

Students' Experiences in Nursing Research and Evidence based Practice Course: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Nursing student's experiences of their research course provide greater insight to develop an effective teaching and assessment strategy in this course. The main objective of this qualitative study was to investigate student nurses' experience about their research and evidence practice course and the challenges they faced during this course. Self-report template was used to obtain students' opinion and experiences about their course content, teaching and learning methods, assessment, challenges, general description of the their experiences. 30 baccalaureate nursing students at one female governmental University in Saudi Arabia were agreed to participate in the study. Three main themes emerged as general description of students' experiences: positive and inspiring, negative and a burden, difficult but useful. In regards to the challenges 5 main themes emerged including: Course outcomes, Teaching Quality, Exams and assignments, Cognitive abilities, Anxiety and motivation. In conclusion these findings help to qualify things we already know about the student experience with learning and teaching, but it has also uncovered where developments have to be occurred to meet student needs.

Keywords: research course, nursing students, students' experiences, challenges, evidence based practice.

Introduction

The research module of Saudi nursing programs has become progressively important over the past several years. At the same time the international demand for evidence-based practice, nurses' petition for increased professional autonomy, the extremely need for nurses' research expertise has appeared, and the national and regional efforts directed to research and evidence based practice in health care professions. All these motives make it obligatory for nursing programs in Saudi Arabia to include research course in their curriculum. Nowadays nurses require justifying and supporting their actions with research evidences and conducting researches by themselves to improve health care services. (Fennessy 1997). So integrating research into nursing curricula is essential to enhance research literacy and to prepare nurses to undertake evidence-based practice (Peckover & Winterburn, 2003).

According to Polit and Beck (2006) nursing research is "systematic inquiry designed to develop knowledge about issues of importance to nurses, including nursing practice, nursing education, and nursing administration.(p. 4) they added that nursing research is vital to the practice of professional nursing, and the importance of its inclusion during undergraduate instruction cannot be exaggerated because with exposure and experience the students can begin to understand the concept and importance of nursing research. The development of a positive perception towards scientific research is an essential component of contemporary undergraduate medical education (O'Mara, et. al., 2015). Actions to increase research awareness among students have been widespread.

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Many researches addressed the reasons why the research is not popular by nurses and nursing students. Hunt (1987) was the first author investigating this issue and mentioned that the explanations nurses most frequently indicated are a preference or greater ability for practical as opposed to intellectual work, and difficulties in implementing research findings in practice. While regarding to students' opinions many researchers tackled this topic. However, different teaching methods, individual tutoring, groups approaches, practical and theoretical work, do not seem to lead to important differences in outcome (Mander, 1988; Pennebaker, 1991). One of the reasons was that lecturers with a nursing background are not sufficiently trained in the use of quantitative and qualitative methods, or do not feel confident about teaching research to often hostile students (Bassett1994).

According to Clifford (1997) 43% of surveyed lecturers felt they were not adequately prepared for this role. Another point of conflict might be related to the research methods that are being taught. Another reason was that students and qualified nurses are often not computer literate and thus wary of computerized statistical analysis (Ward, 1997). But Tierney and Lincoln (1994) revealed that nurses prefer to conduct qualitative research and to publish it in mainstream nursing magazines, while those who teach research methods, with an eye to the next research assessment exercise focus on 'hard science' and publication in scientific journals. Finally, sometimes nursing students often feel extremely anxious before exams, and some withdraw voluntarily from the course (Beck & Srivastava 1991; Lengacher, 1993).

Since there has been a significant shift in nursing education in Saudi Arabia and surrounding countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region; Saudi Arabia is currently moving towards a knowledge-based economy, of which research is an important element. Additionally, It is provoking to know how important and vital the research is to professional nursing practice, and yet struggle to communicate this to students. So it is important to understand the reasons underlying nursing students' challenges in learning research, no studies in Saudi Arabia addressed this topic yet exist in the reviewed literature. Therefore this study aimed to explore challenges faced by Saudi nursing students and their experiences in research and evidence based practice course.

Course Overview

Nursing research and evidence based practice course is a requirement for senior baccalaureate nursing students. The course is included in the required theoretical course components at the senior level; fourth year of baccalaureate nursing curricula. The purpose of this course is to introduce the undergraduate nursing student to the research process as presented in professional nursing literature. It aims at introducing the basic concepts of research, its nature, purposes, methods, literature review and data collection, analysis & utilization. It focuses on the applicability and implementation of the research process to nursing and health related problems. The course provides the students with the opportunity to prepare for research projects. As assessment for the students, in addition to Midterm, quizzes, and final exams, each student is assigned to critique a research paper, and complete the NIH certificate online course.

Faculty are involved in teaching activities at least three hours per week. Posted office hours are required and kept. The lecturer in this course uses many teaching methods including: lectures, practicing exercise, critique, group discussion, and e-learning. Accommodation including: flexible classroom, ICT facilities, library, and e-podium are utilized by this course. Periodically reviewing for course effectiveness and planning for improvement is done per semester using formative and summative assessments, team meetings, student feedback, and course and faculty unified electronic evaluation survey. The purpose of this Qualitative study was to explore the experiences of nursing students and challenges during enrollment in a compulsory nursing research course in one of Saudi Arabia universities focusing on the challenges they faced in the course.

Methods

Study Design

In order to explore the students' experiences, a qualitative contents analysis design was used to conduct the study.

Participants

The study was conducted at one of the governmental universities in Saudi Arabia in 2016, The sample included 30 female Saudi nursing students who enrolled in the course. Inclusion criteria was: currently enrolled in nursing research and evidence based practice course

Data Collections

Students were asked to report how they describe their experience in nursing research course and shed light on the challenges they faced during the course. They wrote the data on template designed by the researcher to facilitate the organization of their ideas and they have been given one week to finish the writings, in addition, they were given the choice to use hand writing or typing to fill the template. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University. Information about the purpose of the study and consent was taken from students prior data collection. They were informed that participation was voluntary. Their performance in this study would not count in their academic performance. They could leave the study without penalties at any time. They were told that their writings would be kept confidential and no names were mentioned in the templates, and only the primary researcher and the research consultant have access to the data.

Data Analysis

The self-reported template was analyzed qualitatively and themes were emerged. The trustworthiness of this study was ensured by using the criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1994), including credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability through detailed, systematic, and organized description of ideas reported by students, developing general categories, and go over them repeatedly until agreed themes were recognized. Also, to validate the analysis, one research consultant in the field of nursing checked the analysis to ensure their accuracy.

Results

All of the participants were female (N = 30). They described a variety of unique experience and challenges throughout the course. However, three main themes emerged as general description of their experiences: positive and inspiring, negative and a burden, difficult but useful. In regards to the challenges five main themes emerged including: Course outcomes, Teaching quality, Exams and assignments, Cognitive abilities, Anxiety and motivation.

General description of the course

Theme1: Positive and Inspiring

20% of the participants verbalized that the course was informative, professional and prepare them for graduation research project, and they clarify that many lectures were inspiring and motivating.

Some of the students reported:

" It was a very nice ,active experience, I appreciate that this course preparing us for future career".

" I liked this course and felt that I am learning something new but very important that made me updated always ".

"We have a professor who has a passion about the course and us, I don't think there is anyone in the class who dislikes her. She moved toward our level of understanding and she got our attention".

Theme 2: Negative and Burden

30% of the students described the course as a burden on them, and reported undesirable experiences for example:

" I felt very discouraged and not interested in the course".

"Despite the professor stressing on the importance of research in nursing field but I am not convinced and I think it is a burden".

"Negative experience that made me think of dropping the course many times".

" we felt the professor was talking about interesting things, but she could not make it seem interesting. And then it works the other way, we start to look at the topics as boring and not interested for us".

Theme 3: Difficult but Useful

50% of the participants agreed on considering the course as a difficult and challenging but in the same time useful and worthy. They described the experience as :

" I felt it is difficult but I was interested in the topics because they are all new and I got convinced of the benefits of evidence based practice in nursing profession".

"However it was tough in concepts, topics, and assignments because they are all new for me but at the end I felt the usefulness of the course".

"All people talking nowadays about evidence based practice and the benefit of research especially in clinical field so I was interested despite it was difficult for me and I didn't have a good scores in the course but I felt I am improved in understanding research papers".

Challenges during the course

Theme 1 : Course Outcomes

Many students presented that the research course was too much advanced. They specified that the language and concepts was unfamiliar to them, consequently they had difficulties following the lectures or using any other resources mentioned in the course syllabus. They suggested also that when the teacher orient them to the course outcomes they felt shocked because they thought this difficult and they don't think at this stage they need to accomplish these outcomes.

Some participants reported:

"It was the new language and topics, i didn't know what the teacher was talking about".

"I don't know why the teachers had to go in the course at the level they went in".

"At the end we still in BSC level so I think we don't need that much knowledge, we are not a researcher".

Theme 2: Teaching Quality

Most of the students felt that teaching quality was extremely satisfying and appreciated by them because it derived them to better understanding and engagement in the course. While some students reported advanced teaching styles that they could not adapt with, this combined with difficulty in the content of the course which accordingly add more challenges for them.

One student said:

"Our professor style of teaching was very advanced; I felt she was lecturing master degree students".

Theme 3: Exams and Assignments

Some students suggested that the course should involve difficult individual assignments that too much effort to do alone because they are practical activities, such critique paper. The reading materials had been designed for that purpose and the professor explain a lot about the critique, but some students felt that the assignments should be done by groups:

"I prefer to do the assignments in groups because it might help me in increase my understanding of research process".

Students also wanted more training in the critique assignment of published papers, one of the students said:

"Although our professor gave us guideline for critiquing a published paper, but we didn't go over written example of critiqued research, and if I don't know anything about research and I am learning just right now in this course, the assignment was like a guessing game, like, I could be right, I could be wrong".

In regards to the exams almost all students wished to have trial exam or examples of questions included in every lecture so they can imagine how the exam questions will be, and this could decrease their anxiety. Few students mentioned that they felt the exams to be very difficult, and this made them frustrated.

"The exams were very difficult, they made me thought I didn't study during the semester at all".

"I prefer to have examples of the questions in every lecture so I can train myself in the type of questions".

Theme 4: Cognitive Abilities

Some students felt that this course needed understanding, memory, concentration, and mathematical skills for research statistics, all these cognitive abilities could be a burden on some students especially those with low academic performance. Also many students thought that what they learned in research course could not at all be implemented in nursing practice:

"The professor told us many times that this course will prepare us with skills in research for future practice, but I think skills that I learned were theoretical but it will not help me to function effectively in practice".

Another student thought that statistics was not needed in this course because it is not related to nursing and if they will do research in future, they can ask for help from statistician:

"I don't like math or interested in statistics, so when we took the lectures about the data analysis, I started looking to this course as tough and challenging for me".

Theme 5: Anxiety and Motivation

Some students have difficulties in understanding the topics covered in the lectures, they felt anxious, especially in the exams and assignments submission. While other students did not feel stressed because they use many methods such as time management, peer learning, and independent study which were vital in reducing anxiety.

Few students thought that the motivation toward the course was a significant cause of their attitude, perception and by some means their performance, they said that the older students in higher levels demotivate them and gave them bad impression about the course so this affect their enthusiasm to the course.

One student reported:

"I thought, the lectures were difficult to understanding and there was an terrible lot of information, I had all my absents, and one morning when I woke up really I felt stressed because I am out of absents I and I have to go for the lecture".

Discussion

The present paper explores challenges faced by Saudi nursing students during their experience in research course. It also focused on student perception during their course of research. Generally, it was expected that this qualitative study would enlighten academic faculty members about some implications that could be endorsed at the present nursing college. The results suggested that the students who participated had different experiences in research course but 50% of them described this experience as difficult and this results supported by many other studies such as (Sussane & Kincade, 2001). In addition, although they were able to view themselves applying their newly acquired knowledge on the practice, they were unwilling to continue conducting research in the future.

But it is important to mention that some students had interest in the course and had many research ideas, but they felt it is difficult to start research project by their themselves. Nursing students are not different from other students in this matter, one study done in Saudi Arabia half of the surveyed Saudi Arabian medical students aware of the importance of undertaking research. Less than half of the surveyed students had a positive attitude towards participating in research activities and they revealed four main barriers to conducting research, including time constraints, lack of mentorship and inadequate training in literature searches and research methodology (Al-Hilal et al., 2016). The high dropout rate of students in nursing research course could be explained by the fact that the students were having many challenges during the study period, that it could be not managed appropriately by course coordinator. It may be true that their dropout was due to their performance, and scores in the course. As our target population was the nursing students who finished the course, we could in this study to reveal those challenges that they faced during this course, with the study findings, we will be able to improve the course in terms of course outcomes, content, exams, activities, and students support so as to motivate and facilitate the students learning as much as possible.

The results of this study emphasized that students were uncertain as to the nature of nursing research course and why it could be useful. However, the content of the research course may deserve to be reviewed, training the students to employ strategies to deal with difficult or new course. It is necessary to notify students of the links between various courses and of the continuity of the thread of research. A number of course already do this, such as those focusing on problem based learning (Frost, 1996). Lecturers, on the other hand, need to think about how this course can be taught. The students must be informed that in the next level in their program they will have a greater understanding of the usefulness of research as they will become involved in graduation research project course (capstone course) (Tordoff, 1998).

The delivery of teaching itself worth some modification. The lecturers should have abilities to discuss the topics with the students in different ways and levels, they should be also motivators, supporters, it is essential that teaching staff on research course are research active, which is sometimes not the case. Coming to terms with the new terminology and research strategies can take months or years, and a course consisting of a few weeks will not completely achieve its purpose. Concerning research, the students mentioned issues such as understanding, cognitive abilities, assignments and exams, which can be easily improved. It was clear that students focused on their memory in studying the course materials, few referring to books or journal articles. This lead to lack of understanding. We think that PowerPoint lectures as a study materials might not be useful after all, as they reduce students' independence, initiative, and motivation to search for information. This might also increase students' feeling towards research as boring and not useful which accordingly made them not to realize how research can be applied in practice. Resources are always subjected to financial constraints, and changes might not be easy to implement. In this case, priorities must be set (Hicks, 1997).

In the present study peers effect had two views, first one which was positive peer learning and how much the students feel comfortable in doing assignments in groups. And the other view which was negative, the demotivating effect of the previous enrolled students in the same course in the higher levels. Peer influence is an essential factor in motivating students. Its significance has been mentioned in many studies (Sit, et al., 2005; Song, et al., 2003). However, there is a study done by Sussane and Kincade (2001) which findings suggested that students' interest towards the course decreases if they cannot discuss with their peers. In any case, nursing research and evidence based practice course need to equip students with skills to implement research process without letting them experience difficulties or having unhealthy challenges that might affect their future motivation toward conducting research in practice.

Conclusion

The present study emphasized several existing challenges faced by students in theoretical research course and made some recommendations for change. In light of the importance given to evidence based practice in health care professions, students must be informed about the importance of this course and how it can affect their future career.

Overall these study findings are helpful in continuing to understand what student experiences, challenges and expectations are of a course. Many of these findings help to qualify things we already know about the student experience with learning and teaching, but it has also uncovered where developments have to be occurred to meet students' needs.

Study limitations

The number of students participated in the study was small. The suggestions made here can only be tentative. No attempt should be made to generalize from these findings. However, they need to be further investigated in a large-scale project. For example, students in this study were all from the same university, a broader approach involving several universities might highlight further differences in the experiences, interest, and implementation of the course. In addition, the study with all participants being female, the results may not be representative of all nursing students. The reason that all of the participants were females was that the nursing school within the university was for female only.

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