



The development of a model of education for casual academic staff who support nursing students in practice



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ABSTRACT

Nursing is predominantly a practice based profession where clinical placement for pre-registration nursing students is a significant component of their programme, as this is pivotal in achieving work readiness of the graduate registered nurse. It is therefore important to ensure nursing students have high quality clinical placements that are supervised by well-prepared experienced registered nurses. This paper discusses one component of the reconnaissance phase of a wider action research project being undertaken in a metropolitan university in NSW, Australia seeking to enhance the development and support of casual academic staff known as clinical supervisors who support students in clinical placement. The outcomes attributed to this project are the development of a participation model which has resulted in a collaborative partnership between the university and clinical supervisors and secondly, the embedding of solution focused ways of working and practice development into the program. The information from the reconnaissance phase of this project confirms the need for further research into the implementation of the participatory model to ensure that future education and support process are developed through collaboration.

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Introduction

Nursing is predominantly a practice based profession where clinical placement for pre-registration nursing students is seen as a significant component in their programme, as this is pivotal in achieving work readiness of the graduate registered nurse. It is therefore important to ensure nursing students have high quality clinical placements that are supervised by well-prepared experienced registered nurses. This article describes one component of the reconnaissance phase of a wider action research project being undertaken in a metropolitan university in NSW, Australia which aims to develop a collaborative partnership between the university and casual academic staff. The overall aim of the action research project is to develop a suite of strategies to assist casual academic staff working in the role of clinical supervisors to better support nursing students in the clinical environment. In this paper, we

briefly review the existing literature for issues and ideas around the challenges faced by clinical supervisors and describe the development of a framework which empowers clinical supervisors to work collaboratively with academic staff in the development and delivery of innovative education sessions.

Background

The host university within this study has over 1000 undergraduate students enrolled in a three year Bachelor of Nursing programme across four campuses which are geographically located approximately 450 km apart. The registered nurses who support nursing students in their clinical placement are either clinical facilitators who are registered nurses employed as casual academic staff by the university, or preceptors who are registered nurses employed by host health care facilities and services (for the remainder of this paper both of these terms will be referred to as clinical supervisors). Both models of supervision present challenges in ensuring nursing students are provided with appropriate supervision and high quality clinical placements.

The significance of the clinical placement for pre-registration nursing students is well recognised (Heath, 2002; Daly et al., 2005; Myrick et al., 2006; Brammer, 2008). Furthermore, in order to gain accreditation, pre-registration nursing programmes in Australia

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must include a minimum of 800 hours of professional experience and nursing students must be supervised during this experience by an experienced Registered Nurse (ANMAC, 2009).

Universities prepare nursing students to work in a range of clinical settings and use different models of supervision. Supporting nursing students in clinical practice is both a rewarding and challenging role for registered nurses; for the university the challenge is to ensure all students receive a high quality clinical placement in a dynamic environment which is often at a distance to the university. Brammer (2008) highlighted the impact of the quality of the relationship between the registered nurse and the student as being pivotal in the students' learning. Abbey et al. (2006) argues that in order to provide high quality clinical learning opportunities for nursing students, universities have a responsibility to provide appropriate orientation and training to staff who are clinical supervisors.

The role of the clinical supervisor is not clearly defined (Bray and Nettleton, 2007) and there is limited evidence in regard to the variations across clinical settings and the effectiveness of the different models of supervision and mentorship. Henderson and Tyler (2011) acknowledge the variety of roles that support nursing students and argue that it is the relationship between the registered nurse and the student that has the most significant impact on the student experience rather than the model of supervision. Previous studies have reported that nursing students perceive the clinical supervisor as the linchpin between addressing the theory and practice gap by assisting students to navigate what can be very 'swampy' and confusing ground for them (Lambert and Glacken, 2005; Edgcombe and Bowden, 2009).

Despite the recognised importance of the clinical supervisor, there remains no formal standardized training programmes to support their professional development. Health Workforce Australia (2011) and others (Henderson and Tyler, 2011; Brammer, 2008; McKenna and Wellard, 2004) have identified this significant gap in clinical supervisors' preparation and training in institutions across Australia. Health Workforce Australia is working with both the health care and university sectors to develop a national solution. At the same time recent developments in clinical supervision training have been largely focused on developing a multidisciplinary workforce to support students in the health care environment (HWA, 2011).

Although this is relevant to the issues faced within undergraduate nursing curricula, the accreditation of programmes across Australia mandates that registered nurses must supervise the assessment of nursing students in the practice environment (ANMAC, 2009). This creates the need for institutions to develop specific programs that address the principles of clinical supervision whilst also accounting for the complexity and volume of the specific needs of supervisors and students in their local settings. The university within this study recognises the dynamic and changeable environment university academic team are currently experiencing in relationship to the preparation of clinical supervisors. In order to address this we have developed a participatory model that is based on the principles of practice development to enable the needs of the casual academic staff and current best practice to be included in education and support programs for clinical supervisors. To enable the evaluation of our developing education framework, we undertook a participatory action research (PAR), project choosing this method because it enables participants to be active in each iteration of the project.

Action research is a valuable and rigorous tool to use in the investigation of social systems for educational program design, improvement and evaluation (Bowling 2009, Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Bowling (2009) suggests

'Action research is undertaken by participants in social situations to improve their practices and their understanding of them. The method was designed to study social systems with an aim of changing them (i.e. to achieve certain goals.' (p. 441).

Both terms 'action' and 'research' are fundamental in PAR; the word 'action' refers to the participants being involved in the change in an active or participatory way rather than being passive in their presence. Research refers to participants making informed decisions that have a real impact on the implementation of strategies and actions (Zuber-Skerritt's 1982). In this project the PAR methodology is being used to assist the facilitators to set 'the agenda' and to 'participate in obtaining and analyzing data' in (Liamputtong, 2009).

Kolb's (1984), Carr and Kemmis's (1986) and Zuber-Skerritt's (1982) seminal work(s) capture the essence of critical action research through the notion of 'becoming critical'. The cycle follows the approach as described initially by Kolb (1984) as "Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect". The essence of this approach is that it is "iterative"; cycles of Plan (then revised plan), Act, Observe then Reflect are carried out through a number of iterations until 'saturation' is achieved. This iterative process relates to the development of participants' understanding of their contributions to the students learning. Action research as a methodology brings together a number of critical elements that lend themselves to their use in nursing and nursing education. The lived experience of stakeholders plays a key role in determining aspects of care as well as the educational experience and so participatory and cyclical qualitative strategies along with reflective and reflexive approaches blend into a mix that reflects the rich artistry of nursing and education practice (Bowling, 2009).

Method

This paper emphasises the contribution that the reconnaissance PAR project has in informing the ideas for future research as it is the phase where significant planning occurs. Walter-Adams (2006) describes the reconnaissance phase of action research as the starting point for inquiry, suggesting that it doesn't matter where you start as long as you consider the action beneficial. This is the point where the researcher needs to look at their practice in detail and consider what aspect needs to change. The reconnaissance phase is a crucial stage in action research that guides and supports further action (Nolan and Grant, 1993).

The time frame for the reconnaissance phase in this project was over a period of two years, that incorporated four iterations of the Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect cycle (Kolb, 1984). This phase of the project was an opportunistic evaluation involving clinical supervisors who participated in a professional development workshop. All participants in the workshop were invited to complete an evaluation and completion of the evaluation and return to the workshop convened was considered as implied consent by the participants.

During the planning component of the cycle consultation was undertaken with senior academic staff and clinical supervisors through a working group, in an attempt to scope possible avenues for an education programme to better prepare the workshop participants in their role as clinical supervisors. This consultation process identified a gap in the preparation of clinical supervisors creating a governance risk for the school. As a result a two day program was drafted by the working group covering topics such as adult education, competency assessment, familiarisation with the university undergraduate nursing program and information on how students' learning outcomes related to their clinical practice experience. The learning and teaching approach for the workshops included both informative and interactive sessions. Participants

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