



Review

A systematic review of online learning programs for nurse preceptors

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nurse preceptors guide students to integrate theory into practice, teach clinical skills, assess clinical competency, and enhance problem solving skills. Managing the dual roles of a registered nurse and preceptor poses tremendous challenges to many preceptors. Online learning is recognized as an effective learning approach for enhancing nursing knowledge and skills.

Objective: The systematic review aims to review and synthesise the online learning programs for preceptors.

Design: A systematic review was designed based on the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Programs.

Data Sources: Articles published between January 2000 and June 2016 were sought from six electronic databases: CINAHL, Medline OVID, PubMed, Science Direct, Scopus, and Web of Science.

Methods: All papers were reviewed and quality assessment was performed. Nine studies were finally selected. Data were extracted, organized and analysed using a narrative synthesis.

Results: The review identified five overarching themes: development of the online learning programs for nurse preceptors, major contents of the programs, uniqueness of each program, modes of delivery, and outcomes of the programs.

Conclusion: The systematic review provides insightful information on educational programs for preceptors. At this information age, online learning offers accessibility, convenience, flexibility, which could of great advantage for the working adults. In addition, the online platform provides an alternative for preceptors who face challenges of workload, time, and support system. Therefore, it is paramount that continuing education courses need to be integrated with technology, increase the flexibility and responsiveness of the nursing workforce, and offer alternative means to take up courses.

1. Introduction

Clinical nursing education provides opportunities for students to learn in multiple patient care settings, receive appropriate guidance, and foster a development of clinical competence and professionalism (AACN, 2008). Clinical competence is described by the theoretical and clinical knowledge used in the practice of nursing, incorporating psychomotor skills and problem-solving abilities with the goal of safely providing care for patients (Hickey, 2010). Clinical competence develops over time as nurses progress through various levels of proficiency (Benner, 1982). Nurse preceptors guide students to integrate theory into practice, teach clinical skills, assess clinical competency, and enhance problem solving skills (Cant et al., 2013). Preceptors need to possess a strong familiarity with the principles of teaching and learning to effectively help students reach their learning goals (O'Connor, 2006). The meta-review by Tang et al. (2005) highlighted four categories of effective clinical teaching behaviors: professional

competence, interpersonal relationship skills, personality characteristics, and teaching abilities. Clinical nurse leaders and academics often articulated concerns about preceptors' competence in clinical teaching and assessment (Wu et al., 2017). A lack of teaching knowledge and experience also leads to role ambiguity, unfamiliarity with clinical assessment systems and processes, and unawareness of appropriate avenues to seek guidance from Benner et al. (2009). An online program utilises digital platforms for the courses of study. The flexible and resource-rich nature of online learning may encourage nurses to use it as a platform for continuing education.

2. Background

2.1. Challenges Faced by the Preceptors

In our prior study, the students perceived that preceptors were overwhelmed by their teaching and patient care workloads and, as a

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result, had little time to guide and assess students (Wu et al., 2016b). Managing the dual roles of a registered nurse and a preceptor poses a tremendous challenge to many preceptors (Jonsén et al., 2013). In struggling to fulfil all their obligations, nurses might give a lower priority to the role of a preceptor because higher patient acuity often forces nurses to focus on patient safety and care (Jones, 2005). Clinical nurse leaders and academics clearly acknowledged the key role of preceptors in clinical assessments (Wu et al., 2016a). The study on nursing education in 20 Western-European countries clearly indicated that preceptors had little time dedicated to clinical supervision, limited academic backgrounds, and insufficient cooperation between higher education and clinical placement (Spitzer and Perrenoud, 2006).

2.2. Online Learning Program for the Professional Development of Nurses

Most authors describe online learning as an access to learning experiences with technology, which provides the accessibility, connectivity, flexibility, and ability to promote interactions among learners. E-learning is deliberated as accessible using technological tools that are web-based, web-distributed, or web-capable. Currently, there is no clear definition or only vague references to terms such as online learning, web-based learning, web-based training, or e-learning believing that the terms can be used synonymously (Moore et al., 2011). To maintain consistency, online learning is used as a common term in this review, as online learning encompasses e-learning and web-based learning.

An online program utilises digital platforms for learning. Online learning is recognized as an effective learning approach for enhancing nursing knowledge and skills (Lu et al., 2009). Online learning has been widely utilised for professional development and training nursing skills in clinical settings (Chen et al., 2008). Cook (2012) suggested that online education should empower nurses to balance their own learning and workloads at the same time. Other reasons for nurses to adopt online continuing education are the flexibility of both time and space, self-regulated learning, cost-effectiveness, and less impact on their families and personal lives (Yu et al., 2007).

3. Methods

3.1. Aim

The questions for this review were developed using the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, and Specific exclusion process (Table 1): ‘What are the current online learning programs for preceptors?’, ‘How effective are online learning programs?’, and ‘What are

the experiences of the participants in such online learning programs?’. The systematic review aims to review and synthesise the online learning programs for preceptors.

3.2. Design

A systematic review was designed based on relevant criteria from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist and the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Programs (Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI), 2014). These frameworks guide the systematic review to collate all evidence that fits pre-specified eligibility criteria in order to address specific research questions. This allows the researcher to minimise bias by using explicit and systematic methods.

3.3. Search Strategy

A broad search strategy was applied. A total of six electronic databases were searched: CINAHL, Medline OVID, PubMed, Science Direct, Scopus, and Web of Science. A systematic search strategy was formed, including key search terms and related text words. ‘online learning program’, ‘e-learning’, ‘online learning’, ‘online learning’, ‘train*’, ‘educat*’, ‘develop*’, ‘prepar*’, ‘support*’, ‘nurse preceptor’, ‘nurse mentor’, ‘nurse educator’, and ‘nurse leader’ were used in the search process. The search was conducted using combinations of exact keywords on titles and abstracts as these addressed by breaking down the review questions.

3.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were (1) articles published from January 2000 to June 2016, (2) peer-reviewed research, (3) experimental, cohort, survey, or qualitative studies, (4) English language publications, and (5) the main research focus was online learning program on clinical teaching and assessment for nurse preceptors. The exclusion criteria were (1) editorials, opinion pieces, non-research papers, and conference abstracts, (2) review papers, (3) non-English papers, and (4) research focusing on an online learning program for students in universities.

3.5. Search Outcomes

The reference management software Endnote X6 (Thomson Reuters, New York) was used to sort the records. After the removal of duplicates, the remaining 1603 records were assessed for relevance by the researcher based on the titles and abstracts. Subsequently, 56 full-text

Table 1
PICOS (comprehensive review).

Population	Studies focus on clinical nurse leaders and nurse preceptors who teach and assess nursing students in clinical practice. Preceptors, nurse instructors, nurse educators, nurse clinicians, and nurse managers who guide pre-registration nursing students for clinical practice are also included in the study.
Intervention & phenomena of interest	Study designs: Both quantitative and qualitative designs are considered. For example, studies with interventions such as clinical teaching and assessment programs and virtual learning programs, as well as studies without interventions of learning programs; qualitative studies exploring the experiences of virtual learning program for clinical teaching and assessment. In addition, systematic reviews, integrated reviews, and literature reviews of virtual learning programs for clinical teaching and assessment are included.
Comparator	Studies evaluate the effectiveness of virtual learning programs on clinical teaching and assessment for clinical nurse leaders and nurse preceptors.
Outcome & context	<p>Primary outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Virtual learning programs on clinical teaching and assessment <p>Secondary outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clinical pedagogy and assessment ● Clinical nurse leaders' and nurse preceptors' competency in clinical teaching and assessment ● Professional development for clinical nurse leaders and nurse preceptors
Specific exclusion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Non-research articles ○ Non-English language articles ○ Research focusing on virtual learning programs for students in universities

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