

Curriculum and Pedagogic bases for integrating practice experiences within higher education

Case study #5: Using reflective learning groups in undergraduate nursing program (Monash University)

Program focus

The undergraduate nursing program at Monash provides clinical placements for its students. Yet, interacting with a range of health discipline staff can be challenging. In contemporary healthcare settings this accentuated through constantly changing patient/client care needs that can add to students' sense of feeling under-prepared for the workplace. To enable final year undergraduate nursing students' effective preparation for their role as a health care professional their engagement in critical reflection activities was trialled.

How practice or workplace experiences are provided

Nursing students engage in clinical placements from the second semester of the first year of a three year nursing course. These placements are supported by clinical teaching subjects within the course structure, and through support in the clinical setting from preceptor nurses and also clinical educators.

How those experiences are integrated into the course curriculum

To provide an environment for students to articulate and share their concerns and reflect upon the clinical experiences, the establishment of a reflective learning group was trialled, before during and after the students' clinical placements for third year students. This initiative was enacted to secure a productive and smooth transition through to practice, and to provide a forum for students to share their experiences and extend their learning collaboratively.

Particular curriculum practices

The students' clinical placements are supported with clinical teaching courses prior to these placements and also with support from experienced nurses (preceptors) in the wards, and from the visits by clinical educators during their placements. Prior to their participation in clinical placements, the students are provided with the procedural skills and understandings about nursing practice that they will need for these placements.

Particular pedagogic practices

The reflective learning group was a voluntary arrangement for students and was facilitated by an academic staff member. The group met monthly and were largely directed by the students themselves, although guided by an academic. In the learning group, the students were encouraged to share stories and experiences, keep journals and engage openly and collaboratively with other nursing students.

Any evidence

The reflective learning group reported as being effective for assisting student nurses to reflect upon their experiences on clinical placements. In particular, it provided a forum for them to share experiences with other student nurses and learn from them. The students reported that it provided an opportunity for them to make links to what is taught (learnt) in the university setting and practice setting. For instance, it reinforced the process of learning the norms of practice for a particular hospital ward. Using examples from practice provided a basis to integrate learning from practice into theory. The learning group provided a basis for reflecting on experience by describing and discussing those experiences, yet within an environment which was distant from the actual clinical setting. In addition, through guidance of the facilitator, it was possible to engage in critical perspectives on work and learning processes.

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