students conducted their project. Many colleagues provided immediate positive feedback and asked for personal copies. They liked the idea and were indeed impressed with the outcomes of the project i.e. the production of something that actually could benefit the public. A nursing colleague from another university sought approval from us to adopt this model for her teaching. However, the most encouraging responses came from the community. There were phone calls and walk-in requests asking for more copies. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, it was not possible to reprint the Resource Guides.

Conclusion

It can be said that most of the aims and objectives of this project were achieved. It was gratifying to learn that the majority of the students had reaped multiple benefits from this learning format. They had been able to actualise their roles, at least to a certain degree, as a resource person, an advocate and a problem-solver. Although not all students mentioned that they enjoyed conducting the project, and would choose this project again if possible, from the reflective journals, the Resource Guides, and the questionnaire, most students evaluated the project positively. Some students expressed the need for active teacher facilitation at the beginning of the project since this was a new learning approach for them. More guidance and support was needed by the students in order to lessen their anxiety of having to cope with a fairly unstructured project.

The teachers also learned that the project design, in particular the structure of the project, is a crucial element in determining how students experience the project. The needs of students, as they navigate through the cycles of action learning, vary in the different stages of a project. Support for the students, therefore, needs to be adjusted accordingly.

Concrete outcomes of this Action Learning Project for all students were comprised of the production of two sets of informational Health Resource Guides for older adults for the Wong Tai Sin and Kwun Tong district. For slightly more than half of the students, the second outcome consisted of the actualisation of the nurse's advocacy role as evidenced by the production of an advocacy paper and/or implementation of related actions. In summary, probably a student's comment best reflects what the teachers hoped to see in a student undertaking this project,

> Even though there was so much unhappiness and bad things happened during the process, I am still very appreciative that I took part in the Action Learning Project, because it let me know that I can overcome all the barriers encountered in the process. The birth of the Resource Guide gave me a greater sense of satisfaction than I ever experienced before. I recognise that I can mobilise the community resources to the elderly. I am very proud of myself. The project lets me know that everything is possible and *also* it built up my confidence. Our potential is unlimited.

These words were like heavenly music to our ears. We believe at least slightly more than half of the students would have concurred with this student. For teachers, there is nothing more rewarding than to see students' metamorphosis.

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