Editorial: Educating nurses for clinical practice

There is an increasing amount of literature focusing on the experience, quality and readiness for practice of newly graduated nurses (ie: Kelly & Ahern 2009, Wangensteen et al. 2008, Björkström et al. 2008). It is clear from the literature that undergraduate education programs (and their product) have an enormous influence both on the quality of the services that can be provided to patients and families and the nature of the nursing workplace itself (Watson 2006). Thus, the quality and nature of the undergraduate classroom and clinical learning experiences to which nurses are exposed are critical matters for the practice of clinical nursing.

It is a feature of the current situation in many countries that the bulk of those largely responsible for the education of nurses are situated outside the health sector; however, in a practice discipline such as nursing, crucial teaching and learning activities occur within the clinical setting. Nevertheless, despite long established tensions between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ nursing (Walker 1997) – also popularly termed the theory/practice gap, it is clear that these two key areas are interdependent. The clinical sector depends on educationalists to train a workforce that has the competence, skill and proficiency to provide safe and effective nursing care, while educationalists depend on clinicians to contribute meaningfully to applied student learning in various ways (Jackson & Mannix 2001, Brammer 2008, Myall et al. 2008), including contributing to curricula to ensure relevance and clinical currency, and providing support for graduates as they make the transition into the workforce as beginning registered nurses (Kelly & Ahern 2009).

Notwithstanding the various models that have been created to enhance relationships and build closer links between the clinical settings in which nurses work and the educational facilities within which they study – and despite their interdependence – there is a reduced rapport and connectedness between the sectors. There remains a need to explore, actively, new and innovative ways to foster and promote effective connections that can promote teaching and learning opportunities (Björkström et al. 2008) and contribute to the creation of cultures of learning within health care facilities (McCormack & Slater 2006).

Journal of Clinical Nursing (JCN) welcomes papers that explore aspects of nurse education that relate to practice, from the undergraduate through to postgraduate levels. Scanning some of the papers published in JCN reveals the breadth and nature of issues capturing the interest of contributors to the journal. Some of these studies focus on the role and contribution of clinical nurses in the clinical education of undergraduate students with continued recognition of the real importance of clinical nurses to the development of clinical proficiency in student nurses (see for example: Jackson & Mannix 2001, Brammer 2008, Myall et al. 2008). Everyday behaviours such as friendliness, being welcoming, showing interest, offering constructive feedback, taking the time to question understandings and providing clarification are identified as enabling, supporting and greatly enhancing the clinical learning experience for students in clinical settings (Jackson & Mannix 2001, Brammer 2008, Myall et al. 2008). These behaviours also doubtless contribute to creating the cultures of learning within clinical environments as proposed by McCormack and Slater (2006).

Other papers focus on classroom teaching content and how this content is able (or not) to be adapted from the on-campus classroom or laboratory setting and applied within the clinical environment (see for example: Reid-Searl et al. 2008, Barrett & Randle 2008). In the clinical environment, students are able to apply and enact the knowledge introduced in the classroom or laboratory. Through working alongside experienced registered nurses, students can observe how theoretical and practice based knowledge can be assimilated and applied at the bedside with real patients, in sometimes highly pressured situations. Through observing the clinical practice actions of experienced nurses, nursing students can see the embodiment of nursing as informed, well-educated and reflective praxis, and begin to get a sense of the skill and the artistry inherent in expert nursing practice (Jackson & Mannix 2001).

A further issue of interest, when considering this genre of papers, is the idea of becoming a nurse. As do other professional groups, nursing has its own cultures of practice and the sum total of on-campus and clinical experiences should ideally prepare graduates to take their place in the community of professional nurses. Professional socialisation of nursing students is acknowledged as a key issue (Barrett & Randle 2008) and poor professional socialisation has been implicated in some of the discussion around the retention problems facing nursing. This notion of professional socialisation refers to the ‘process where students come to adopt the norms, values and roles that characterise their group’ (Barrett & Randle 2008:1851) and the opportunity to socialise into the profession is one of the major desired and intended outcomes that should arise.
from placing nursing students into clinical areas.

Professional socialisation carries implicit meanings including the ability to communicate effectively with patients and families as well as a range of other health professionals. Nursing is a narrative practice and there is the need to be able to engage authentically with patients and family members (Carter 2009). There is also the need to engage in effective problem-solving in various contexts, from clinical situations through to the interpersonal challenges that can arise in the workplace. It is important that nursing students get opportunities to negotiate some of the day-to-day communication challenges that face nurses.

Papers published in JCN reveal a continuing interest and concern on the part of readers and contributors with the content and nature of undergraduate education and a real commitment to positioning the education of nurses as a matter of integral concern to clinical nursing. The fact that these papers come from a diverse international nursing community highlights the global nature of the issues and challenges facing nursing, nurse education and the practice of nursing. We are challenged to continue to explore educational issues related to clinical nursing, interrogate curricula and develop and report innovative teaching and learning methodologies that can best prepare and support current and future generations of nurses.

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References


