



# Knowledge transfer from an e-learning course to clinical practice



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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Continuing education is essential in improving practical psychiatric nursing skills. However, little is known about how knowledge gained in continuing education is transferred to nurses' daily work.

**Objectives:** To describe the transfer of knowledge gained from an e-learning course to daily practice.

**Design:** Qualitative study design.

**Settings:** One hospital district in Southern Finland with three specialized psychiatric wards (acute, rehabilitation, geriatric wards).

**Participants:** Nursing staff (N = 53) were recruited and 35 participated voluntarily in the e-learning continuing education course in spring 2009.

**Methods:** The data comprised nurses' reflective writing during the e-learning course and course evaluation forms completed after the course. We used qualitative design with inductive content analysis to analyze nurses' writings.

**Results:** The nurses were willing and able to transfer what they learned to their daily practice including the course themes, communication and co-operation among staff members, understanding of preventive and alternative treatment methods and critical thinking regarding one's own work. After the e-learning course the nurses were able to identify development areas such as issues related to staff members' daily work, the patient's role on the ward, alternative methods to avoid coercion, issues pertaining to the care environment on the ward, psychiatric nurses' education, and making an action plan for aggressive situations. All nurses would recommend the course to other nurses.

**Conclusions:** New knowledge is easily adopted and transferred to daily practice.

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## Introduction

Continuing education is deemed an essential way to develop vocational professional skills (European Commission, 2010; Council of European Union, 2011). In order to provide the best patient care recommended, health professionals should invest in educational opportunities offering up-to-date knowledge and skills (WHO, 2005). In this agenda the importance of an open continuing education environment to ensure lifelong learning is crucial in health care (European Commission, 2010). This is also the case in psychiatric nursing (Ryan-Nicholls, 2003), where the importance of improving mental health workers' skills and knowledge has been emphasized (Jones and Lowe, 2003; WHO, 2005, 2007).

E-learning has recently become a popular format to deliver continuing education to health care professionals (Wilkinson et al., 2004). It is reportedly one solution in nurses' continuing education (Cleary et al.,

2011). Although e-learning has grown rapidly as an education format in health care (Wutoh et al., 2004) it has been used relatively little in mental health care education (Kontio et al., 2011; Rigby et al., 2012). Urgent tasks for continuing education in mental health include broadening nurses' clinical expertise in longer-term care (Cleary et al., 2011), psychiatric nurses' attitudes towards seclusion (Happell and Koehn, 2011), and managing patient aggressive behavior (Kontio et al., 2009). Interestingly, the literature review by Kynoch et al. (2011) showed that the best way to educate psychiatric nurses related to aggressive behavior is to use structured training programs.

Psychiatric nurses appreciate e-learning as one good way of producing continuing education (Jones and Lowe, 2003). Curran and Fleet (2005) point out the importance of continuing education using e-learning to generate change in health care professionals' daily practice. Different issues from e-learning courses have been reported, such as preparation for learning, accessibility, nature of learning resources, and its impact on student knowledge (Wilkinson et al., 2004). Positive feelings and satisfaction in using e-learning methods have been reported (Cook et al., 2008), likewise negative experiences, such as feelings of isolation and a lack of peer support (Wilkinson et al., 2004). Students' computer skills

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and time consumption in e-learning have also been questioned (McVeight, 2009).

The benefits of e-learning in continuing education have generally been measured by satisfaction with course content (Cobb, 2004) and knowledge level after the course (Cook et al., 2008; Lahti et al., 2013). However, it has been argued that more energy should be invested in knowledge transfer and change in practice (Curran et al., 2010). Nor is enough known about how knowledge gained in continuing education is transferred to daily nursing (Allan and Smith, 2010). Therefore studies should focus on evaluative research to show if learning in continuing education benefits clinical practice (Lauder et al., 1999).

Transfer of knowledge is among the main goals in lifelong learning (Draper, 2007; Jackson et al., 2009). Although the benefits of e-learning have been shown in several studies (Cook et al., 2008), not enough is known about what nurses think about e-learning continuing education (Wilkinson et al., 2004), and if knowledge is transferable to daily practice (Bleich et al., 2009). This is also the case in psychiatric nursing (Teodorczuk et al., 2012).

## Aim

The aim of this study is to evaluate an e-learning course regarding means of knowledge transferring what was learned to daily practice. The research questions are as follows:

1. What knowledge have nurses transferred to their daily work?
2. How would nurses like to develop their daily work after participating in an e-learning continuing education course?
3. Would nurses recommend the e-learning course to other nurses?

To the best of our knowledge no specific study has been presented addressing this issue.

## Methods

### Evaluation Model

The study was based on Kirkpatrick's (1998) model of learning outcome evaluation, which is widely used in the field of education (Galloway, 2005). The model includes four levels: 1) reaction (i.e. student satisfaction), 2) learning (i.e. knowledge increase), 3) performance (i.e. behavior change in practice), and 4) impact (i.e. results as final outcomes) (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Galloway, 2005). Here we address the level three, namely change in practice, such as the transfer of knowledge to daily practice. In this study, the model has given a useful frame how students' learning is transferring to daily practice, can be understood.

### Design

We use a qualitative method design with inductive content analysis (Burns and Grove, 2009; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) to examine psychiatric nurses' transfer of newly acquired knowledge to their daily work. This qualitative method is useful in mental health research where the phenomenon under investigation is complex (Driessnack et al., 2007). However, we focused on Kirkpatrick's level three because we wanted to learn more about knowledge transfer resulting in change in practice.

### Description of the E-learning Continuing Education Course

The continuing education e-learning course used was ePsychNurse.Net. It was originally developed together with six European countries: Finland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal and England (Leonardo da Vinci; FI-06-B-F-PP-16070), aiming at high quality, ethically appropriate and therapeutically effective daily practice to enable nurses to manage distressed and disturbed patients in psychiatric hospitals and inpatient units in the European area (Välimäki et al., 2008).

The e-learning course designs progressed from themes related to caring for distressed and aggressive patients (legal implications, ethical issues, internal and external factors affecting the care of distressed and disturbed patients, self-awareness and interpersonal relationships, teamwork and integration of knowledge and practice) the general to the more detailed. This enables the students to build up their own basic information and to adapt this in their own working environment (Lowe et al., 2007). This modular e-learning course takes 120 h, and after every unit students submit a reflective task for comments by the tutors (experienced nurses with MNS and/or PhD degree).

The ePsychNurse.Net e-learning includes different learning methods; a reading tasks, a discussion forum, reflective journals and assignments after each unit. A virtual patient is used for a clinical decision making and moreover there is a self-awareness exercise. In the participating hospital the use of e-learning was a relatively new method. To ensure appropriate technological resources, the computers were checked for adequate programs needed for running the course (Koivunen et al., 2008).

### Setting

The study was conducted in one hospital district in southern Finland and its three psychiatric units (acute, rehabilitation and geriatric). The wards were mixed-sex, 24-hour, with 10–20 beds, mostly with locked doors. The wards treat serious mental cases. The most common diagnoses among patients on the wards in the study hospital were mood disorders 36% and schizophrenia 28%. Patients' average length of hospital stay in 2009 was 25 days.

### Recruitment of Nurses

Recruitments were in spring 2009. All nurses (N = 53) working in three psychiatric units (15 to 17 nurses per unit) who fulfilled the recruitment criteria were invited to participate in the e-learning course. Inclusion criteria for recruitment were being a registered nurse (nurse, deputy ward manager or ward manager), working in a permanent position or being long-term substitutes (three months or more), being over 18 years old and fluent in Finnish. Out of 53 nurses, 35 voluntarily participated in an e-learning continuing education course in spring 2009 and 33 completed the course.

### Data Collection and Instrument

Data was collected from two different source materials; 1) the course evaluation form after the e-learning course (as a response to the first and third research questions) and 2) nurses' sixth reflective essay written on the e-learning course platform (as a response to the second research question).

The first research question about psychiatric nurses' transfer of knowledge to their daily work after participating in the ePsychNurse.Net course was answered on the basis of one open-ended question on the course evaluation form. The psychiatric nurses were asked to describe in their own words what they learned from ePsychNurse.Net and transferred to their work. The respondents wrote their perceptions and beliefs on the course evaluation form. The third research question about recommending the course to others (yes/no) was likewise answered on the course evaluation form.

Data was collected from the course evaluation form after the e-learning course. The course evaluation form with open-ended and multiple-choice questions was sent to those who voluntarily participated in the course (N = 35). It elicited background information and posed five multiple-choice questions related to course management and content. The evaluation form included six open-ended questions related to the course content. The nurses had two weeks to complete the evaluation form and return it in a sealed envelope to a closed box on their ward. In total 25 (71%) nurses returned the completed questionnaire.

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