Learning experiences of seconded pre-registration nursing students


Abstract

Aim To explore the academic learning experiences of seconded students in a pre-registration adult nursing programme.

Method Academic learning experiences were examined using a self-report questionnaire which was distributed to 29 students. Twenty seven responses were received and were assessed in terms of: peer support; shared knowledge, life experiences and levels of understanding; motivation; and peer learning.

Findings Seconded students perceived a variety of benefits from being part of a discrete group organised specifically for them. They valued the support of peers, and shared existing knowledge and skills to help each other to learn.

Conclusion Seconded students may benefit from being taught in segregated groups. The students developed a strong learner identity and had different needs to their non-seconded peers. More work is required to explore the specific learning needs of seconded students, particularly during the common foundation element of the programme.

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Keywords

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Background

Research on learning in nursing education is well documented. Two areas of relevance are the impact of working in small groups and the experiences of mature students. The majority of research on learning in groups seeks to explain group learning in general education (Slavin 1996, Will 1997, Spalding et al 1999). There are few studies of group learning in nurse education specifically, and fewer focusing on seconded students.

Co-operative learning involves working together on tasks, discussion and peer review to reinforce each individual’s learning.
Collaborative learning is characterised by more open-ended shared enquire, where individuals in the group work together to construct knowledge (Will 1997). The students participating in this research are involved in elements of collaboration and co-operative learning since both methods are used in problem-based learning. An examination of group learning among school and college participants addressed four theoretical perspectives on co-operative learning: motivational, social cohesion, cognitive and developmental perspectives (Slavin 1996).

A motivational perspective focuses on reward systems or goal structures. Reward systems for adult students may differ from those for school or college students; however, motivational perspectives of students at various ages are yet to be examined. A social cohesion perspective suggests that students will help one another to learn because they want each other to succeed. The cognitive perspective focuses on interactions among students to increase levels of achievement through mental processing of information. The developmental perspective is linked to theories of cognitive development, where interaction on appropriate tasks increases students’ mastery of critical concepts (Slavin 1996).

The experiences of mature female students in pre-registration nursing were explored by Kevern and Webb (2004). They found that, although nurse education programmes have undergone restructuring, little progress has been made in identifying mechanisms that support mature students. The approach taken in this study may be one such mechanism.

**Aim**

The study aimed to examine seconded nursing students’ perceptions of their academic learning experiences. It formed part of a larger study evaluating the experiences of all students who had started nursing study in September 2000 (Ousey 2003). Specific aims of the study were to describe seconded students’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of being a discrete group, and to examine seconded students’ views about peer learning.

**Method**

A self-report questionnaire was developed to address the aims of the study using eight open-ended and closed questions (Box 1).

The questionnaire elicited qualitative and quantitative responses. Each questionnaire was coded to preserve anonymity. Students were given information about the study and an opportunity to ask questions about the research. Twenty-nine seconded students commenced a Diploma of Higher Education in Nursing (adult branch) programme in September 2000, leading to initial registration as registered nurses. The questionnaire was administered in 2003 at the end of the three-year programme as part of course evaluations; 27 students completed the questionnaire. On completion of the course, the age range of the students was between 24 and 57 years. Thirteen students were in their 40s on completion of the programme. Seconded students tended to be older than their non-seconded counterparts because many non-seconded students entered the nurse education programme via further education at 18.

Burnard’s (1991) 14-stage framework was used to analyse the data, from which five themes emerged: peer support; shared knowledge, life experiences and levels of understanding; motivation; and peer learning. The students’ own words have been reported so as not to dilute the meaning. In many cases more than one student used the same words or phrases in their responses. The researcher was one of the programme lecturers, and so was in contact with students on an occasional basis, but had little knowledge of individual students. Student responses were collected anonymously and coded for ease of data analysis. It was made clear to the students that their words would be used in reporting the findings but that individual students would not be identified. The letters ‘P’ and ‘H’ are used to signify the two base groups into which the seconded students were divided.

**BOX 1**

**The self-report questionnaire**

- How much nursing experience did you have before starting the course?
- How old are you now?
- Do you think there are benefits to being in a group with other seconded students? If so, what are the benefits?
- Are there any disadvantages to being in a base group with other seconded students? If so, what are the disadvantages?
- Do you meet up with your base group colleagues to undertake trigger work? If so, tell me about these meetings.
- Tell me about your experiences of learning from your fellow students within your base group.
- As a seconded student do you feel your learning experiences have been different from non-seconded students? If so, can you tell me about these differences?
- As a seconded student are your learning needs different from non-seconded students? If so, can you describe these differences?

* For further information on trigger work see Roberts and Ousey (2004)
Findings and discussion

All respondents had previous healthcare experience. Experience ranged from one to 30 years, and 18 students had between five and 19 years previous healthcare experience. Most seconded students had worked as healthcare assistants, although some had been dental nurses or held administrative posts in the NHS.

Peer support Students described how they gained a great deal of support from their peers. Students ‘understood each other’ (P04, P10, P14, P15, H20, H22) and ‘felt a bond of trust and understanding’ (P08, P15, H19, H24) which enabled them to support each other. Nine respondents emphasised their need for support from their peers. Respondents reported that they were able to support each other because they were ‘in the same boat’ (P04).

Three dimensions of peer support have previously been identified: facilitating learning, providing emotional support and assisting with physical tasks (Campbell et al 1994). In Campbell et al’s (1994) study, students reported that emotional support from peers provided a sense of ‘family’, and that peers understood them in a unique way. Peer support was perceived as an important mechanism in ‘getting each other through’. Although Campbell et al’s study was conducted in Canada, where the nurse education system is different, similar themes are highlighted in the current study population.

The findings from the seconded students demonstrate that peer support may be more important to some students than others, and that there may be a relationship between the age of the student and his or her need for support. Spouse (2003) suggests that younger university students can gain social support from sharing living accommodation because this provides them with a greater opportunity to share their experiences.

Social support systems have been shown to benefit nursing students and are important in nursing education (Spouse 2003). The curriculum for mature students, particularly those who do not share accommodation, can preclude them from developing peer groups that can be accessed for support and learning. Grouping students for the duration of an educational programme may be one way to enable consistent and constant peer support among nursing students.

Shared knowledge, life experiences and levels of understanding Students’ responses showed that they shared prior knowledge, skills and experiences to help each other to learn. They used the base group as the forum for sharing previous experiences from practice and general life.

Evidence from other studies suggests that dialogue in the classroom setting is important for helping nursing students to attain meaning of their practice encounters. In Savin-Baden’s (2000) research, students used problem-based learning groups to highlight their understanding of interrelationships between problem-solving processes, prior experience and new learning material. Students’ dialogue with their peers helped them to tackle problems and to integrate new learning into practice and general life.

Dialogue and subsequent learning are linked to the development of a ‘learner identity’ which is a self-perception of being an active learner (Savin-Baden 2000). Problem-based learning groups can promote consideration about practice with other nursing students which improves understanding. Such dialogue may be more useful if it takes place outside the clinical setting. Students use problem-based learning groups to enable them to make sense of interrelationships between problem-solving processes, prior experience and new material being learned. Through dialogue with peers, students consider how to tackle a given problem and thus integrate that which was previously incomprehensible (Savin-Baden 1998).

Sharing experiences through group discussion can promote ‘cognitive elaboration’ (Slavin 1996). Effective elaboration involves explaining material to someone else. Students who are likely to benefit from co-operative learning may be those who tell their stories to others and, in so doing, provide elaborate explanations. This approach could be encouraged in adult learning with the use of groups to promote sharing of elaborate explanations.

Students from the current study reported that they had some understanding of nursing before commencing the programme. Students’ levels of understanding were perceived to be similar across the group, although there was no formal testing of this before starting the course. Most respondents assumed that the knowledge and skills they had were appropriate, and commented that they did not want their lecturers or themselves to ‘waste time’ (P10, P13) in explaining ‘basic nursing care, simple nursing activities and multidisciplinary working’ (H16, H18).

‘As a seconded student… some lectures on time-management and communication are not appropriate. You have been seconded because you have developed these skills, and have been selected for secondment because of this’ (H21). Students commented that they learned clinical skills from base-group members who had worked in a variety of different clinical settings, however, these skills were not identified in the current study. As students did not work together in the same practice placement demonstration of skills would not have been possible. Therefore, they must have shared their skills by using other conversational methods. Motivation Some respondents expressed that the group members had a strong work ethic because...
they were seconded. They expressed this through statements such as ‘wanting to be [on the programme], having a real desire to learn and putting every effort into studying’ (H17, H18, H19, H23). This sense of group togetherness may be an example of social cohesion, whereby students help one another to learn because they care about one another and want each other to succeed (Slavin 1996). Anecdotally, the lecturers who supported these two groups throughout the three-year programme also commented that the seconded students had a strong work ethic.

Students appeared to be aware of their financial position and felt that being with students who had not been seconded was potentially problematic. Responses which demonstrate this include: ‘I would feel awful sitting next to a student who was having to take on part-time work to make ends meet when I’m being paid my normal wages… I didn’t have to hide the fact that I was being paid… it would be detrimental to be sitting next to a student who wasn’t being paid’ (P01, P04, P06, P09, P14, H17, H21, H24).

Students perceived that being in a discrete group had some disadvantages. Some students stated that they needed to share experiences with all of their peers, rather than just those from the same base group, and that they had fewer opportunities to meet other students. Respondents commented that during sessions where all branches were taught together ‘it was refreshing to hear fellow students with no nursing experience talk about their views and approaches to nursing… they don’t bring with them old attitudes and values’ (P03, H21, H24).

Seconded students with less experience than other group members expressed a feeling of being ‘left behind, insecure and disadvantaged’ (P10, H20, H23). These students may have lacked self-confidence associated with the amount of time they had spent in practice before starting the programme. They seemed to be in awe of their more experienced counterparts, and their own relative lack of experience was perceived as a negative trait.

Peer learning  Peer learning had an important role for seconded students in this study who used their experiences to help each other to learn. The students learned vicariously through other’s clinical experiences, for example, they listened to peer discussions on clinical practice and related what was said to their own experiences. This process is central to peer learning. One respondent commented: ‘My fellow students help me to view things from a different perspective, we tell each other about good and bad experiences’ (P06). Another student was more specific about the influences of her peers’ experience:

‘I have a background in outpatients; students from medical and surgical backgrounds share their experience with me and this helps me to prepare for placements on such wards’ (H20).

Other respondents mentioned sharing knowledge about specific areas they had worked in:

‘Because we all came from different wards and specialties, we learned about the type of nursing from each specialty from everyone… I had only worked in a stroke rehabilitation unit and I learned about different areas and different ways of nursing’ (H22, H24).

These responses may demonstrate what is termed ‘vicarious learning’ (Spouse 2003). Spouse established small seminar groups during the third year of an education programme so that students could compare their feelings with those of their peers. Story telling was used to allow students to construct and rehearse their thinking and to provide learning opportunities. Spouse (2003) suggests that sharing experiences is important for students because stories carry a reality which is engaging for listeners. Story tellers were engaged in their story by clarifying and enlarging various aspects, or rehearsing parts that were pertinent. Story telling enabled the students to develop an imaginary view of themselves in different roles, mirroring the roles undertaken by whoever they were talking to. The story teller develops new insights into the situation based on the suggestions and ‘sense-making’ activities of their friends, and the group benefits by developing a collective understanding.

Group members who have not participated in the same nursing activity can gain a vicarious learning experience which helps them to formulate suitable actions when facing similar situations in practice. The interaction between students during story telling is important for developing new perspectives and for debating and defending views. However, the value of listening to other students may depend on the quality of the story telling and the topic content.

**Requirements of seconded students**

Mature students strive for understanding and use a thorough approach to learning. Sutherland (1999) found that mature students were assignment-driven and marked assignments were perceived as valuable learning experiences. However, there was diversity in opinion concerning the social context to learning. For example, Sutherland (1999) comments that solitary learners tended to view peer tutoring, seminars and student presentations as a waste of time and so tended to work alone. However, this contradicts the importance of group learning expressed by Will (1997) and Slavin (1996). As Sutherland’s (1999) study investigated
nurse tutors, the findings may not be applicable to nursing students.

Some respondents in the current study reported that their learning experiences had been different from those of their non-seconded peers. One respondent felt that it was important to pass, and another felt that she needed to 'owe it to their seconding home trust to pass' (H17, P06). One student commented that, unlike some of her peers with less experience, clinical staff expected more of her, although other respondents did not mention this. Another student regretted not being able to practise previously learned skills, such as venepuncture until her third year, by which time she required further education.

Students in this study stated that their learning needs were different from those of other students because of their previous experience. Respondents said that the first year of the programme was largely spent going over what they felt they already knew. Many students perceived this initial year as 'wasted time'. They felt that they required 'less clinical skills teaching and more support with academic writing and assignments'.

Many students commented on needing fewer clinical skill lessons and more help with academic work, especially in the first year (P03, P04, P10, P13, P15, H16, H18, H22). It is important to evaluate the nature and level of the skill base in those with previous nursing experience and for those skills to be acknowledged. Educationalists may need to consider a shift in emphasis in the curriculum for seconded students to ensure that study is seen as relevant and develops what they already know.

**Limitations**

This study focused on a single cohort and addressed the perceptions of seconded nursing students. The research only used perceived comparisons with non-seconded peers; therefore, further work could research the similarities and differences between these groups of students. As the current study focused on students' perceptions only, future research could examine the views of lecturers in terms of students' progress. This article highlights the perspectives of seconded students in one cohort. The findings may not be generalised because of the small sample size and the fact that the questionnaire was not assessed for reliability and validity. More extensive research is needed to explain the role and perceived value of peer support and to investigate how this might be applied within the curriculum.

**Conclusion**

Findings from this small evaluative study suggest that segregating seconded nursing students into a discrete group had benefits in this cohort. Although students identified disadvantages to being in a discrete group, such as not having the opportunity to listen to others with different levels of experience, the perceived benefits appear to outweigh the negative aspects. Students were able to develop and sustain effective peer support, which they considered to be valuable. They used the base group to help each other to learn about clinical practice through vicarious learning. These students developed strong learner identities and felt that their previous experience should be acknowledged to a greater extent by the faculty.

The learning needs of seconded students appear to be different from those of non-seconded students, particularly with regard to their first year in the programme. More research is required to develop a greater understanding of the impact of peer learning in nurse education, and the influence that this has on learning and teaching NS.

**References**


