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Cycles of reflection and challenge: Using sequential blended learning strategies to enhance student understanding of, and transition to, the Nurse Practitioner role in Australia

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Received 20 November 2014; received in revised form 12 February 2015; accepted 1 April 2015

KEYWORDS

Education;
Post-graduate
education;
Nurse Practitioner;
Nursing;
Blended learning

Summary

Aim: This paper describes and discusses the development and implementation of sequential blended learning strategies in one Australian post-graduate nursing program designed to support student transition to the Nurse Practitioner (NP) role.

Background: Despite the availability of NP practice standards and role descriptions, the diversity and complexity of NP practice can make it difficult for students commencing post-graduate NP programs to comprehend what ways they need to develop to meet professional expectations.

Scholarly critique: This paper examines this contemporary post-graduate education issue. Blended learning strategies provided an opportunity to address the requirements, diversity and complexity of NP practice early in the NP program. Students were confronted with the gap between their current level of competence and NP competence, and supported to plan and travel the transitional and developmental pathway to achieve competence.

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Conclusion: Working with students from early on in their degree enables them to progressively and more clearly envision the gap between their current level of competence and that required of the Australian NP role. Adopting a sequential blended learning approach is one way to engage students in preparing for their future role. Consideration of design elements integral to blended learning approaches is important, including a need for authenticity and support. Preparing NPs who fully comprehend the nature and scope of their practice is both vital for safety and of strategic importance to the nursing profession. Examples of how to facilitate student understanding of the NP role are needed to inform educational practice.

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1. Introduction

Twenty years have passed since Nurse Practitioner (NP) models of practice were first piloted in Australia. Since 2000, when the first two NPs were authorised for practice, there has been a steady NP workforce growth, with recent reports indicating that the number of endorsed NPs in Australia is now over 1000 (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2014). Along with increasing numbers of NPs, Australian regulatory bodies have developed and revised definitions of advanced practice nursing, NP standards for practice, scope of practice and a wide range of supporting materials (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2006; Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2013). The diversity and complexity of NP practice across a wide range of settings can make it difficult for students commencing post-graduate NP education to comprehend what it is they are aiming to be, and in what ways they need to develop to meet professional and role expectations. This paper describes the development of sequential blended learning strategies over the first year of a post-graduate NP education program at one Australian school of nursing and midwifery. The discussion examines the ways in which the adopted blended learning strategies have successfully addressed this issue.

2. Background

Post-graduate educational programs to prepare advanced practice registered nurses to apply for endorsement under the protected Australian title of 'Nurse Practitioner' have evolved over the past fifteen years. Stringent national accreditation standards and criteria which regulate tertiary education providers offering Masters level courses leading to NP endorsement have been in place for several years (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2009). These standards outline minimum admission criteria for student entry, including 'a minimum of five years full-time equivalent experience (FTE) as a Registered Nurse, three years in a specialty area and one year (FTE) at an advanced practice level in the relevant specialty area of practice'. Evidence of postgraduate qualification in the specialty area and active involvement in the profession are also required (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2009, p. 12, 14–15). These developments have resulted not only from increased regulatory authority clarity around the NP role, but also from steady growth in health service understanding of the role, largely from integration of NPs within the Australian health care system. These factors have resulted in NP programs that are highly structured and challenging. Programs also

require close collaboration and strong integration between academic and clinical settings. To achieve success in the face of such a demanding program, students require significant resilience, endurance and tenacity. They also need to fully appreciate the nature of the role to which they aspire (Lowe, Plummer, O'Brien, & Boyd, 2012).

NP programs offered in Australia use diverse modes of delivery ranging from intensive on-campus delivery with the geographical limitations that are inherent in this model, to others solely employing online delivery. Since its inception in 2001, the NP program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, has been offered externally utilising an online learning management system (Blackboard™) with a face-to-face workshop undertaken mid-program. This mode of delivery has ensured the NP program is accessible for clinicians working in rural and remote areas, key settings where NP roles are needed (Iglehart, 2013). It has also provided the flexibility needed for students working full-time in clinical settings (Nursing and Midwifery Office, 2012). The online approach reflects the global, ever-evolving higher educational environment which, pressured by fiscal constraints and student demand for greater flexibility and accessibility, has responded by encouraging academic staff to adopt online approaches to post-graduate education. These pressures coincide with an increasing capacity within online learning environments for different styles of engagement between academics and students. As information technology's capacity to support online learning has grown, so too have online functions which enable synchronous and asynchronous communications, promising enhanced student support despite geographical distance or isolation (Allan, O'Driscoll, Simpson, & Shawe, 2013; Keller, 2008; Middleton, 2010; Njenga & Fourie, 2010; Williams, 2011).

In preparation for the University of Newcastle NP program re-accreditation in 2011, a careful review of the challenges experienced by previous students and academics was undertaken. Taking time to consider these challenges offered a strategic opportunity to re-think program design and delivery. In particular, the ways students were learning about and preparing to meet future role expectations and competencies were examined. To inform the review, past student feedback, student performance in final clinical vivas and the views of academic staff teaching the degree were considered. This consultation identified multiple factors that appeared to contribute to the struggle students described in trying to comprehend the developmental journey needed to reach NP endorsement. Key amongst the identified contributing factors were (a) changes to the student cohort, with increasingly less experienced clinicians seeking entry

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