



Nursing student and professor perceptions and assessments of the achievement of practicum competencies: A mixed method approach



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ABSTRACT

Within the context of the European Higher Education Area's requirement of competency-based assessments, the objective of the present study was to evaluate the Nursing Degree Practicum experience at the University of Girona (Spain) and ascertain student and faculty perceptions of the degree of competency achieved as a result of the practicum. This cross-sectional, descriptive, study combined quantitative analysis of a questionnaire and qualitative analysis of focus group comments. In the quantitative part of the study, 163 fourth-year nursing students completed the questionnaire; the qualitative analysis was derived from a focus group of 5 students and 5 professors.

On the questionnaire, overall practicum evaluation was 8.39 on a 10-point Likert scale; scores evaluating the nurse mentor/instructor and nursing professor were 8.43 and 7.98, respectively. The geriatrics practicum experience received the lowest overall score (7.81), while the surgical practicum received the lowest score on the adequacy of knowledge acquired in the classroom in previous courses (5.54). The best scores were earned by the mental health and intensive/emergency care practicum experiences (a mean of 9.05 and 8.70, respectively). Students and professors in the focus group agreed that the practicum met the Nursing degree program's competency goals, highlighting practical activity as the best methodology to evaluate competencies. Participants highlighted the importance of reflective practice and the role of the nurse mentor/instructor in student learning, and indicated that it is essential for the university and the health care centers where students take practicum courses to maintain a strong relationship and good communication. Finally, feedback from the nurse mentor/instructor and Nursing professor was very important to students, both to motivate them and to help them learn.

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1. Introduction

Practicum is an educational activity that provides training at an off-campus site, mainly at health care facilities, and integrates the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that have been acquired throughout the degree program in Nursing. This is an important part of the training received by nursing students and gives them the opportunity to experience the professional life of a nurse (Levett-Jones and Bourgeois, 2009). In accordance with European Higher Education Area (EHEA) directives, practicum experience is evaluated on the basis of competencies acquired; in other words, the capacity or skill required to complete a

task successfully (ten Cate and Scheele, 2007). Nonetheless, Eraut (1994) considered a competent person to be not only someone with the needed competencies, but one who can apply them and can make decisions and judgments that are appropriate to the context. This makes competency a multidimensional concept that is complex to measure (National Education Framework, 2008; Yanhua and Watson, 2011); as a result, the first difficulty faced in evaluating practicum students based on their competencies is the broad and ambiguous definition of the concept.

Multiple observations are required during the practicum experience to determine whether a nursing student is competent, and the observations must include a great diversity of contexts and consider more than one perspective or focus (Epstein and Hundert, 2002). Some authors describe the difficulty of determining student competency based on the level of performance (Watson et al., 2002). The National Education Framework (2008) highlights the need to incorporate various methods into the assessment of competencies. On the other hand, Zupiria-Gorostidi et al. (2003) showed that the main source of students' stress

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is “lack of competency”, both at the beginning and at the end of their nursing studies.

The nursing degree program, in consonance with EHEA directives, often chooses reflective practice as a teaching methodology during the practicum. Reflective practice is a process of learning and development through the examination of one's own practice, opening it up to scrutiny by others and taking into account the scientific evidence that support it (Dahl and Eriksen, 2015; Goudreau et al., 2015). Some authors (Gustafsson and Fagerberg, 2004; Peden-McAlpine et al., 2005) have shown that nurses use reflection during their learning process and, using reflective practice, they change their point of view with respect to patients' families, modifying their values and beliefs.

Portfolios, reflective journals, tutorials, clinical sessions and practical activity are considered appropriate learning activities for assessing competencies in reflective practice. The portfolio develops critical thinking, promotes discussion between student and professor, and helps students strengthen their reflection skills and self-assessment ability during the practicum (Buckley et al., 2009; McMullan et al., 2003). The reflective journal improves abilities related to clinical decision-making (Fakude and Bruce, 2003). Carlson et al. (2009) define tutorials as a continuous process that includes different levels and establishes open communication focused on the student's individual learning needs. In 2009, the Nursing Department of the University of Girona (Spain) initiated its practicum coursework, following the new EHEA directives that require an assessment of the practicum upon full implementation of the four-year university degree in nursing.

2. Objectives

The study objective was to evaluate the fourth-year practicum course of the Nursing degree program at the University of Girona (Spain), and to gather student and faculty perceptions of the achievement of required competencies using the various learning activities.

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

This was a cross-sectional, descriptive study combining quantitative analysis of a questionnaire and qualitative analysis of focus group comments, carried out between September 2013 and May 2014.

3.2. Population and Setting

The study population was fourth-year nursing students at the University of Girona, Catalonia.

3.3. Definitions

The third- and fourth-year Nursing degree curriculum includes practicum rotations in general hospital nursing, community nursing, and five required specialty areas completed (in any order) over these final two years of study: surgical, maternity, geriatrics, intensive/emergency care, and mental health. The present study focused on the four-week specialty rotations, two of which are completed in the third year and the remaining three during the fourth year. Students were asked specifically about their fourth-year rotations in three specialty areas.

Two main instructional roles exist: professor and nurse mentor/instructor. The professors are university faculty members who provide tutorials and monitor and evaluate the practicum activities: portfolio, reflective journal, and clinical sessions. Each professor is responsible for about 5 students in each practicum rotation. A nurse mentor/instructor working in the specific center where the student is assigned for the practicum also provides instruction. This nurse receives training from the Nursing faculty in the relevant curriculum material, reflective practice, and the different learning methodologies used in

the practicum. The responsibility of the mentor/instructor is to provide training, monitor the student's clinical practice activities and evaluate them based on observation.

3.4. Study Sample

The quantitative part of the study involved a population of 253 students, of which 163 (64.43%) participated in the survey. The qualitative part of the study consisted of a focus group of 5 students and a second focus group of 5 practicum professors. These participants were recruited as a convenience sample using the snowball technique.

The inclusion criterion for students was the same for the quantitative and qualitative studies: fourth-year status in the Nursing degree program. By definition, these students have completed practicum rotations in two of the five required nursing specialty areas and are enrolled in the remaining three required specialty rotations.

3.5. Instruments

The quantitative part of the study consisted of an *ad hoc* questionnaire that had two sections:

1. Sociodemographic data (age and sex) and questions related to evaluating the practicum. Using a 10-point Likert scale, students were asked to provide a general evaluation of the instruction and training they received from the nurse mentor/instructor at the health care center(s) where they completed a practicum, the monitoring provided by the practicum professor, the usefulness of the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom before beginning their practicum experience, and their overall satisfaction with the practicum.
2. Questions related to the students' evaluation of the specific methodologies used during the practicum (practical activity, portfolio, reflective journal, tutorials and clinical session). Students were asked if these methodologies had helped them to acquire the 19 required competencies related to the practicum, and to indicate which learning methodologies helped them to achieve each competency (marking all that applied).

The qualitative part of the study was a semi-structured group interview, with one focus group of practicum students and another of practicum professors. From a phenomenological perspective, information was collected about the achievement of the competencies related to the practicum, their evaluation of the learning methodologies used to assess their competency, and their evaluation of the usefulness during the practicum of the knowledge and abilities previously acquired in the classroom.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Dean of Nursing at the University of Girona (Spain) in accordance with university policies on classroom research. Students and professors who participated in the study received information about the study. Confidentiality and the anonymization of data was guaranteed under Spanish law (BOE, 1999) protecting data of a personal nature; signed informed consent was obtained from focus group participants.

3.7. Data Collection Procedures

The study questionnaire was administered by the researchers and other professors who participated in the study as students completed their practicum in the different centers. At the same time, students and professors were also invited to participate in the focus groups for more in-depth discussion related to the study objective.

The focus groups were carried out in a nursing classroom; two researchers participated in each session, one in the role of observer. To avoid possible bias, the student focus group was led by individuals

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