



Developing supervision skills through peer learning partnership

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ABSTRACT

Oslo University College, Faculty of Nursing places undergraduate students in peer learning partnerships: 3rd year students as tutors, and 1st year students as tutees during practical skill learning. A study was designed to investigate this peer learning project. One of the research questions in particular on the role of the tutors: How do 3rd year nursing students carry out their role as supervisors for 1st year students in the skills laboratory? The study had an exploratory design. Qualitative data was gathered by three members of a research team, using video recordings of the supervised sessions and focus group interviews with both 1st and 3rd year students. Data collection was repeated in 2006–2007–2008 in different groups of students. Four identified themes illustrate how the 3rd year students supervise during the performance of the procedures in the skills laboratory:

- * Observe and guide
- * Supportive attitude
- * Identify with the patient
- * Focus on theoretical knowledge

The results of this study indicate that apart from enhancing practical skill learning in 1st year students, the assignment in the skill laboratory also provided an arena for developing competence in supervision in third year students.

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Introduction

The Quality Reform in Higher Education in Norway (2002) encourages learning strategies that enhance the guidance role of the teacher, as well as strengthening the sense of obligation and collaboration between students. In order to achieve these expectations and create a curriculum that develops students' learning potential, the Faculty of Nursing, Oslo University College has adopted peer learning methods as a way to renew teaching methods in the skills laboratory. Undergraduate students are placed in peer learning partnerships during practical skill learning sessions with 3rd year students as tutors and 1st year students as tutees. This project is an innovative approach to enhance skill acquisition, which is a complex process due to the double demand of developing how to actually perform the skill in question as well as developing

a professional understanding of theoretical and social aspects involved in such performance (Bjørk and Kirkevold, 2000).

An assumption was that this way of organizing learning would not only enhance practical skill learning in 1st year students, but also provide an arena for 3rd year students to develop competence in supervision. Competence in supervision is regarded as crucial for professional nurses in interaction with unskilled staff, students and patients, and is therefore part of the curriculum for 3rd year nursing students. The student tutors were trained by academic staff to act within their role as tutors. They were also required to plan and prepare for the learning sessions.

A study was designed to investigate this peer learning project. The overall aim was to explore students' learning and styles of supervision in the skills laboratory. The research questions were:

- What characterises the dialogue between 1st and 3rd year students during group reflection prior to practice in the skills laboratory?
- What learning processes occur during 1st year students' practice of practical skills in guided practice sessions in the skills laboratory?

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- How do 3rd year nursing students carry out their role as supervisors for 1st year students in the skills laboratory?

The study reported in this article concerns the role of the 3rd year students as supervisors.

Background

Peer learning and tutoring

Peer learning in higher education involves students learning from and with each other in both a formal and informal way (Boud, 2001). Slavin (1990) emphasizes the life-long aspects of peer learning, particularly fostering skills or attributes such as: collaboration and teamwork, critical enquiry and reflection, communication skills and learning to learn. In that frame of reference Boud et al. (1999) point out that there are increased possibilities for students to engage in reflection and exploration of ideas when the authority of the teacher is not an immediate presence. Whether these possibilities are realized depends on how peer learning is established and the context in which it operates. Students are able to articulate their understanding and have it critiqued by peers, as well as learn from adopting the reciprocal role. This is a sort of feedback which is specific and relates to the detailed qualities of the work under consideration. Boud and Falchikov (2006) suggest that students should develop the capacity to be assessors of learning.

According to Topping (1996), peer tutoring is characterised by specific role taking among peers; the roles of tutors and tutees. In higher education a tutor can be a more advanced undergraduate. The tutee may be less reticent about asking a peer tutor “stupid” questions than they would of a teacher (Falchikov, 2001). Peer tutors in educational settings do not have the power to award final grades. Cross-level peer tutors may have gained some knowledge about theories of learning that their tutees have not gained (ibid). Extending the students’ tutoring capabilities could, as suggested by Salomon and Perkins (1998), be understood as providing them with cultural tools as vehicles for peer learning. Research on peer learning and tutoring has been grounded in constructivist as well as socio-cultural theories of learning (Topping, 1996, 2005; O’Donnell and King, 1999; Falchikov, 2001). Both Piaget and Vygotsky have highlighted the role of interaction among peers with an equal level of competence while Vygotsky in addition has emphasized the importance of interaction with more capable peers (O’Donnell and King, 1999).

A review reports that peer tutors, even when trained, focus more on delivering knowledge than developing it (Roscoe and Chi, 2007). Peer learning and tutoring especially in the skills laboratory, has been sparingly researched in nursing education. A systematic review of peer teaching and learning in clinical education reports that it can increase students’ confidence and improve learning in the psychomotor and cognitive domains (Secomb, 2007). Roberts (2008, 2009) found that peers were important for coping with clinical placements and for learning subtle, unwritten rules. In clinical practice an ‘ask anything’ culture among student nurses seems to develop (Roberts, 2009). A Norwegian study examined the experiences of 3rd and 1st year students as well as contact-nurses, who participated in a threesome tutoring assignment in clinical practice. Both groups of students reported fruitful learning outcomes (Hessevaagbakke et al., 2010). Loke and Chow (2007) examined a peer tutoring session of ten weeks with 3rd and 2nd year nursing students in Hong Kong. Apart from predominate positive experiences, they found frustrations in dealing with mismatched learning styles. In an Australian study, Goldsmith et al. (2006) report from an evaluation of a peer learning partnership between 3rd and 1st year nursing students related to clinical skills practice sessions. Both groups of students felt comfortable in the

learning relationship. The 3rd year students also reported an opportunity to review their skills, allowing them to evaluate their knowledge base. Owens and Walden (2001) report from a study in the USA where senior nursing students supervised beginning students in the nursing laboratory. The results suggested that provision of a learning environment that was supportive and non-threatening reduced students anxiety related to skills testing (Owens and Walden, 2001).

The setting of the study

The skills laboratory is the setting in this study. The tutees are expected to read literature and use a net based electronic program on nursing procedures to prepare before the sessions. The supervised sessions begin with pre-training reflection where larger groups of students gather around tables in the laboratory. The themes are introduced and the procedures are framed with respect to theory and practice. Following this, first year students in each unit divide into groups of two to three, allocated to one bed and practice the procedures guided by one third year student. During practice the students take turns as patient, nurse or observer. The teachers stay close in the background for support when needed. After practice, the larger groups get together again for post-training reflection and, finally, the third year students meet with the teacher to discuss their experiences as tutors.

The focus of the learning experience for the tutors is to guide 1st year tutees in accordance with the training program that prepares them for their role as supervisors. All of the students have to participate as tutors. The intention of the two-day compulsory training program is to provide the 3rd year students with a repertoire of tutoring skills based on professional supervision strategies (Handal and Lauvås, 1994; Buberger and Hessevaagbakke, 2008). Handal and Lauvås (1994) have developed a strategy that emphasizes the ability to adjust one’s supervision style to the needs of the person and characteristics of the situation. In the skills laboratory reflection and hands-on experiences are emphasized. Thus the supervisor’s task is to support, challenge or supplement the student’s perceptions of knowledge and manner of conducting the procedures. Sometimes instruction is needed, and sometimes students who are supervised need to try things out for themselves.

The supervised sessions in this study consisted of three sequences (Fig. 1).

Methods

The study had an exploratory design. ‘Exploratory qualitative research is designed to shed light on the various ways in which a phenomenon is manifested and on underlying processes’ (Polit and Beck, 2008, p. 21). Qualitative data was gathered by three members of the research team, by video recording the supervised

Preparation	Supervised sessions			Follow up
Literature and net based electronic program on procedures. Practice on their own (1 st year students). Supervision course (3 rd year students).	1.Pre-training reflection in groups of six to nine 1st year students and two to three 3 rd year students	2.Supervise performance of the procedures in groups of two to three 1 st year students and one 3 rd year student	3. Post – training reflection and assessment in the larger groups.	3 rd year students reflect on their experience as tutors with the teacher

Fig. 1. The supervised sessions.

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