



Conceptualising learning through simulation: An expansive approach for professional and personal learning



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores different ways of conceptualising the learning that occurs as student nurses engage in simulation experiences. The conceptual frameworks discussed in this paper draw upon the work of Benner and Sutphen (2007) and Engeström (1994). Benner and Sutphen's work highlights the complex nature of situated knowledge in practice disciplines such as nursing. They suggest that knowledge must be constantly integrated within the curriculum through pedagogies of interpretation, formation, contextualisation and performance. These pedagogies present a framework, which may enhance our understanding of the impact of simulation upon student learning. Engeström's work on activity theory, recognises the links between learning and the environment of work and highlights the possibilities for learning to inspire change, innovation and the creation of new ideas. His notion of expansive learning offers nurse education a means of reconceptualising the learning that occurs during simulation. Together these frameworks present an opportunity for nurse education to articulate and theorise the learning inherent in simulation activities.

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This paper considers Benner and Sutphen's (2007) pedagogical model for professional learning in relation to expansive approaches to learning and offers different perspectives for understanding learning through simulation. Benner and Sutphen's work highlights the complex nature of situated knowledge in practice disciplines such as nursing. They suggest that knowledge must be constantly integrated within the curriculum through pedagogies of interpretation, formation, contextualisation and performance. These pedagogies present a framework, which may enhance our understanding of the impact of simulation upon student learning. Engeström's (1994) work on activity theory and expansive learning supports the contribution of this model towards the revelation and elucidation of effective learning through simulation in nurse education. His notion of expansive learning may offer nurse education a way of reconceptualising the learning that occurs during simulation. This paper offers illustrations of the different activity systems to which student nurses are exposed, together with analysis of the expansive learning processes that occur between these systems as the students learn to be nurses. Together these frameworks present an opportunity for nurse education to take a different look at simulation and offer potential to articulate and theorise the learning inherent in simulation activities.

Simulation and expansive learning

Activity theory offers a way of conceptualising aspects of the learning experienced through simulation, and in particular the notion of expansive learning articulated in the context of workplace learning by Engeström (2001). Activity theory emphasizes change rather than stability, with its focus on the dynamics of learning rather than the learner as a participant in an established system. Simulation experiences may provide an opportunity for expansive learning, where students can be supported to consider the contradictions between what is taught in university and clinical practice leading to learning, development and change. According to Engeström and Sannino (2010):

as activity systems are increasingly interconnected and interdependent, many recent studies of expansive learning take as their unit of analysis a constellation of two or more activity systems that have a partially shared object. (p. 6)

The context of nurse education has changed significantly over the last four decades from an apprenticeship model of learning based primarily in healthcare settings to graduate level learning in university combined with practical experience in healthcare settings. Thus the activity systems for nurse education today are the university and the healthcare setting. The diagrams below illustrate the activity systems for nurse education. Fig. 1 represents the activity system for the university and Fig. 2 the healthcare setting.

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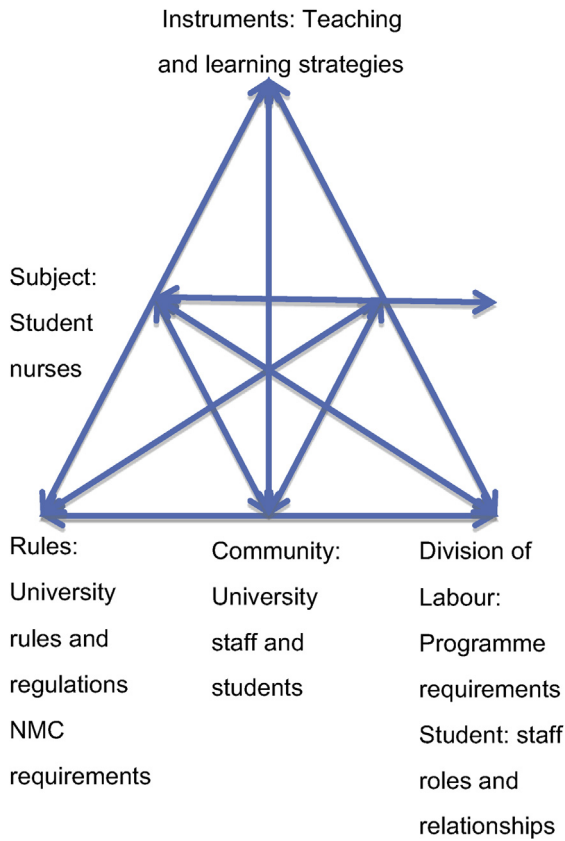


Fig. 1. The activity system of the University.

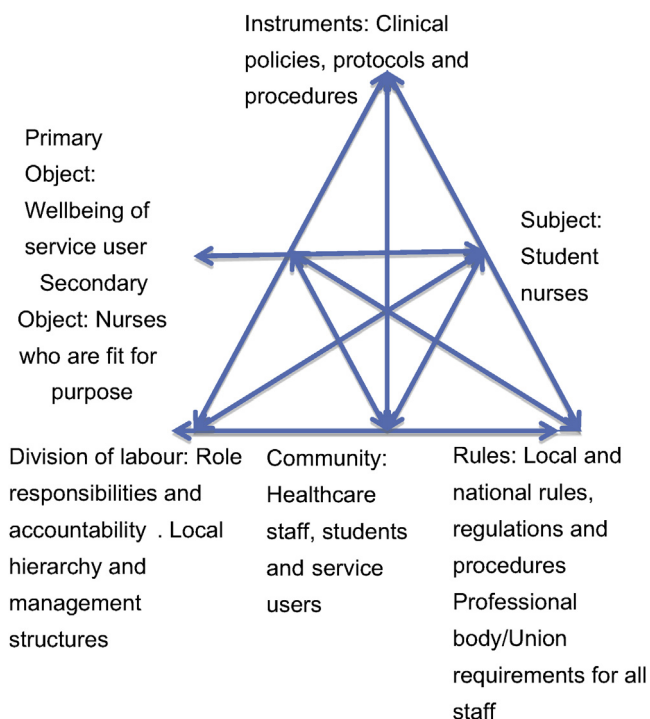


Fig. 2. The activity system of the Healthcare setting.

Fig. 1 shows the activity system of the university where the object is to produce graduate nurses who are capable of questioning and developing nursing practice in response to service user needs and changing evidence bases (Haigh, 2007). They are subject to the influences of the university community such as staff student relationships and academic and professional rules and regulations.

In contrast, the activity system of the healthcare setting (Fig. 2) has as its primary object the well-being of each service user. In this system, student needs are necessarily a lower priority and the object, in relation to nurse education, is to produce a nurse who is fit for purpose in a specific context with specific working practices.

In this activity system, students are exposed to a community where additional rules, regulations and responsibilities apply. In this environment the prime focus is safe and effective care.

These activity systems produce and are subject to influences, tensions and contradictions, which offer different conceptions of learning and different views of nursing practice. According to Engeström (2001) these contradictions and tensions can be addressed by means of an expansive learning process, in which the two parties together generate a new, shared object and concept for their shared activity. In effect, the many different elements of these activity systems lead to rethinking and consideration of how things should be done in order to continue to achieve the collective objective of enabling student nurses to learn to care.

Fig. 3 demonstrates the potential for expansive learning to occur as the activity systems generate a new shared object and concept for their shared activity. In this case, the shared activity or object focuses upon student nurses learning to nurse. The concept which supports this activity highlights the experiences that may be shared by students as they engage in simulation activities and is drawn from Benner and Sutphen's (2007) pedagogical model for professional learning. The environment that supports this activity is simulation.

The real test of a theory about learning is its capacity to generate learning which helps us to make sense of our world and prepares us in some way for the future (Engeström, 2001). Engeström (2001) states that there is a tendency to depict learning and development as vertical processes, 'aimed at elevating humans upward, to higher levels of competence' (p. 153) (see Fig. 4). Traditionally nursing students engaged in clinical nursing skills following step-by-step procedural guidelines, learning to perform the nursing task (for example, measurement and performance of blood pressure or a simple wound dressing) in class and then refining their skills on placement in a healthcare setting. Through this vertical model of learning the students began to *act* like nurses and gain competence in specific nursing skills.

Engeström (2001) suggests a complementary perspective, where learning can also be viewed in terms of horizontal or sideways development.

Fig. 5 illustrates the notion of horizontal or sideways expansion of learning through simulation. It highlights the learning that students may experience as they participate in simulation and learn to become attuned to nursing situations (Lasater, 2007; Cant and Cooper, 2010). Rather than performing procedural tasks in a step-by-step manner, as students engage with the simulation environment and the care of service users in this environment, they begin to respond, behave and *feel* like nurses, albeit in a simulated environment. The discussions that follow offer evidence of expansive approaches to learning and engagement with horizontal or sideways learning and development (Engeström, 2001).

Simulation and expansive learning for the formation of nursing identity

There are many issues pertinent to the development of nursing identity, such as the role of the nurse mentor, the role of the nurse

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