The effect of social interaction on mental health nurse student learning

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a phenomenological research study exploring the effect of social interaction upon mental health nurse student learning. Central to this study are ideas about Communities of Practice as described by Wenger et al. (2011). The researcher conducted two focus groups and four semi-structured interviews with mental health nurse students at various stages of their training. The study found that students understand personal progress by comparison with others and that there is a relationship between peer group membership and learning outcomes. Students interpret academic studies and theoretical knowledge in a dynamic relationship with clinical practice where successful learning depends upon careful negotiation of social boundaries. Whilst acknowledging limitations this paper concludes by tentatively suggesting some implications for future nurse education practice which recognises the socially mediated nature of learning.

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Introduction

This study focuses upon socially mediated aspects of learning amongst mental health nurse students. Communities of Practice theory (CoP) as originally described by Lave and Wenger (1991) and more recently by Wenger et al. (2011) form the theoretical background to the study. In the UK, Mental nurse students follow the Nursing and Midwifery Council curriculum (NMC, 2010) but interactions in practice, with peer groups and the university has an influence. There has been a great deal of discussion (i.e. Côté et al., 2012; Musker, 2011) about the disadvantages of a perceived 'theory/practice gap'. This study treats these different influences as Communities of Practice, representative of the social factors contributing to the student's eventual understandings.

The current study set out to answer the following question:

"What interactions and influences mediate the development of key concepts, professional identity, attitudes and values amongst Mental Health Student Nurses?"

Background

Teaching approaches which focus upon individual student learning (i.e. Marton and Säljö, 1976; Entwistle and Smith, 2002),

dominate higher education pedagogy. By contrast, others emphasise the importance of socio-cultural interactions to the development of learning (Cassidy, 2004; Cole, 1996; Engeström, 2001; Eraut, 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Nursing students progress through the university within cohort groups and spend practice time as part of clinical teams, once qualified they will work within a team. Ability to negotiate entry into these social groups is important to the student's development as nurses and understanding of individual learning is incomplete without considering these social factors. Therefore, this study is a reflective attempt to identify the influence of social learning processes and to begin consideration of how such understanding might influence learning design.

A CoP is a partnership in which people collectively learn about an area of knowledge. This shared experience becomes a learning resource as the community tackles learning tasks (Wenger et al., 2011). CoP theory originated in studies conducted by Lave and Wenger into a variety of social groups (Cox, 2005). Examples of CoP's include workplaces and educational settings where common interests and experience binds these communities. This idea has evolved into a tool used by organisations to assist development of horizontal networks to complement existing vertical management structures (Cox, 2005; Wenger et al., 2002, 2011). Wenger's recent work outlines a framework for the assessment of 'value creation', making explicit the value of learning created by the networks and communities within the organisation which is adapted in this study to inform data analysis.

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CoP theory defines learning more broadly than being simply an individual attribute. Lave and Wenger (1991) criticise ideas that seek to abstract learning from context arguing instead that teaching and learning are essential and inevitable facets of everyday life (Wenger, 1999). Learning involves a constant process of participation and reification where meaning develops through a dynamic, dialectic process of negotiation with context. As we experience and shape the world around us − in turn this interaction shapes us.

Learning involves a process of socialisation in which newcomers move from peripheral to full participation, becoming part of the shared practices, beliefs and use of words and tools common to that group. This is a process shaped by historically defined boundaries. Initially, participation is peripheral as newcomers to a community take time to assimilate. Wenger (1999) uses the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' to indicate that this is a normal part of group integration. Some communities have boundaries that are more rigid and newcomers are less able to enter. An example cited was a description of trainee meat cutters in an environment where working practices blocked newcomers from interacting with more experienced people whilst an inflexible hierarchy stifled the possibility of progress (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Kwan and Lopez-Real (2010) used Wengers matrix framework (Wenger et al., 2002) to examine identity formation of teacher mentors in the process of interaction with student teachers. Whilst showing that identity and individual development are central to learning the study also suggested the community is itself changed by the newcomers. The study examined teacher-mentor role perceptions and considered how the actual process of mentoring affected this understanding. The participants also discussed ways in which membership of other groups had also influenced their understanding. Analysis of the participant's narrative confirms the importance of social interactions within CoP's to individual identity formation and to subsequent individual and collective learning. However, this study also suggests that the nature of the environment within which the CoP operates is also important and may serve to help or hinder identity development.

Similarly, Guldberg (2008) used a CoP approach to analyse learning in an online course for people involved in the care of children with autism. This examined online interactions and described how conversations led to development of a shared narrative. The study equated this process with that of individual learning and suggested that learners move from peripheral to more integrated group participation via dialogue, shared understanding and experience.

The learning outcomes of nursing students have also been studied using CoP theory. For example, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation was central to Spouse's (1998) longitudinal study of seven nursing student's experience of clinical placement. This paper highlighted the importance of the quality of relationship between student and mentor and the role that this has in facilitating participation in increasingly complex clinical practice. Another study by Thrysoe et al. (2010) examined final year nurse student's engagement with practice. They suggested that there was a link between successful participation in practice and the degree to which students managed to develop professional and social links. The study found that learning opportunities for the students increased as their relationships with mentors developed.

Another study (Thrysoe et al., 2012) examined newly qualified nurse's interactions within CoP's. This also identified how important the development of formal and informal social links is to the process of integration for newcomers. Successful integration was more likely for the newly qualified nurses who were involved in team dialogue and where personal links developed with established staff. However, others who were unsuccessful were less

involved in dialogue with existing team members who in turn were uninvolved in them as individuals.

Generally, the studies discussed above emphasise the shared and social nature of practice-based learning. The ability to cross boundaries and to become accepted by and socially integrate within established teams appears to be important to successful practice learning.

Research design

The research design was a phenomenological study into student experiences of social interactions encountered in university and clinical practice with a specific focus upon the effect that this experience had upon learning. According to Denscombe (2010), Phenomenology is primarily concerned with an attempt to describe subjective human experience and the interpretations that individuals place upon events. This was an appropriate approach for this study because of the focus upon understanding the way that individual students perceived the learning environments that they found themselves in.

Two methods of data collection were utilised. The study used a data collection tool developed from research conducted by Wenger et al. (2011) to guide a series of semi-structured interviews. Techniques described by Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith (2010) were also used to conduct a series of focus groups. Data were analysed using a process of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 1999).

Wenger et al. (2011) formulated methods of capturing information about the causal relationships between knowledge producing activity and the instances where this is applied. Research tools developed capture evidence about activities undertaken by participants, seeking to identify the value that people attribute to these activities. Data is recorded which reflects the value of community participation and learning, which looks at personal value, relationships with others, effect on professional practice as well as how the participant was able to influence the community. There is also a framework for capturing examples of stories told by participants about specific examples of interactions experienced.

In the current study, this original framework developed by Wenger et al. (2011) was adapted. Participants talked about their experience of interactions with their student peer group, in clinical practice as well as interactions with course lecturers and tutors.

An email sent to student groups in June 2013 asking volunteers to participate received no replies. It was necessary instead to approach individual students and groups to seek participants. Part of the problem in seeking participants is that half of the nursing course involves students in attending clinical practice and they are difficult to access during this time. The study therefore used a convenience sample of undergraduate mental health nursing students. Several authors (Coyne, 1997; Gorard, 2001; Denscombe, 2010) discuss convenience sampling, concluding that this is the least credible choice in terms of research quality. However, as argued by Denscombe (2010), it is inevitable that small scale unfunded research will have to make hard choices about sampling. It is therefore necessary for researchers to be open about decisions made, to be clear about samples used, and to show reflection on the effect of the sample on the conclusions. Therefore, interviews with four students and two focus groups involving six participants form the basis for this study.

The university ethics committee granted approval, the author's institution gave permission to contact students and the study applied ethical principles as set out by the British Educational Research Association (2011).

A process of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 1999) was used to analyse data. Firstly, the researcher