



# Educator informed practice within a triadic preceptorship model

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## ABSTRACT

Preceptorships have long been a subject of scholarship with proven effectiveness in preparing nursing students to transition into beginning graduate nurses. Nursing research has predominantly focused on the dyadic preceptor–student relationship. The triadic pedagogical relationship between educator–student–preceptor has garnered less attention and inquiry. Nurse educators' experience in preceptorships is under reported. Through a process of scholarly inquiry, nurse educators from one western Canada School of Nursing documented their experiences and professional judgment in facilitating preceptorships over one semester. In the context of the anticipated exodus of nursing experts in the midst of rapidly changing healthcare delivery, this paper recommends a reemphasis on preceptorships as a triadic pedagogical relationship. Educator informed practices that foster triadic relationships in preceptorships include attending to distant relationships, being mindful of the influence of continuity, recognizing a preceptor's proficiency, responding to rapidly changing and complex environments, facilitating common understanding through communication, and integrating practice and education performance expectations.

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Nurse educators bring a unique and valuable perspective to the ways to support nursing students, preceptors, and educators to successfully transition students to the evolving graduate nurse role. This paper addresses, by way of collegial nurse educator inquiry, several significant educator activities that facilitate the triadic preceptored relationship from the educator's perspective. An often-overlooked component of this triadic relationship of the student, preceptor, and educator is the connection of educator activities with the post-secondary mission of teaching, service, and inquiry. The less observable day-to-day nurse educator activities are a critical component of successful preceptorships. These activities and relationships contribute to a strong practice education partnership that promotes safe client care, sustains clinical placements, and fosters scholarship. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the everyday nurse educator activities in preceptorships and link these educator practices to relational pedagogy and the mission of post-secondary institutions.

## Context

### Literature

In the past decade, unrelenting change has become the norm for nursing practice across Canada, a trend that noticeably affects everyday nursing functions (Freiburger, 2001; Green, 2003; Villeneuve and MacDonald, 2006). Demanding practice environments including workload, shift work, patient acuity, limited opportunity for professional development, and a decline in organizational leadership and decision-making processes, are contributing directly to nurse burnout and fatigue (Canadian Nurses Association [CNA], 2010). In addition, restructuring and reallocation of resources in all sectors of healthcare have become stressors that result in competing demands on time in nursing practice (CNA, 2010; Ellerton, 2003; Freiburger, 2001; Smedley and Penny, 2009; Yonge et al., 2005). A substantial increase in information technology and in specialized technological knowledge at the bedside contribute to more complexity in the clinical setting than in decades past (Freiburger, 2001; Lorentz, 2008; Orovioigoicoechea et al., 2008; Yonge et al., 2005). Demographic shifts in nursing and in the general population have been well documented as having a significant influence on healthcare delivery. Thirty-eight percent of the nurses registered to practice in Canada are over 50 years of age (Canadian Institute for Health Information [CIHI], 2010) and will soon reach the traditional

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retirement age of 65 years or will depart from the profession at an earlier age. The complexity of nursing practice combined with the loss of experienced nurses and changing employment patterns will shape the way in which healthcare agencies and Schools of Nursing design and implement preceptorships.

For several decades, the preceptorship model has been a key proven strategy in preparing nursing students for safe and competent practice. The complex nature of preceptorships has been addressed in the literature from various angles such as preceptor preparation, student and preceptor relationships, and support and recognition of preceptors (Ferguson, 1996; Hautala et al., 2007; Yonge et al., 2005; Stone and Rowles, 2002). Benner's (1982) work on novice to expert nursing practice has informed nursing education regarding preceptor development, student evaluation (Boyer, 2008; Ulrich et al., 2011) and student transition into professional practice (Anderson et al., 2012; Hillman and Foster, 2011; Rush et al., 2013). Paton (2010) defines the preceptorship as a triad, or "an equilateral relationship among a nurse preceptor, faculty member, and an undergraduate nursing student" (p. 143). However, most scholarship has conceptualized preceptorships as a student and nurse dyad. There is limited inquiry on the knowledge and strategies educators draw upon to support preceptorships and on educator engagement in preceptorships against the backdrop of post-secondary triadic missions of service, teaching, and scholarship. The value and sustainability of nurse educator engagement in a triadic preceptorship model is underexplored. This inquiry offers a perspective on several key educator activities aimed at supporting preceptors and students.

#### *Situating the program and preceptorship*

The triadic preceptorship model at Thompson Rivers University, implemented in the early 1980's, draws significantly upon the interior region of the province of British Columbia (BC) for practice-education experiences. This population of 750,000 residents within 550,000 square kilometers has 58 incorporated communities with 80% of these communities having a population of 10,000 or less (Interior Health Authority, 2011; BC Ministry of Health, 2007). Between January and April 2011, 74 baccalaureate nursing students completed 432 hours in diverse preceptored placements following 39 hours of preparatory seminar. Sixty percent of the 74 students completed their final program practicum locally, while forty percent completed a preceptorship in various urban and rural areas throughout the province of BC. Twenty-one percent of the student population had their preceptored practicum outside of Kamloops but within the southern interior geographical region; another 19% had their practicum outside of the southern interior region. The distribution of students among placement contexts included mental health (7%), intensive care (9%), emergency (11%), community (11%) maternal-child (12%), medical (16%), surgical (23%), and rural acute care (11%).

A usual teaching assignment in this triadic model consists of fifteen students placed across diverse geographical and practice contexts to one educator to support students and preceptors. Typically, nursing students are preceptored by more than one diploma or baccalaureate degree prepared Registered Nurse (RN). In 2011, 106 RNs preceptored 74 students. Increasingly the program relies on novice nurses as preceptors and expert nurses as novice preceptors. The standard orientation includes (a) advanced contact with preceptors by educators; (b) provision of a preceptor orientation booklet; and (c) educator-preceptor meetings to discuss policies, expectations, and evaluation processes. On average, students, preceptors, and educators communicate regularly on a weekly basis. Communication methods consist of meetings in practice sites or offices, phone calls, emails, and electronic discussion boards.

#### **Inquiry process and themes**

The goal of this inquiry was to explore the largely unexamined educator practices in preceptorships. The principle approach to this inquiry involved documenting and analyzing nurse educator narratives of every-day practices. Each of five educators engaged in the inquiry process and in doing so experienced a growing trust in each other and in the process itself. The educators openly discussed their daily personal educator practices. Sharing their challenges and successes in supporting the preceptorships for which they were responsible became a key aspect in the group process and assisted in moving the inquiry forward. When talking about normally unspoken day-to-day educator practices, the educators realized the potential usefulness of documenting these experiences. The educators decided to record their thoughts, experiences, and reflections on an electronic discussion board. They recognized that the group became an increasingly safe place to share their personal pedagogical challenges and perceived effectiveness of actions. The inquiry inspired the educators to move from a reflective activity to a thematic analysis of educator narratives. The process of documenting and analyzing educator insights is presented briefly.

For the purposes of this paper, the reflections recorded on the electronic discussion board became the primary source of data for thematic analysis. Educators committed to regularly meeting and critically reviewing the data before coming to a consensus about the themes of everyday educator practices that often go unnoticed and unexpressed. Each revisiting of the data provided opportunity for deeper reflections. Educators attended to authentic interpretation and representation of the thematic analysis by critically questioning each others' perceptions, being open to others' perspectives, and coming to a consensus. Regular meetings occurred after the initial four-month time frame and extended to twelve months to allow for group engagement in thematic analysis. Several conference presentations enhanced opportunities for thematic identification and clarity. From early analysis to final thematic consensus, the interpretation developed into a deeper understanding of the educators' practices.

The primary analysis of narratives revealed several key areas upon which educators focus their attention within a triadic preceptorship model. These areas of day-to-day preceptorship support include guiding practice, seeking continuity, promoting understanding, fostering relationships, attending to preceptor development, and integrating expectations. Affirmative and contrary exemplars from nurse educator reflections are included to illustrate these themes. The educator quotes are not linked to the author order.

#### *Guiding practice within challenging environments*

Preceptorships take place in increasingly intense, diverse, and complex environments. The diverse and evolving staff configuration and subsequent workloads, increasing client co-morbidity due to chronic health challenges, and rising acuity across healthcare contexts, significantly influence the day-to-day practice of educators. Educators and preceptors are challenged to guide students who encounter intense situations that require complex decision-making. The educator role involves assisting students to choose appropriate and ethical care options in practice environments where political tensions, conflicting agendas, and diverse perspectives are common.

*"One of the preceptors...a strong, senior nurse...is very concerned about the acuity of the acute care areas and the change in the way that workload is being allocated...she sees that students are being unfairly affected by these workload changes...and I've also noticed*

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