



The hidden curriculum in near-peer learning: An exploratory qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

Background: Near-peer learning involving students from the same course, but at different levels, has gained prominence in health professional education over recent years. At the authors' university, nursing and paramedic students engage in near-peer learning in clinical skills laboratories where junior students learn specific skills from senior students. Our observations indicated that beyond the skills teaching, unintended learning occurred repeatedly.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to examine near-peer learner and teacher experiences of participating in near-peer learning and to explore students' engagement beyond the skill being learnt.

Methods: Separate focus group interviews were conducted with groups of peer learners and peer teachers from nursing and paramedics following near-peer teaching and learning sessions. In total, 26 students participated in one of four audio-recorded focus groups.

Results: Data were analysed thematically. A range of unintended learning experiences became evident, indicating the operation of hidden curriculum additional to that intended within the formal curriculum. Four main areas emerged and were focussed on junior students: *identifying with their peers, the course and related expectations, clinical placements and managing difficult situations.*

Conclusions: Near-peer learning and teaching has been reported as having a range of positive outcomes, particularly for those engaged in the teaching. However, this study has highlighted that can also provide a range of benefits unique to junior students. More research is warranted to further examine this phenomena and ways to harness and extend such learning opportunities, as well as the nature of social and cognitive congruence.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, the roles of health professional as teachers are becoming formalised in professional standards (McKenna and French, 2011; Williams et al., 2014; Marton et al., 2014). In that context, much has been written in recent years about near-peer, or peer-assisted learning, particularly that involving senior peers teaching juniors in health professional literature. Near-peer teaching usually involves senior students teaching junior students from the same education program. Studies of near-peer teaching models and their outcomes have been described in disciplines such as medicine (Marton et al., 2014; Aba Alkhail, 2015; Fermedge et al., 2014; Naeger et al., 2013), nursing (McKenna and French, 2011; Brannagan et al., 2013), and paramedic education

(Williams et al., 2014, 2015) and even across disciplines (McLelland et al., 2013).

A range of benefits of near-peer teaching have consistently been described, in particular for peer teachers. For peers engaged in teaching organised programs, experiences have led to increased confidence in teaching capabilities (McKenna and French, 2011; Naeger et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2015; Ten Cate and Durning, 2007; Evans and Cuffe, 2009), as well as consolidating their own prior knowledge (McKenna and French, 2011; Aba Alkhail, 2015; McLelland et al., 2013; Ten Cate and Durning, 2007; Evans and Cuffe, 2009). For the learner in a peer teaching relationship, benefits have been described through the creation of more comfortable learning environments (Ten Cate and Durning, 2007) that evoke less anxiety (McKenna and French, 2011), having more resources to support their learning (Fermedge et al., 2014) and having role models on whom to develop their own professional roles (Ten Cate and Durning, 2007). It has been suggested that the social proximity or cognitive congruence of peers to the experiences of learners may assist their understanding of learners' difficulties, along

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with their ability to relate better to learners, than academic staff (Bennett et al., 2015).

2. Methods

At the authors' university, peer-assisted learning programs have existing in clinical skills teaching in nursing and paramedicine since 2009 and 2011 respectively. In the Bachelor of Nursing, all final year students undertake a core unit on teaching in health care. This unit covers educational theory and practice, with one of the unit requirements involving these students teaching vital signs to first year students in clinical skills laboratories. Each near-peer teacher develops a lesson plan and delivers the teaching in a scheduled two-hour session with a partner to two to three junior learners. In the Bachelor of Emergency Health (Paramedic) second and third year students are invited to volunteer as peer teachers for first year students learning basic life support competencies. They support classroom tutors assisting junior students to learn required clinical skills. By this point in their education, the first year students have not been exposed to clinical placements in their respective disciplines.

Since the introduction of the near-peer teaching interventions, we have evaluated these programs quantitatively using the Clinical Teaching Preference Questionnaire and qualitatively using focus groups with first and final year students. Quantitative results have been published elsewhere (*citation withheld*). Prior to undertaking the evaluation, the project was approved by the university ethics committee. For the qualitative component, four focus groups of between four and ten participants each were conducted after near-peer teaching and learning experiences, nurse peer learners (NL), nurse peer teachers (NT), paramedic peer learners (PL) and paramedic peer teachers (PT). In total, 26 students participated, some of whom were undertaking double degree studies in both nursing and paramedics. Focus groups were designed to explore students' experiences and capture aspects in the teaching and learning encounters that had not been previously considered by the team. The overarching research question was: What are the experiences of peer learners and peer teachers during near-peer sessions? All students who participated in the teaching sessions were invited to participate in a focus group by an academic staff member not involved in their direct teaching who provided verbal and written information. Students signed written consent forms prior to the focus groups commencing. Prior to commencement, students were briefed on the importance of maintaining confidentiality of participants and what was said in the groups. Focus groups were guided by the following key questions:

- Has the peer teaching experience impacted on your perceptions of nurses'/paramedics' teaching roles?
- What are your perceptions of your peer teaching experience more broadly?
- What aspects were the most challenging?
- How might the experience impact on your role as a graduate?
- How could we develop the experience for future students?

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and data saturation was achieved after the fourth focus group. Data were analysed using thematic analysis informed by Grbich (2013) using labelling of concepts, followed by attaching codes to the data, then grouping similar data into themes. What became evident from our own observations and the focus group interviews was that much more was taking place during the teaching experiences than purely clinical skills teaching and learning, and that there was a large element of vicarious learning, or unintended, hidden curriculum emerging. Trustworthiness of themes was undertaken through two research team members reviewing and coding transcripts and comparing themes. One area to emerge strongly from the analysis related to unintended learning

opportunities. Findings are reported through associated anonymous quotations.

3. Results

The focus group discussions raised many aspects constituting unintended or hidden curricula, that is, valuable learning beyond the intended outcomes of the near-peer teaching experience. Across both disciplines, these were around four key themes: *identifying with their peers, the course and related expectations, clinical placements, and managing difficult situations*. Overall, these encounters were found to have an influence on junior students' beginning professional identities and socialisation.

3.1. Identifying With Their Peers

There was much discussion in the focus groups that indicated that learners sought to identify with their near-peer teachers. These teachers were perceived by learners to have a level of authority, that lecturers did not, to provide information on a range of issues relevant to students, such as future clinical placements. Hence, they developed a different type of rapport than junior students would with their lecturers, making relationship building easier:

It's a lot easier to relate to them and it's a lot easier to get that relaxed rapport with them.

[(NL)]

You can say look guys, we've been there. You better do this and don't worry so much about that. It was a more peer guidance than a teaching session.

[(NT)]

There was a perception by juniors that near-peer teachers had the ability to relate to where the junior students were at, using their own experiences as evidence:

I find they give you very relevant information, so when we're actually doing our scenarios and our practising that they tend to say, oh, I was like this and I found this really worked for me at that time - really practical information that you can take on board. You can take it or leave it, but it's fantastic how they can put themselves in your shoes back when they did it and give you some suggestions how to move forward, it's almost a personalised insight.

[(PL)]

Peers were wonderful. They have been through it all before and understood our feelings and desires to be confident & competent.

[(NL)]

Relationships that were built through the near-peer teaching experience were also reported by some as continuing when first years began their clinical placement experience:

I found when I was out on placement this last block that I had first years on the same ward as I was on and they would come up to me and ask me questions about how do you do this and how do you do that.

[(NT)]

3.2. The Course and Related Expectations

The peer-teaching encounter also provided opportunities for junior students to learn more about the course, its requirements and what to expect as the course progressed. This was evidenced by a number of comments from both learners and teachers.

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