



## Clinical education

## Empowering clinical supervisors to flourish through critical companionship

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## ABSTRACT

Education for professional nursing practice has undergone a significant shift over the last few decades impacting nursing practice and the relationship between nurses. Enhancing professional practice and acting as a conduit for empowering nurses to be active participants in their learning and development is Practice Development. This action research project with philosophical premises of critical companionship and human flourishing aimed to develop the knowledge and skills of registered nurses in their ability to provide clinical supervision of nursing students in practice. The overall project consisted of two action research cycles in two different health facilities. Participants in both projects identified similar issues and common learning needs including; how to better understand and develop skills in reflective practice; how to provide a positive learning and enabling environment; and how to provide effective solution focused feedback. Workshop facilitators witnessed the flourishing of participants as they were enabled to negotiate their learning requirements; grow and develop in their roles over the workshop series. Participants themselves identified personal growth in skills, knowledge and confidence in being a preceptor as a result of the workshops in the study. Overall, this study has resulted in the development and capacity building of the nursing workforce clinical placement capacity through the development of clinical supervisors.

## 1. Introduction

In the current complexity of the healthcare environment, there is an increasing need to ensure that registered nurses as clinical supervisors are prepared adequately to support nursing students during their clinical placements in practice (HWA, 2011). Within the Australian context, there is no one definition of the term clinical supervisor (Mackay et al., 2014). For this research project, clinical supervisors will be defined as registered nurses by the clinical placement host organisation and who have a role in assessing and supporting nursing students during their placement. In addition to their role with nursing students, this group of registered nurses also have a role in supporting new nursing staff. Their role of a clinical supervisor is in addition to that of their everyday role as a registered nurse caring for patients or clients. This paper will refer to this group of registered nurses from this point only as clinical supervisors.

There is an assumption in the health care environment that registered nurses have the knowledge, skills, and ability to be effective clinical supervisors (HWA, 2011). This research project upheld this assumption however it further assumed that registered nurses require

support in the form of education to unlock their full potential as clinical supervisors. This education was delivered in the form of four co-designed workshops where the registered nurses as participants and experts in their educational journey identified the groups learning needs and agreed with the workshop facilitators on the content and mode of delivery.

The opportunity for these workshops came about as a result of Health Workforce Australia (HWA) funding opportunities to increase clinical placement capacity (HWA, 2011). Importantly, increasing placement capacity is not only focussed in increasing numbers, it is also focussed on ensuring a quality experience for students in terms of the placement, meeting their learning needs and the provision of quality supervision. Increasing clinical placements has become a joint responsibility for the university and the health care providers (HWA, 2011). The university within this research project partnered with two health-care services in regional and rural NSW who had expressed an interest in developing their registered nurse workforce in term of clinical supervision and their placement capacity.

This research built on previous action research undertaken by Mackay et al. (2014) in Australia. Their research outcomes identified

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that when participants are empowered to be active participants in developing education programs that meet their needs they flourish in their ability to support nursing students in practice. The research team within this current project utilised the existing knowledge and skills drawn from the previous research project to further develop educational support workshops to meet the needs of regional and rural health care providers. This approach enabled the research team to create supportive and dynamic environments enabling authentic partnerships to be realised.

The aim of this paper is to report the outcome of an action research project where participants were empowered to reach their full potential through enhancing their understanding of the role of a clinical supervisor. Further, we discuss how participants were creatively challenged to explore their role in a series of high challenge and high support workshops. Education facilitators within this project acted as critical companions to the participants providing support and role modelling for the duration of the research project.

## 2. Background

This research project has been undertaken through the philosophical premises of critical companionship and human flourishing. The workshop facilitators worked with the participants by valuing clinical supervisors as experts in their learning and valuing the contribution they make to their own growth and development was a fundamental assumption that the researcher in this project held. ‘Working with’ rather ‘doing to’ provided the framework for the development of a trusting relationship that was sustainable and empowered the participants with an active voice within the research project (McCormack et al., 2013; McNiff and Whitehead, 2011).

Critical companionship has an emphasis on the development of a relationship between a critical companion (the workshop facilitator who were academic staff from a regional university in NSW) and the participants (clinical supervisors working within the healthcare provider). Brown and Harrison (2009) acknowledge the nature of this relationship as one of working with others to enable them to reach their full potential. The critical companion relationship is to help the participant to grow both personally and professionally. Through the development of a critical companion relationship, participants are enabled to generate new knowledge and to have a positive impact on the learning culture within their workplace (Titchen, 2004; Manley et al., 2008). Titchen (2004, p. 149) considers critical companionship to be a process that:

brings mind, heart, body, and creative imagination into helping relationships for practice development. It offers a metaphor and framework for an experienced facilitator (often, but not necessarily a colleague) who accompanies another on an experiential learning ... Creating trust and using ‘high challenge’ and ‘high support’, critical companions enable individuals, teams and organisations to transform their roles, relationships, cultures and ways of thinking, being, doing and feeling.

While relationships are central to critical companionship, they also directly impact the learning environment and the theoretical insights uncovered during the relationship. Both participants and the critical companion share in the learning thus benefiting both parties (Titchen and McGinley, 2003). Critical companionship has direct and positive effects on participants understanding of person-centredness which is a fundamental principle of healthcare. Therefore the development of a person-centred high support and high challenge relationship through critical companionship in the workshop context provides a positive role model for clinical supervisors to consider when in practice working with nursing students.

Working with others through critical companionship means that human potential can be fully realised. For McCormack and Titchen (2014) human flourishing draws from Aristotelian thought on human

agency, but can also be conceptualised in contemporary ways. For Heron and Reason (1997) human flourishing relates to how practical knowing is primarily at the service of human flourishing. Therefore, to enhance social and personal fulfillment we need to know how to ‘choose and act’ within those networks or workplace contexts in which we interact. Intellectual knowing is instrumental, supporting practical knowing (Heron and Reason, 1997, p. 11). Accordingly human flourishing is experienced when ‘people achieve beneficial, positive growth that pushes their boundaries in a range of directions ... human flourishing occurs when we move with flow from the point of inner knowing to taking right action effortlessly’ (McCormack and Titchen, 2014, p. 3). It is through person-centred care and culture that human flourishing is enabled, as it acknowledges that health care is not merely based on research developments and technical approaches rather it values the person in both staff and patients/clients.

Human flourishing includes the characteristics of ‘respect, transformational learning, person-centredness, evaluation and the valuing of knowledge and wisdom’ (McCormack et al., 2013, p. 278–279). As a vital outcome, human flourishing is ‘both the means and the end in itself of transformative Practice Development’ (McCormack et al., 2013, p. 278). For this research project, clinical supervisors were valued for the knowledge and practice wisdom they brought with them to the workshops, this was utilised in the co-creation of the workshop content and further enhanced through their participation in practice development which provided the medium for them to explore and deepen their clinical supervision knowledge and skills.

Practice Development draws from the original definition provided by McCormack et al. (2008) and is identified as:

A continuous process of improvement towards increased effectiveness in patient centred care. This is brought about by enabling health care teams to develop their knowledge and skills and to transform the culture and context of care. It is enabled and supported by facilitators committed to systematic, rigorous continuous processes of emancipatory change that reflects the perspectives of both service users and service providers (McCormack et al., 2013, p. 4).

This definition incorporates the vital concept of emancipatory change to ensure individuals develop the skills necessary to overcome barriers to effectiveness. Practice Development has developed into a crucial strategy in developing positive learning cultures within the clinical settings over the last 20 years. This has resulted from responses to dramatic changes, both political and technological impacting the nursing profession and the healthcare culture. Focusing on ‘person-centredness’, Practice Development considers the ‘human factors’ in health care with a particular emphasis on the relationship that impact well-being, leadership, team relationships, morale, satisfaction and a sense of belonging (McCormack et al., 2013, p. 2). In the context of this research project, practice development has provided the creative methods for the clinical supervisors to reflect on their practice and develop tools that will enable them to be better prepared for their role in supporting nursing students during their clinical placement.

At the heart of professional nursing practice, education has undergone a significant shift over the last few decades (Chang and Daly, 2015). This shift has impacted on nursing practice and the relationship between registered nurses in the clinical practice environment and nursing students. This research project hopes to address this to a degree by empowering registered nurses to co-design education that will enable them to flourish to their full potential as clinical supervisors of nursing students in practice.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Methodology and methods

This research project drew on a number of the theoretical

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