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From Open-Book Exams to Group Podcasts: A Paradigm Shift in Assessing Pre-Registration Nursing Associate Students' Knowledge of Long-Term Condition Care

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Abstract

The role of Nursing Associates in the English healthcare system has become increasingly significant amid a nursing shortage, necessitating a re-evaluation of traditional higher education assessment methods. This case study critiques high-stakes examinations and advocates for authentic assessment strategies that better reflect real-world scenarios. We explore group podcasting, which foster collaboration, critical thinking, and digital competencies while maintaining a human-centred focus. By integrating digital skills with interpersonal care, this case study highlights the importance of inclusive, effective educational frameworks that prepare pre-registration Nursing Associates for the complexities of modern healthcare delivery.

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Introduction

The role of Nursing Associates in the UK healthcare system has gained significant prominence in recent years, with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) registering over 758,000 healthcare professionals in 2022, including 7,000 NAs in England (NMC, 2022). Amidst a backdrop of nearly 50,000 registered nurse vacancies in the English health and social care sector (RCN, 2022a), Nursing Associates have emerged as vital contributors to addressing workforce shortages. These professionals typically complete a two-year Foundation Degree programme that combines academic learning with practical experience, equipping them with essential knowledge, skills, and attributes to support registered nurses in delivering safe and effective patient care.

As the landscape of nursing associate education evolves, there is a growing need to critically evaluate traditional pedagogical approaches, particularly in relation to assessment methods. High-stakes examinations and conventional written assignments have long been the cornerstone of educational assessment, yet their effectiveness in measuring the competencies required for contemporary nursing practice is increasingly being challenged. This case study explores the necessity of rethinking assessment strategies in nursing associate education, advocating for authentic assessments that closely reflect real-world clinical scenarios.

In addition to addressing the pedagogical challenges, this discussion encompasses the imperative for pre-registration Nursing Associate students to develop strong digital skills in an increasingly digitalised healthcare environment. While the integration of technology enhances patient care, it also raises concerns about potential over-reliance on digital tools, which may hinder essential interpersonal skills. By embracing innovative assessment methods such as group podcasting, this approach aims to cultivate collaboration, critical thinking, and effective communication skills among pre-registration nursing associate students, ultimately preparing them for the complexities of modern healthcare delivery.

Through a critical examination of pedagogical and ethical considerations, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding pre-registration Nursing Associate education, highlighting the importance of authenticity in assessment, the integration of digital skills, and the need for an inclusive learning environment that prioritises the diverse needs of all students.

Rethinking Assessment in Pre-Registration Nursing Associate Education: The Case for Authentic Assessment Over High-Stakes Exams

The effectiveness of high-stakes or unseen exams (including open book examinations) in higher education is a debated topic, with many educators challenging their value in areas such as real-world relevance, validity, memory retention, student motivation, academic misconduct, and fairness.

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Empirical evidence supporting the pedagogical benefits of these exams is limited, with much of the support based on opinion, anecdote, and practicality rather than solid research. In contrast, significant evidence points to their drawbacks, suggesting that high-stakes exams are not strongly backed by empirical findings (French et al., 2024).

A key aspect of pre-registration nursing associate education is the implementation of authentic assessment, which emphasises evaluating students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills in practical, real-world settings. Assessments including simulated clinical situations, practical exams such as Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE's), and reflective exercises are designed to replicate the actual challenges Nursing Associates will encounter in their roles. These methods not only assess their competence but also cultivate problem-solving abilities and critical thinking, which are vital for delivering effective patient care (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014).

By grounding assessments in real-life practice, educators aim to ensure that pre-registration Nursing Associate students are better prepared for the demands of the healthcare environment, ultimately improving the quality of care (Gulikers et al., 2004). Authentic assessment also helps bridge the theory practice gap, ensuring that students are not just learning but are able to demonstrate their competence in meaningful, relevant ways (Biggs & Tang, 2011). A structured education and assessment process arguably enables registered Nursing Associates to play a key role in the workforce without replacing registered nurses, but rather complementing their work to improve patient outcomes.

While open-book examinations may be viewed by some educators as more authentic than traditional unseen exam hall examinations, their effectiveness for pre-registration Nursing Associate students is debatable. Critics contend that such assessments fail to replicate the pressures of real-world clinical environments, where quick decisions are essential, and reference materials are unavailable (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 2018). This raises questions about whether open-book formats adequately prepare students for patient care, especially in managing long-term conditions, where critical thinking and rapid decision-making are vital (Bennett, 2019; Moon, 2004).

Navigating Digital Skills in Nursing Associate Education: Balancing Technology with Human-Centered Care

In an increasingly digitalised healthcare environment, we believe it is essential for pre-registration Nursing Associate students to cultivate strong digital skills to provide effective care for patients with long-term conditions. While proficiency in tools such as electronic health records is crucial for tracking patient progress and managing treatment plans, concerns arise regarding the potential for over-reliance on technology, which can lead to diminished interpersonal skills and a detachment from the patient experience (Health Education England, 2018). Although telehealth platforms facilitate remote consultations and improve access to care, they may not fully replicate the nuances of in-person interactions, potentially compromising the quality of the therapeutic relationship (Koonin et al., 2020). Furthermore, while mobile health applications can enhance patient education on medication adherence and lifestyle modifications, the variability in patient engagement and digital literacy may limit their effectiveness (Mhealth Evidence, 2021).

Our team has explored alternative methods, such as group podcasts, particularly given the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in education, which can lead to students relying on AI for assessments instead of engaging with the material (Dede et al., 2016).

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This discussion has encouraged us to seek assessments that better reflect real-world challenges, including the complexities of caring for patients with long-term conditions, and that develop the critical skills necessary for effective Nursing Associate practice (Miller, 2023).

Group podcast assessments provide numerous advantages in educational settings, particularly in enhancing collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills among students. This format encourages our students to express their ideas clearly and engagingly while fostering teamwork and cooperation. By working together to research topics, script discussions, and produce a final product, our students deepen their understanding of the subject matter. Podcasting also promotes active learning, which enhances retention and comprehension (Hew & Cheung, 2019).

In this context, incorporating podcasting into assessments can provide a valuable opportunity to develop the digital competencies of pre-registration Nursing Associate students while also fostering critical thinking and communication skills. By creating and sharing podcasts, students learn to convey complex information in an accessible manner, bridging the gap between digital tools and meaningful patient engagement (Hew & Cheung, 2019). Furthermore, group podcasts create a more interactive learning experience, mirroring the collaborative nature of healthcare practice and preparing students for real-world scenarios. Overall, this assessment method not only enhances students' academic skills but also equips them with essential competencies for their future careers in healthcare (Adams et al, 2021; Perrin, 2019).

However, it is important to critically assess whether such methods genuinely enhance learning or if they merely serve as a trendy pedagogical approach. Ultimately, while developing digital skills is essential, Nursing Associates must remain vigilant in maintaining a human-centered approach to care, ensuring that technology enhances rather than detracts from the quality of patient interactions and outcomes.

The paradigm shift - Transforming Nursing Associate Education: Embracing Creativity and Inclusivity in Assessment Methods

Our landscape of pre-registration Nursing Associate education is experiencing a critical paradigm shift as we strive to move beyond traditional pedagogical frameworks and adopt creative teaching approaches that prioritise inclusivity. This transformation began with rigorous team debates about the effectiveness of conventional examinations and written assignments, leading us to question whether these methods genuinely assess the competencies essential for Nursing Associates in today's diverse healthcare settings. In our pursuit of more equitable assessment strategies, we conducted extensive research into alternatives that not only foster creativity but also amplify the voices of all students, ensuring that no perspective is overlooked.

Among the methods we considered, group podcasting emerged as a particularly promising tool. While it enhances collaboration and communication skills, we had to critically evaluate whether it genuinely addresses the gaps left by traditional assessments or if it simply serves as a novel alternative without substantive pedagogical merit. To deepen our understanding, we partnered with expert colleagues from the Arts and Media School who possess expertise in podcasting and group assessments, bringing invaluable insights into the design and implementation of this approach.

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This collaboration enabled us to broaden our understanding and led us to critically question how authentic our assessments really are. We also had to critically consider our own beliefs and practices and embrace non-traditional teaching and assessment methods. We are currently in the process of rewriting our assessments, removing the unseen open book exam and replacing it with a group podcast. This transition required us to put together a business case for the school to purchase podcasting equipment and create a detailed project plan. Initially, we were somewhat naïve and conservative regarding our timeframe, hoping to roll out the new assessment within six months. However, due to various pedagogical, ethical, and financial considerations, it will ultimately take nearly two years from the initial conception of the idea to the implementation of the new assessment.

Pedagogical Considerations:

1. Authenticity in Assessment: Emphasising authentic assessments, such as practical exams and simulated clinical scenarios, ensures that students can apply their knowledge in real-world settings. This approach helps bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, enhancing their preparedness for actual patient care (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Gulikers et al., 2004).

2. Critique of High-Stakes Examinations: The limited empirical support for high-stakes or unseen exams raises questions about their effectiveness in measuring essential competencies for pre-registration Nursing Associate students. Educators are encouraged to explore alternative assessment methods that foster critical thinking and quick decision-making, which are vital in clinical practice (French et al., 2024; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 2018).

3. Integration of Digital Skills: In a digitalised healthcare environment, students must develop robust digital skills to provide effective care. Training in digital tools is crucial, but it must be balanced with the cultivation of interpersonal skills to avoid detachment from the patient experience (Health Education England, 2018; Koonin et al., 2020).

4. Collaborative Learning through Podcasting: Utilising group podcasts as an assessment method promotes collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills. This format encourages students to engage with the material actively, facilitating deeper understanding while preparing them for the collaborative nature of healthcare practice (Hew & Cheung, 2019; Adams et al., 2021).

5. Balancing Technology and Human-Centered Care: While integrating technology and digital assessments is essential, maintaining a human-centered approach in nursing practice is crucial. Educators must critically evaluate whether technological tools genuinely enhance learning and patient engagement, ensuring that technology complements rather than detracts from the quality of care (Mhealth Evidence, 2021; Perrin, 2019).

Ethical Considerations:

1. Equity in Assessment: Ensuring that all students have equal access to learning opportunities and assessment methods is critical. Educators must consider the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of pre-registration Nursing Associate students to provide equitable assessments that do not disadvantage any student group (RCN, 2022b).

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2. Accommodating Neurodiverse Learners: It is essential to create assessment environments that are inclusive of neurodiverse learners. This may involve offering alternative assessment formats or accommodations, such as extended time or the option to demonstrate knowledge through non-traditional methods, to support diverse learning needs and ensure all students can showcase their competencies effectively (McKenzie et al., 2020).

3. Informed Consent and Data Privacy: In a digitalised healthcare setting, pre-registration nursing associate students must be educated on the ethical implications of using digital tools, including issues of informed consent and data privacy. Students should be trained to understand the importance of safeguarding patient information when using electronic health records and other digital platforms (Health Education England, 2018).

4. Balancing Technology Use: The integration of technology in education raises ethical concerns about over-reliance on digital tools, which may detract from interpersonal skills essential for patient care. Educators must critically evaluate the ethical implications of technology use in assessments, ensuring that it enhances, rather than diminishes, the quality of care and the human connection with patients (Koonin et al., 2020).

5. Supporting Vulnerable Populations: Nursing Associates often care for vulnerable populations with complex needs, including those with long-term conditions. Ethical considerations must include training pre-registration nursing associate students to understand the unique challenges faced by these populations and to advocate for their patients' rights and well-being, promoting social justice and equity in healthcare (Mhealth Evidence, 2021).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the evolving landscape of pre-registration Nursing Associate education necessitates a critical re-evaluation of traditional assessment methods to better prepare future professionals for the complexities of modern healthcare. With a growing shortage of registered nurses, the role of Nursing Associates has become increasingly vital, making it essential that their education reflects real-world demands. Our focus on authentic assessment strategies, such as group podcasts, aims to foster creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking among students while ensuring inclusivity in learning environments.

As we navigate the integration of digital skills into pre-registration Nursing Associate education, it is paramount that we maintain a balance between technological proficiency and the essential interpersonal skills that underpin effective patient care. By fostering an environment that prioritises human-centred approaches, we can enhance the learning experience while equipping students with the competencies required for the challenges they will face in their careers.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary collaboration with colleagues from the Arts and Media School has been instrumental in broadening our understanding of innovative assessment methods and refining our pedagogical practices. The shift towards non-traditional assessment strategies, including the removal of high-stakes exams in favour of authentic, practical evaluations, reflects our commitment to enhancing the educational experience and ensuring that pre-registration Nursing Associates are well-prepared to deliver high-quality care in an increasingly digitalised healthcare environment.

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Ultimately, our goal is to create a more equitable, inclusive, and effective educational framework that not only addresses current workforce needs but also empowers qualified and registered Nursing Associates to contribute positively to patient care and outcomes. By embracing creativity and innovation in assessment, we can cultivate a generation of nursing professionals who are not only skilled in their practice but also adept at navigating the challenges of a rapidly changing healthcare landscape.

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Disclosure statement

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