Developing activities to help students achieve learning outcomes in practice placements

Outlining the development of an online structured framework to help student nurses achieve assessment learning outcomes during practice placements

INTRODUCTION
In 1999 the UKCC recommended the improvement of clinical placements and highlighted the need to consider the context of modern health care delivery. The modernisation agenda and The NHS Plan (Department of Health, 2000) supported this. Placements in Focus: Guidance for Education in Practice for Healthcare Professions (DH and English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting, 2001) also said quality of placements needed improvement.

The School of Health and Social Care at the University of the West of England (UWE) has adopted an outcome-based competency approach. Here, we explain how a competency-based clinical assessment document was developed, which now forms part of student nurses' professional portfolio.

BACKGROUND
In response to the separation of nursing practice and education, academic tutors at the School of Health and Social Care were allocated to placement areas and became link tutors.

Their role was to support and facilitate students and mentors in practice, enhancing the learning environment and undertaking educational audits (Cave, 2005). However, it was felt that educators’ clinical role was unclear and undervalued and that heavy workloads left insufficient time for support and facilitation.

During 2000–2001, the link tutor role was replaced by the clinical education facilitator (CEF) role. CEFs were appointed jointly by the university and trusts to address these issues.

During this collaboration, mentors found the competencies difficult to interpret the academic language of the learning outcomes in the context of actual clinical practice. This was especially true in areas where students were working with a variety of professionals and the same learning on placement. However, this was not accessible to all mentors because of the sheer number of placements and lack of resource files.

The academic link tutors had developed an online ‘library of activities’ for students. The library and the resource file had been produced separately and it was clear that a collaborative project would be better for both students and mentors.

During this collaboration, CEFs became practice education facilitators (PEFs).

Student and mentor feedback
After the new system was introduced, concerns were raised about students’ experience of clinical placement from mentors and students.

Mentors reported that students were unprepared and unaware of possible learning opportunities. Students felt that learning opportunities had changed considerably, and many felt isolated and unwelcome in the clinical setting (Twentyman et al, 2006). They added that inadequate staffing or heavy workloads meant that mentors were not always accessible. Competing demands can affect mentors’ ability to support students (Wilkes, 2006).

Another factor was the move from small, local colleges of nursing to higher education institutions (HEIs). Some students were given placements up to 50km from the university, which increased their sense of isolation.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that many mentors found the competencies difficult to assess. They also sometimes found it difficult to interpret the academic language of the learning outcomes in the context of actual clinical practice. This was especially true in areas where students were working with a variety of professionals and the same learning.
outcome had to be matched to the various clinical learning opportunities.

The difficulty in establishing parity of student evidence between mentors was apparent in both literature and anecdotal.

**LIBRARY OF ACTIVITIES**

To address the issues of parity of information and learning opportunities, in 2001 Christine Stevens and Carol Clark developed a website of information for students. This detailed learning opportunities and gave information about placements and suggestions on how to fulfill the competencies in these areas.

The documentation needed to be more user-friendly, so a ‘library of activities’ was set up. This online, structured framework helps students to identify learning needs and guides them towards achieving learning outcomes. It also helps mentors to identify valid evidence and suggests ways to support students.

**Establishing the PEF role**

To improve student support in the practice area, the PEF role was established in 2002. It was refined following the Student Learning in Practice Project (University of the West of England et al, 2002). The project identified the positive impact of the CEF (now PEF) role on practice education and the difficulty link lecturers had in meeting practice obligations.

The key responsibilities of the PEF were to:

- Develop and increase the capacity of the clinical placements;
- Be a resource to mentors, ensuring their mentorship/assessment skills were annually updated via the four-year development cycle (UWE et al, 2004);
- Develop and enhance the learning environment, acting as a conduit between practice and UWE, and endeavouring to bridge the theory-practice gap for students;
- Troubleshoot problems and support mentors over challenging student behaviour;
- Develop strategies to support mentors and students to achieve learning outcomes.

**Amalgamating work**

PEFs used action plans to help mentors through the formative and summative stages of assessment. Action planning appeared to be related to particular competencies, and anecdotal evidence suggested interpretation of these competencies varied.

Both the HEIs and PEFs were trying to address similar issues – PEFs for the mentors and the academics for the students. They decided to amalgamate their work into the library of activities.

This partnership has had a positive effect. The library offers a user-friendly approach by providing guidance and a clearer understanding of what can be used as evidence for competency achievement.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSES**

Wilkes (2006) suggested that student-mentor relationships can be hampered by multiple demands and limited resources.

Potentially, the library of activities can help address part of this problem by providing a resource that benefits both students and mentors, helping them to achieve learning outcomes in bite-sized portions. Evidence to show that learning outcomes have been achieved can be downloaded from the internet and added to a student’s portfolio of evidence.

The library of activities is aimed primarily at the student as an independent learner who is required to provide evidence.

It is hoped that students will become more active with the provision of a self-directed learning environment that enables them to work at a pace that meets their needs (Cooze and Barbour, 2007). This student-centred approach promotes constructivist thinking (one in which individual learners construct knowledge for themselves).

Using a web-based facility means that activities can be made interactive. A communication crossword, for example, demonstrates the student’s knowledge of communication.

**CONCLUSION**

The library of activities is adaptable and still evolving; currently it includes puzzles, podcasts and quizzes, all of which are designed to engage students.

The activities are standardised by the NMC code (NMC, 2008) and are in line with Fitness for Practice (UKCC, 1999) and the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (DH, 2003).

The library reflects the university’s philosophy of promoting evidence-based practice and blended learning.

Many mentors are using the library activities and, as these activities become interactive, students are enjoying completing them.

The library is increasing the parity and equity of the student learning experience. The collaboration of experts from practice and academia is proving to be extremely successful in developing the content of the library.

**REFERENCES**


**BACKGROUND**

- Nursing practice and education were separated in the late 1990s – this has often made it more difficult for nurses to produce evidence of achievement in practice.
- Mentors have expressed concern about how best to support student nurses and how to gather evidence that they are achieving in practice.
- Mentors have found the academic jargon used in assessment documentation difficult to understand.
- The government’s modernisation agenda and The NHS Plan (DH, 2000) support the call for an improvement in placements.

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