The development and evaluation of online stories to enhance clinical learning experiences across health professions in rural Australia

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Summary   Clinical placement learning experiences are integral to all health and medical curricula as a means of integrating theory into practice and preparing graduates to deliver safe, high-quality care to health consumers. A growing challenge for education providers is to access sufficient clinical placements with experienced supervisors who are skilled at maximising learning opportunities for students. This paper reports on the development and evaluation of an innovative online learning program aimed at enhancing student and clinical supervisors' preparedness for effective workplace-based learning. The evidence-based learning program used 'story-telling' as the learning framework. The stories, which were supported by a range of resources, aimed to engage the learners in understanding student and supervisor responsibilities, as well as the expectations and competencies needed to support effective learning in the clinical environment. Evaluation of this program by the learners and stakeholders clearly indicated that they felt authentically 'connected' with the characters in the stories and developed insights that suggested effective learning had occurred.
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Introduction

In Australia, as in many other countries, the demand for clinical placements for students in health and medical disciplines is growing, while the supply is limited by a range of factors such as staffing shortages, higher patient acuity and health sector budgetary constraints (Courtney-Pratt, Fitzgerald, Ford, Marsden, & Marlow, 2011; Murray & Williamson, 2009; Sears, Goldsworthy, & Goodman, 2010). This means that students and their clinical supervisors need to work together to ensure that students get quality learning experiences on every placement (Lapkin, Levett-Jones, & Gilligan, 2013; Sanderson & Lea, 2012; Walker et al., 2013). The project discussed in this paper was designed to support the professional development of both students and their clinical supervisors by offering an interprofessional, innovative e-learning program that, via a storytelling model, would contribute to effective work-integrated learning experiences.

Health Workforce Australia (HWA) is an Australian national agency tasked with coordinating health workforce reform to meet the future needs of the community. One of their focuses is on enhancing clinical learning opportunities for students by developing evidence-based frameworks to guide education providers and their clinical partners to maximise learning for and during clinical placements. The learning program discussed in this paper was developed using funds provided by HWA and drew on the National Clinical Supervision Support Framework document, which states; '*the quality of clinical supervision is the key influence on the quality of the clinical placement, and ultimately, on the calibre of the health practitioner*' (HWA, 2011, p. 1). This principle is also clearly evident in other reform agendas such as the British Nursing and Midwifery Council's (NMC); 'Standards to support learning and assessment in practice' (NMC, 2008) and 'Safer Care: Improving Patient Safety' (NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, 2013). All of these documents articulate that work-integrated learning, or clinical placements, are integral to health professional education and, when done well, allow students to authenticate, integrate and apply their knowledge and skills to the delivery of competent and compassionate care to health consumers. Therefore, a professional development program that supports clinical supervisors to facilitate quality learning opportunities for students, will contribute to the overall goal of producing quality health graduates. This paper discusses the conceptualization, design and evaluation of an interprofessional online learning program based on a storytelling framework for students and those who supervise their placement experiences.

Design

There were a number of considerations regarding the design of the program. First, the development of the learning program was based on a desire to support students and health professionals for workplace-based learning, across a large rural area of northern New South Wales, Australia. The large geographical area and 24 h shift rotations in which students were placed meant that it was impractical to conduct face-to-face educational sessions; our focus was therefore on development of an engaging online learning program (Phillips, Forbes, & Duke, 2013). To reduce download times in rural areas (Paliadelis, Parmenter, Parker, Giles, & Higgins, 2012) audio files, rather than video files were embedded into the online program.

Second, we were mindful of the literature from Australia and overseas which clearly identifies the need for greater integration of interprofessional education into the curricula of entry-level health professions to enhance mutual respect, effective team-work and person-centred care in practice settings (Learning & Teaching for Interprofessional Practice Australia [L-TIPP], 2009). The resulting learning program was developed for students and clinical supervisors in nursing, medicine, social work and pharmacy — all of the health disciplines taught within the university.

Third, our aim was to encourage engaged learning to develop knowledge and skills to undertake and to supervise clinical learning experiences. The educational literature suggests that storytelling, as a learning framework, encourages deep rather than surface learning, as it engages the learner on an emotional level and creates opportunities for reflection and assimilation of the story content into the learners' schema (Lordy, 2007; Mimirinis & Bhattacharya, 2007; Moon & Fowler, 2008; Rees, Munrouxe, & McDonald, 2013). One of the benefits of using stories to share knowledge is the level of emotional engagement that can be created when learners feel a sense of empathy or 'connectedness' with the characters in a story. The plots and scripts for these stories were developed by an experienced script writer. Lordy (2007) indicates that storytelling is the ideal means of instilling professional values and increasing understandings of culture and context, developing critical thinking, and building translatable skills (Haigh & Hardy, 2011; Stupans, 2013). The program was structured using stories as the means of conveying the key content, followed by structured reflection to promote deep learning (Christiansen, 2011; Cox, 2001; Young, 2007).

Fourth, the program needed to be relatively simple to use and intuitive, as the learners were expected to be drawn from a wide range of ages, discipline backgrounds and levels of confidence with online modes of learning. The strategy used to overcome these challenges were to work with a skilled educational developer to ensure that learners who lacked familiarity with online learning technology would not feel overwhelmed by the interface, as this would likely detract from achieving the stated learning outcomes. One strategy used to reduce online complexity and 'clutter' was the design of the home page, presented as a series of attractive ''postcards from practice''. Each one of the postcards linked to each one of the story audio files (backed up by a written script) and to the resources and the reflective and evaluative activities. The home page for the program is shown in Fig. 1.

The stories used to trigger learning were gathered from a range of key stakeholders and then adapted and scripted as audio dramas by interprofessional groups of faculty members and clinicians to ensure they were archetypal and did not focus only on one profession. The stories were used as 'vehicles' to convey the core content, prompt emotional engagement with the characters in each story and encourage reflection (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009). The 'characters' presented the situation from each of their