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Recognising the potential: maximising meaningful learning in practice settings

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Recognising the potential: Maximising meaningful learning in practice settings

Symposium

Lead correspondent Jan Draper

The Open University

Introduction (5 mins)

In this symposium we critique conventional approaches to the support of learning in practice settings. In the context of the increasing complexity of health services and the consolidation of nursing as a graduate profession in the UK and internationally, we argue that these traditional approaches are not fit for purpose. Drawing in part on our experience at The Open University (OU) as a provider of part-time, distance learning pre-registration nurse education, the symposium proposes a more contemporary model of supporting learning in practice and identifies the implications for education, practice, commissioning and policy.

Of relevance to practitioners, students, educationalists and commissioners, the objectives of the symposium are:

- to problematise traditional constructions of how learning takes place in practice settings
- to critically examine the key features of a high quality learning environment from the perspectives of students, mentors, employers and educationalists
- to identify the implications for service, education, commissioning and policy.

Paper 1 Breaking circuits (Julie Messenger and Verina Waights) (20 mins)

This first paper sets the historical and political context underpinning current models of practice learning in pre-registration nursing. In the UK, nursing students traditionally have rotated through a range of placement circuits, undertaking a set number of weeks in designated settings in order to complete a total of 2300 hours of practice learning set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council. An assumption inherent in this model is that 4 weeks 'doing' time on an acute surgical ward, for example, will equip students with the necessary skills to care for patients. The model therefore privileges time 'done' rather than emphasising the key features of a quality learning environment.

We argue therefore that this model of placement circuits does not necessarily assure a quality learning experience. Drawing on vignettes and scenarios from practice, we propose a more contemporary approach to learning in practice. The 'breaking circuits' metaphor implies a move away from 'doing time', where students are seen as short-term visitors in practice settings, to a different model that recognises the vast diversity of and potential for learning in practice, whatever and wherever that practice happens to be.

Paper 2 Making connections (Lin McDonagh, Linda Kenward and Rosemary Bottoms) (25 mins)

In response to the call for a more contemporary approach to the support of learning in practice outlined in Paper 1, this second paper identifies the key constituents of meaningful learning in practice.

Students' learning of theory (most often done in the class room) and their learning of practice (most often done in practice) have become, over time, conceptually and geographically divorced. This 'fracturing' of the academic and practice components of education (Melia, 1987) has underscored a belief in two types of learning and contributed to the so called 'theory-practice' gap. It has also resulted in students feeling 'caught between the socialising forces of academia and the day-to-day reality of nursing' (Ross and Clifford, 2002, p.546). However, whilst some learning remains clearly

more suitable for classroom settings, the real 'nitty gritty' learning of the what, where, how and who of nursing is done in real-life practice. A contemporary model of quality practice learning – underpinned by strong partnerships between students, employers, practitioners and educationalists – has the potential therefore to make a significant contribution to the modernisation of the preparation of nurses in the 21st century.

With reference to our experience of delivering pre-registration nursing across the UK, we draw on the experiences of students, mentors and the unique role of the Programme Tutor, to illustrate the potential impact of such a model. This tripartite model promotes continuity of support ensuring that both student and mentor are equally supported. It also explicitly values the diversity and range of learning opportunities in the workplace that add richness to the student experience. Mentors, students and programme tutors will be involved in sharing their experiences of this model of learning support.

Paper 3 What is the difference that makes a difference? (Sheila Counihan, Jan Draper and Lesley Holland) (20 mins)

In the third paper we further elaborate on our proposals for a modernised practice learning model and seek to identify the implications for education, service and policy. We draw on a range of projects undertaken at the OU in relation to students' experience of learning in practice, such as the development of emotional resilience (Brigham and Smith, 2008), experiences of the transition from student to staff nurse (Draper, Sparrow and Gallagher, 2009), the experience of the Programme Tutor role (McDonagh, Draper and Gallagher, 2009), students' use of and interaction with portfolios (Holland and Buckeldee, 2008), and the development of a framework to maximise the impact of learning on practice (Clark, Draper and Sparrow, 2008). In doing so, we conclude that significant investment is required in the environments within which practice learning takes place.

These environments are located in organisations and these organisations need to become 'learning organisations' in order to cultivate the success

of learning in practice. Through interaction with other delegates, we debate the key features of a learning organisation and how these facilitate effective learning in practice. Changing the culture of practice learning will require continued investment. Placing an emphasis on practitioners also being creative teachers in and of practice will have significant implications for pre-registration nurse education, mentor preparation, practitioners, educationalists, commissioners and policy makers. The paper will conclude by identifying these implications and ways in which they may be taken forward.

Conclusion and debate (Jan Draper) (20 mins)

Using an interactive approach, the symposium will conclude with an open discussion amongst delegates concerning the issues raised. The challenges posed by this or indeed other models of practice learning support will be debated and the potential for transferability to other work-based health programmes discussed.

(965 words)

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Lead correspondent:

Jan Draper
Professor and Head of Nursing
Faculty of Health and Social Care
Horlock Building
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
j.draper@open.ac.uk
01908 858871