'Show us you know us': using the Senses Framework to support the professional development of undergraduate nursing students

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Title of Article:**‘SHOW US YOU KNOW US’: USING THE SENSES FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNDER-GRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS****Authors**

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Abstract

As students, fledgling nurses need to feel they belong to a community of academics, peers and mentors who value their contribution to learning and knowledge. Creating a sense of community allows students to experience academic and practice integration at the beginning of their professional journey, recognising that positive learning experiences at an early stage of professional maturation can shape lifelong attitudes to learning and discovery. The Senses Framework has been used to develop supportive working in relation to older adults; it also has resonance for the development of undergraduate nurses. This article focuses on the student experience, exploring the potential for the Senses Framework to underpin a learning community, promoting collaboration and acknowledging the emotional, academic and professional work that is now essential for the preparation of registered nurse in the 21st Century.

Introduction

Historically nursing has been associated with vocation; a 'calling'; to perform selfless public service caring for the 'sick and suffering' (Rognstad 2002 p 321). Over the past 150 years, however the profession has changed, become secularised and roles more complex and challenging (Rognstad 2002). Nursing is moving from vocational to professional status, evidenced by the recent move towards graduate exit programmes in the United Kingdom (UK). The motivation to nurse however remains grounded in the desire 'to help and care for others' (Mooney et al 2008 p 385). Applicants to UK undergraduate nursing courses believe nursing to be as profession which offers both job satisfaction and the opportunity for professional development (Mooney et al 2008). Although the profession cannot take for granted that individuals will continue to apply as their first choice, applications for undergraduate places, including nursing places, have markedly increased since 2007 (Guardian 2009).

Contemporary student nurses are not a homogeneous group. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN 2008), report that rather than entering straight from school, seven out of every ten individuals who applied were in paid employment prior to commencing undergraduate nursing studies. Andrew et al (2007) and Andrew et al (2009) discuss the importance of acknowledging both the collective and individual needs of undergraduate student nurses. The QAA (2005a; 2005b) recommended that HEI's (Higher Education Institutions) identify sub-groups within the first year undergraduate population (school leavers, college articulation

students and mature entrants) in order to tailor support at pre-entry and transition into first year. Despite the current trend towards increased applications, Mooney et al (2008) maintain that overall, demographic trends indicate that if the profession is to continue to attract high quality applicants, in the number required, careful attention will have to be paid to the issues of recruitment and retention.

Nursing is a discipline that promotes and values nurturing and the holistic care of the individual (Lemonidou et al 2004). Early experience is highly influential in the formation of personhood and 'moral agency' or awareness and is an important part of the nurse's development (p121). Early clinical experiences can, according to Lemonidou et al (2004), shape future attitudes to caring. If students encounter negative feelings, ethical transgressions and poor practice at an early stage, it may lead them to examine their motivation to remain. Where, however, these feelings are shared with peers, mentors and academic staff, a sense of 'fellowship' develops, based on community working and living (p129). This promotes exploration of previously internalised feelings of disappointment and turmoil that result from initial exposure to professional discontent or disappointment. Equally within Higher Education (HE) students need to feel that they belong to an academic community that values their contribution to learning and knowledge as early experience often shapes lifelong attitudes to learning and discovery (Gallagher 2007).

This article explores what it means to be a student on an undergraduate nursing programme (primarily in Scotland) and how we could, using an adaptation of the Senses Framework, create a supportive learning community to nurture the professional development of students throughout their academic/practice journey.

Student experience

Nursing attracts a diverse student population. The RCN (2008) report that currently only 30% of nursing students in Scotland are aged between 18-24 years with 22% aged between 25-30 years, 20% between 35-and 40 and 16% over 40 years. In 2002, attrition rates in pre-registration nursing programmes in the UK (United Kingdom) were estimated to be between 27%-40%. In 2006, data showed an overall rate of 24.8% (Bowden 2008). Most of the research into attrition tends to focus on 'autopsy studies'; quantifying why students choose to leave and not what keeps them motivated to remain, even when the 'going gets tough' (Yorke 1999). The RCN (2008) states that 42% of nursing students in Scotland (44% UK) have

considered leaving their course and that of those, three quarters (73%) did not make their personal tutor aware of this.

The literature acknowledges the complex and challenging nature of undergraduate nursing programmes and highlights the steep learning curve that students undertake to 'adapt to and span both an academic and professional environment' (Andrew et al 2009 p18). Andrew et al (2009) highlight the fact that students want to feel they belong to and be part of a community. To become a registered nurse, individuals function both as a student in Higher Education (HE) and as a novice practitioner and they need to be adequately prepared for both roles. Timmins and Kaliszer (2002) found that student nurses can experience both academic and work related stress. They conclude that this, in part, may be caused by general 'non-integration' into the university sector due to constant alternation between academic and the placement settings; not spending enough time in either to develop a sense of identity and belonging (p207).

Students however appear to stay because there is a strong commitment to finish their programme of study, with many actively choosing to leave previous employment in order to undertake a nursing programme (RCN 2008). McKendry et al (2010) identify that a positive first year is regarded as pivotal, promoting longer term adaptation to the educational environment; vital for a successful undergraduate experience. Transition issues may well be intensified for nursing students as they are required to adjust quickly to multi-environment working. To promote successful transition and professional development students should be nurtured within an expert community; one that exposes them to excellence in scholarship, practice and supervision. Thorne (2006) argues that in order to produce graduates who can take a leading role in health care policy and provision we must blend expertise and academic skill within a nurturing and supportive environment.

Student support

The theme of belonging recurs regularly in the literature in relation to undergraduate nurses (Levett Jones et al 2007; Andrew et al 2008; Andrew et al 2009; McKendry et al 2010). The RCN (2008) clearly identify that students want to be recognised and valued as individuals and require a continuous level of high quality support throughout their programme of study. Students clearly articulate their need to belong. From a very early stage in their development; they want to feel part of the profession and to develop a sense of professional identity

(Andrew et al 2009). In order to belong, students need to adapt, in equal measure, to clinical and educational environments and they need to do this at the beginning of their professional journey. Andrew et al (2009) discuss the impact of the first year in higher education and compare the move into nursing as moving from one way of life, (familiar and known) to another (unfamiliar and unknown). They maintain that students need to learn to behave as nurses and as students and believe that they need to feel supported, involved and valued from the very start of their journey. Nursing students have to adapt to and span both academic and professional environments and 'they have to do this quickly'; if adaptation does not happen in the early stages then it 'may not happen at all' (p18).

The quality of support is key to the twin challenges of progression and retention. The RCN (2008) are clear about student priorities and reveal that good academic support can make the difference between opting to stay and work through problems (whether financial, personal or academic), or leave. Andrew et al (2009) found that the quality of mentoring in early clinical experience was literally a 'make or break' issue (p17). What is clear however is the fact that support has to come from both the university and the clinical areas in equal measure and that this support should present as an integrated whole. There is little doubt that effective mentoring really makes a difference to the way in which students view their role in the workplace and that supportive lecturers can help students to overcome academic challenges (Andrew 2009). The literature commonly reflects a focus on one aspect or the other; less often do we discuss systems that span academic and clinical areas. If we are to achieve the practitioner of the future, one who can span both clinical and academic environments we should nurture the concept of community from pre-registration onwards (O'Conner 2007).

The Senses Framework comprises six senses that are 'pre-requisites for good relationships within the context of care and service delivery'; they are security; continuity; belonging; purpose; achievement and significance (Ryan et al 2007 p 79). Nolan et al (2004) contextualise these six senses to the care needs of older adults; however they are of equal importance to student nurses who are also at the centre of a network of complex relationships socially, educationally and professionally.

Relevance of the Senses Framework to the undergraduate student experience

The Senses Framework has roots in the Advancing Gerontological Education in Nursing (AGEIN) project which was a three and a half year project commissioned by the former

English National Board (ENB) for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting and published in 2002 (Nolan et al 2002). The overall aims of the project were to develop an 'epistemology of practice and education for practitioners involved in the care of older people' (Brown et al 2008 p 1217). This was a multi-method, multi-stage project the conceptual phase of which concluded that the Senses Framework (Nolan 2001) might illuminate students' experiences of 'learning to care for older people' (Brown et al 2008 p 1217). Consequently a total of 67 focus groups were conducted with students over a three year period. In addition a total of 40 placement visits were undertaken by the project team. The AGEIN project, summarised in Nolan et al (2008), found that positive placements are essential for successful undergraduate student experience, helping students to 'consolidate their vision of what nursing is about' (Brown et al 2008).

In 2005, in response to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA Scotland 2005a) Enhancement Theme, focussing on the first year experience in higher education, a small team of academics at Glasgow Caledonian University introduced a comprehensive approach to induction in the first year of learning. The Enhance Project also utilised a multi-method approach to data collection and evaluation underpinned by an action research framework. The research spanned three years (2005-2008) and utilised questionnaires and focus groups with a range of stakeholders (academic staff, students, practice education facilitators, and senior managers) to explore and describe practice experience of a cohort of first year undergraduate nurses (n=555). The findings from this project highlight the need for early professional development to be seen as an integrated whole; 'greater than the sum of its parts' and 'overwhelmingly indicate' that equal support from clinicians and academics working in partnership is essential to the successful completion of first year (Andrew et al 2009 p13).

The findings from this study also indicated that positive placements were linked to a successful undergraduate student experience (Andrew et al 2009). In 2009, two members of the team that had originally worked on the Enhance Project collaborated with one of the lead researchers involved in the AGEIN project, who along with a small team of researchers was engaged in a research study to develop a 'Profile of Learning Achievements in Care Environments'; the PLACE Project. This is a toolkit for assessing and enhancing the quality of learning in health care environments from the perspectives of registered nurses, nursing students, care assistants, older people and family carers. The findings of this study are currently the subject of a separate publication.

Collaboration between project staff triggered a process of knowledge transfer and cross-fertilisation of ideas, identifying links from the work of both projects with application to current undergraduate nursing practice. The work of the PLACE team concentrated on the clinical learning environment related to older adults; however it became apparent, at the outset that this work also resonated with the experience of undergraduate students in all clinical/theoretical placements. The overarching aim of this collaboration was to take forward the work of the PLACE project, with a sub-aim of exploring the possibility of building on the work of the Enhance Project to establish a supportive learning community intended to nurture the professional development of the students throughout their academic journey.

Brown et al (2006) revealed that different senses were rated as more important by students at different stages of the undergraduate nursing programme. For example; a sense of security was not surprisingly seen as very important at the beginning of the programme and again recurred at the end of the programme just prior to qualification as student faced the prospect of becoming registered nurses. The work of the Place Project emphasised the need for continued exploration of the experience of the student group at different points of the academic journey to ensure a continuously high frequency of achievement of the various senses. The Enhance Project focussed on key aspects of transition; adaptation and belonging as part of the first year experience in nursing. Members of both teams collaborated to explore further the components of a supportive learning community and to contextualise this to the undergraduate student experience.

Building a supportive undergraduate learning community

A review of project findings was initially undertaken by members of both project teams. The result of this work evolved as an adapted and adaptive framework for undergraduate support, shown below in table 1. This framework uses the senses as a vehicle to support undergraduate academic and professional development.

Table 1: Creating a Community for Learning in Nursing: Implementing the Senses Framework in Undergraduate Nursing

Senses Framework	Pre-Registration Application
A sense of security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To have the emotional and physical demands of work and study recognised by academic and clinical staff
A sense of continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous and integrated exposure to positive role models across academic and practice settings. Expectations of academic and practice achievement are articulated clearly and consistently
A sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be part of a learning community
A sense of purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To have a sense of the integrated academic/practice direction of pre-registration nursing
A sense of achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be proud of and celebrate both individual and collective peer achievement
A sense of significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To feel that you as an individual matter at both academic and practice levels throughout your course and preparation for practice as a registered nurse

(Adapted from Ryan et al 2008)

In the table shown above, the senses are linked to the needs of undergraduate nursing students. The statements in the application section emerged from the findings of the Enhance Project and were agreed with Place Project researchers. Students, practitioners and academics alike identify the need for continuity through clear integration of theory and practice and exposure to excellence and expert clinicians from the beginning of the professional journey. Students express the need to have both their emotional and physical effort recognised to help build a sense of security and a sense of belonging and purpose is seen by all participants as paramount to a successful first year experience. Clinicians and academics clearly perceive collaborative working as a vehicle to promote integration and all participants identify the need for meaningful professional involvement to document achievement from the first year onwards (Andrew 2009).

The sense of significance is allied to a sense of purpose and belonging; students need to be recognised as individuals who matter at both academic and practice levels. In the original work by Nolan et al (2004), the Senses Framework is linked to relationship centred care. They describe the use of this approach in relation to the *respect for personhood* and acknowledge that the individual is at the centre of a complex network of relationships with others. It is this concept of personhood that makes the sense of significance such an important

part of undergraduate support. The concept of personhood underpins the Senses Framework and is described by as the 'standing or status bestowed upon one human being by others' (Nolan et al 2004 p47). In a similar way Lemonidou et al (2004) discuss the notion of professional personhood, describing the development professional standing and status in nursing. In the study investigating students' views on gerontological nursing, Brown et al (2008; 2009; 2010) highlight the characteristics of an impoverished environment; these include staff who lack appropriate skills and knowledge and poor investment in CPD (continuing professional development). In particular, they found that the crucial factor present in an impoverished environment is staff attitude. Their study focuses on the clinical learning environment; however staff attitude is paramount in academic as well as clinical settings (RCN 2008).

Fisher (2005) believes that a model encompassing the roles of academic and clinical staff spanning both education and practice, acceptable and meaningful in both spheres, could foster clinical/academic collaboration. This process is similar to the construction of Communities of Practice (CoPs) as described by Wenger (1998) blending the best of both roles to enhance the learning potential across clinical and educational settings at pre and post-registration levels. O'Conner (2007) suggests that all nurses should be working as part of a community and believes that a professional space is required to bind members together and allow them to develop an understanding of what their community is about.

Conclusion

The findings of the Place and Enhance Projects re-enforce the theory that nursing students need to acclimatise to the dual nature of academic and practice learning. Students have to learn to behave like nurses and also to behave like students. The need to create a community that embraces aspects of both theory and practice is one of the big issues in nursing education. The adapted Senses Framework described in this article is an approach that values student effort in all areas of professional life, taking into account the emotional as well as the academic and professional work that are part of the process of becoming a registered practitioner.

In Higher Education our core business is the preparation of the next generation of nurses. A model that promotes effective collaboration across academic and practice areas reflects the growing number of nursing posts that routinely span both. Contemporary working in

healthcare settings is increasing underpinned by communities of practice and these are more difficult to achieve if we do not involve all nurses, from undergraduates onwards. Involving students in the creation of a community environment from the beginning will prepare them for practice as qualified nurses in a changing and increasingly volatile professional environment.

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