

Research Paper

Group mentoring: A story of transition for undergraduate baccalaureate nursing students

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SUMMARY

Background: Group mentoring has been endorsed as an effective method of supporting novice professionals across disciplines. In one university, faculty revised the undergraduate nursing curriculum to include a group mentoring course as a requirement of students during the four semesters they are enrolled in the nursing program.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of undergraduate nursing students participating in a group mentoring course.

Design: This study used a hermeneutic interpretive phenomenological method.

Setting and Participants: Data were collected from 22 undergraduate nursing students enrolled in group mentoring courses at a private Midwestern university in the United States.

Methods: At the end of each semester of mentoring, students provided written responses to five open-ended questions about their experiences of participating in the mentoring courses.

Results: Four themes emerged: conversation, communication, connection, and cohesion.

Conclusion: Group mentoring was an effective way to support nursing students as they transitioned from undergraduate student to novice professional nurse.

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Introduction

Educating undergraduate nursing students presents enormous challenges for nurse educators. Health care continues to be complex and demanding. As novice nurses prepare for 21st century practice, they require additional support in preparation for practice. For centuries, mentoring has been utilized as a method to support novices. Traditional one-to-one mentor–mentee relationships have been documented as providing effective support for the novice (Bennis, 2004; Vance, 2000). However today, with the limited availability of financial and personnel resources, this traditional form of mentoring is not always feasible. Over the last ten years, *group* mentoring has become more prevalent and is recognized as a viable alternative to the traditional one-to-one mentoring dyad. Yet, a review of the literature reveals a gap in nursing students' participation in group mentoring.

Emelo (2011) claims that group mentoring is emerging as a 'best practice model' in the training and development of a profession. Group mentoring has been successfully used in business (Carvin, 2011; Kelly, 2009; Rosen et al., 2010) and in community mental healthcare (Jent and Niec, 2009). Group mentoring has been identified as a successful strategy to support new university faculty

(Darwin and Palmer, 2009) as well as staff (McCormack and West, 2006). Junior medical students have also benefited from participating in group mentoring (Colares et al., 2009) as well as novice registered nurses (Scott and Smith, 2008).

Faculty at a small private university revised the undergraduate nursing curriculum so students could complete nursing courses in four semesters instead of five. Recognizing that this revision would increase the intensity of the program, faculty committed to supporting these students through this challenging program. The decision was made to integrate a mentoring program into the new curriculum. However, due to a faculty shortage and increasing student enrollments, the traditional one-to-one mentoring was not practical. Therefore, a group mentoring approach was instituted.

Based upon a review of the literature and discussion among the faculty, a *definition of group mentoring* congruent with the mission and vision of the school of nursing was established:

A reciprocal relationship between faculty and students developing over time. It is an interactive group experience grounded in respect, created in an environment of trust, mutual sharing, affirmation, collegiality, and caring.

Four objectives of the mentoring course were set forth: (1) enhance and preserve the quality of faculty–student relationships; (2) provide support and guidance; (3) socialize students to the profession of nursing; and (4) promote student retention.

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During each of their four semesters enrolled in nursing courses, students registered for one mentoring class. The group met in a classroom on campus for 1 h per week and received one academic credit per semester. Students and faculty established the group during the first semester, and membership remained the same throughout the remaining three semesters to facilitate member trust and group cohesion. A pass/fail grade was awarded to students based on attendance, class participation and journaling. The implementation of a required group mentoring program spanning the undergraduate nursing curriculum represented an innovative strategy to support nursing students through a challenging program while at the same time preparing them for their professional nursing role.

Purpose

The benefits of traditional one-to-one mentoring are well documented in the literature. Yet cost-constraints, job demands, workload, and mentor availability have made this traditional form of mentoring a challenge. These deterrents provided an impetus to explore alternate ways to provide a mentor–mentee relationship. Group mentoring was found to be a viable alternative for some (Emelo, 2011; McCormack and West, 2006). However, there is little evidence in the literature documenting the experiences of undergraduate nursing students participating in group mentoring. Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of undergraduate baccalaureate nursing students' participation in group mentoring.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) provided the theoretical basis for this study. As social psychologists, Altman and Taylor studied how persons developed close relationships. They theorized that close relationships form only if the communication of persons moves in a slow and orderly manner from superficial to intimate levels. Altman and Taylor (1973) compared one's personality to the layers of an onion. The outer layer represents the public self, what one reveals to those who are acquaintances. As each subsequent layer is peeled off, more personal details of oneself are disclosed. This self-disclosure is reciprocal between persons in the relationship. As one feels more comfortable sharing more personal details, the other person also begins to share their own private experiences. Students entered the group mentoring course as strangers, communicating only superficially at first, but gradually established strong relationships. Thus, the Social Penetration Theory provided an appropriate framework to guide this study.

Methodology

Design

This study used a hermeneutic interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experience of undergraduate nursing students' participation in a group mentoring course.

Participants

After approval was obtained from the institutional review board, all junior level nursing students were invited to participate in the study. Students were assured that participation was voluntary and that their decision to participate or not participate would in no way affect their grade for the course or student status at the university. All data were anonymous. Twenty-two of the 29 junior level students agreed to participate. All students were female. The majority were between the ages of 21 and 30 (63%; $n=14$). Fifty percent of the participants were African-American, 31% were Caucasian, and 4% were Hispanic.

Data Collection

At the end of each semester in the nursing program, participants were asked to respond to five open-ended questions that related to perceptions of being a student in a mentoring class. The five questions were: (1) Tell about an experience, one that you will never forget because it stands out for you as what it is like to be a student in a mentoring class; (2) How does participation in a mentoring class influence your perspective of the profession of nursing; (3) Discuss your relationship with your faculty mentor; (4) Discuss your relationship with students in your mentoring class; and (5) Discuss the impact that participation in a mentoring class has had on your progress throughout the nursing program. Students were given time on the last day of class each semester to complete the surveys. To assure anonymity, faculty left the room while data were collected so it was not known which students participated in the study. After the students responded to the questions, one student in each class volunteered to collect the data, place them in an envelope, and returned the envelope to the researchers' mailbox.

Data Analysis

Two doctorally-prepared nurse faculty researchers analyzed the data by using hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology as described by Crist and Tanner (2003). This method is appropriate as its aim is to "understand the human experience" (Crist and Tanner, 2003, p. 202) of those students participating in group mentoring. For this study, researchers modified the approach used by Crist and Tanner in that students were requested to respond in writing to the open-ended questions rather than verbally recount their thoughts. The written response method was chosen because it was felt that students would hesitate to share their true beliefs face to face since the researchers were also mentors of some of the students. In keeping true to hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology, the researchers did not bracket their own preconceived beliefs. Rather, they revealed their assumptions that could potentially influence the data interpretation: (1) Students believe mentoring class is valuable; and (2) students need mentors to be successful in completing a challenging nursing program. These assumptions form the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle.

Researchers employed the following four phases of data analysis: (1) *Early Focus*. Data were categorized by semester. Within each semester, answers to each question were grouped. Researchers initially read the data independently, then reviewed the data together. (2) *Central Concerns, Exemplars, and Paradigm Cases*. Researchers again examined the data and extracted themes unfolding for each semester. Initial interpretive writing began in this phase as researchers identified predominant concerns and exemplars. (3) *Shared Meanings*. Exemplars were studied for shared meanings across stories, revealing commonalities of experiences. (4) *Final Interpretation*. Extensive examination of central concerns, unfolding themes and interpretations were completed through a dialogue between both researchers.

Findings

Exhaustive data analysis revealed four themes that reflected the evolution of the group process. Participation in the group supported student progression through the nursing program and provided readiness for transition into professional practice. Each semester, a new theme emerged: conversation, communication, connection, and cohesion.

Semester One: Conversation

Prior to acceptance into nursing, the mentoring students completed the undergraduate requirements in liberal studies and the sciences,

such as philosophy, microbiology and pathophysiology. While the students established relationships with others during their first two years at the university, they did not feel as though they belonged to a group. Overall, the students believed that mentoring provided a transition from that of an undergraduate student completing the general education requirements to the role of a nursing student. Initially students were cautious about engaging more fully with other students. During the first semester of mentoring, the environment created was relaxed, open and safe, where personal information could be shared with understanding and without judgment. One of the factors that contributed to this supportive environment was the number of participants in the mentoring group. The small group size (10–12 students) was strongly embraced by the students in that it allowed everyone an opportunity to fully share their viewpoints. As the semester progressed, students began to share concerns about their classes and issues related to assignments, papers and tests. This sense of a safe environment leads to establishing confidentiality and budding trusting relationships. While confidentiality was a goal of mentoring and modeled by the faculty mentor, students were only able to completely demonstrate this behavior after trust was firmly established. As one student stated, "Trusting others enough to share personal information is important."

Students expressed strong support of the faculty and believed that the trusting relationship was initially between the faculty and student. Faculty mentors were described as compassionate, fair, helpful, approachable and available not only during the class period, but outside the classroom as well. One student commented, "My faculty mentor gave me insight to some troubling personal issues and it was very helpful."

As the semester progressed, conversation in the group became more open so that everyone started to feel more welcome, comfortable and willing to share. One student stated, "I'm starting to learn that communication is very important in classes as well as in the community". Mentoring provided a time that information about the program was shared and any fears or concerns were expressed. An upper classman was invited to one of the mentoring sessions to relate her own personal journey through the nursing program. The students thought this information gave them a better understanding of the nursing program. A student commented, "You got to actually think about why it is that you want to be a nurse and to see/hear other people's perspectives of what nursing is to them". The upper classman's honesty about the pitfalls as well as the highlights of the nursing program gave the students the realization and courage to believe that they, too, could succeed.

The relaxed milieu acted as a stress reliever for the students. One of the objectives of the mentoring sessions was to provide a safe haven for the students to come together as a group, express their concerns, issues and stressors, find support and together find solutions to the problem at hand. Students found this environment very encouraging. One stated, "mentoring serves as a tool to keep pressing toward the finishing line as a student".

Students were required to write in their journals each week and the mentor would return the journals with comments the following session. This provided another avenue of communication with the group. Some students found it easier to write troublesome remarks in their journal as opposed to orally reporting the situation during class. Often the mentor would discover common issues that many students described and would introduce them at the next meeting. This would open up the discussion for all to collectively use problem solving techniques to address the concerns. Additionally, students commented that journaling was "positive in that it alleviates stress as well as verbalizing". Finally, a student stated: "I enjoyed writing the weekly journal due to the caring, personal touch that was written in the feedback from the mentor".

Second Semester: Communication

During the second semester the theme of communication emerged. This expanded on the conversations experienced during

the first semester. Communication and relationships were enhanced. One student stated; "I returned to school after stopping [out] for a time and felt kind of out of it. I was made to feel welcome and worth something when I was doubting myself". Previously the support the students felt came from the "formal" mentor. Now it came from peers as well. The students expressed receiving this support not only for academic concerns, but for personal problems. One student related; "When I learned that my sister was very sick, I talked about how I felt and the responses that I got from my mentor and my peers was very, very comforting". Conversation transitioned into deeper communication as the students felt that someone was listening. Feeling listened to is critical to establish honest communication. Students commented: "We were able to talk openly with our classmates. Share our experiences"; "It (mentoring) teaches us that as nurses we should communicate with each other. We should all work together. It is important to communicate and respect everyone's opinion even if you don't agree with them"; "I was having a very bad day with all going wrong. In my country, you do not complain. Here we talk and I felt better". These statements demonstrated that students respected one another.

As students listened to each other there was a glimmer of understanding that arose from discussing common issues which can help students when they encounter similar situations. In these exchanges, learning occurred. This new level of communication involved not only academic concerns such as what to expect from the next nursing course, but actual situations involving patients in acute care settings.

As clinical experiences were analyzed, students presented the situation and discussed successful interventions such as treatment or patient education. Additionally, the students shared feelings they had while helping patients. These emotions ranged from euphoria to terror and every emotion in between. Fellow students were able to listen and assist their classmates to process the event and problem-solve a better solution for the future. When students are engaged at an emotional level, greater learning occurs.

As students felt more comfortable and trust was more profound there was a perception of increased valuing of self. One student stated: "Being that it is our second semester together, I found that our relationship has grown, we all talk on a personal level and we all have a sense of trust for one another." Another student said, "This trust allows us to be advocates for ourselves as well as classmates".

Semester Three: Connections

During semester three, communication gave way to the formation of connections among students. Strict confidentiality became the norm. Listening skills increased and a greater sense of being an integral member of the group occurred. One student stated: "We are much closer, even a more well connected class. Our relationships run deeper". Another commented, "It is difficult just to pick out one experience. Basically what I like about this mentoring group is the fact that we were able to talk about anything. Every time I am here, I have this confidence that everything that is said in here stays in here". As connections intensified, students were able to discuss more openly and demonstrated greater acceptance of others' opinions. One student remarked; "Arguments are voiced in a respectful and professional manner. I remember several different opinions and views on specific issues. It was nice to be able to discuss issues with differing opinion and everyone was respected regardless of their opinion".

As connections strengthened, students began to work as a team. They recognized both the value and importance of teamwork, and came together to solve problems. One student stated, "Everyone worked together to solve our classmate's problems". Another commented, "I experienced an incident that was devastating at that time. I had lots of peer support with ideas on how to tackle the situation". As teamwork and group problem solving increased so did

the respect students had for one another. “Everyone has a different opinion about certain things. It is important to respect everyone and learn how to work together”, noted one student. This respect for others was demonstrated in another way. One student stated: “I like the relationship that I have with my classmates in mentoring; maybe it is not the closest one, but I believe it is an *honest* one. I think that it is the most important”. Students began to generalize their experiences in mentoring to their career as nurses. They realized that working together, communicating effectively, and supporting one another were critical to their success as a professional nurse. As students encouraged one another, they believed they were able to navigate the academic system with greater ease. Students trusted that there was understanding and motivation from their fellow mentees. As one student stated, “We try to support each other whenever and where-ever we can”. This experience increased their confidence in asking for and receiving the support they needed from the greater academic community.

Semester Four: Cohesion

In semester four, mentees transitioned from student to novice professional nurse. Interest centered on taking NCLEX-RN (the United States National Nursing Licensure Examination) and what positions were available in hospitals post-graduation. Recent graduates of the program came as guest speakers so that the mentees could ask questions about the “real world of nursing”. Ideas were exchanged and information received that guided mentees to make decisions about the future. Additionally, guest speakers encouraged students to entertain the idea of graduate school and stressed how important life-long learning is to success. As one student remarked, “It has given me a realistic image of nursing”. Other students commented, “It helps when there is someone who has been in the position that you are preparing for”; “It gives me a better outlook and different insight”. These statements indicated a readiness to confidently launch into the next phase of their professional lives.

In this last semester there was an overwhelming sense of cohesion and bonding in the group. One of the benefits the students experienced was feeling that they belonged. Students acknowledged that the group supported their academic, personal and professional needs. One student stated, “I have formed such special bonds with peers in this group who have supported me throughout personal and educational issues”.

While students experienced collaboration and cohesion in the group, there was a belief that everyone had unique thoughts, opinions and ideas to contribute. As one student remarked, “Every person has a different perspective to bring to the table. I know that is how it will be when I enter the nursing field”. Another stated, “I feel as though they are people that I can talk to and would otherwise not have the opportunity to know”. In respecting the individual perspectives of others, the novice nurse will be able to generalize this positive experience and build professional relationships in their career.

Discussion

Undergraduate students in this baccalaureate nursing program found it beneficial to participate in a group mentoring course. Faculty believed the small group environment contributed to the perceived value of group mentoring. According to Ishmael, “a group process involving between six and eight people is as effective as the conventional one-to-one approach” (Pickersgill, 2008, p. 62). Gradually over time, this small group atmosphere enabled students to develop trust in one another resulting in reciprocal self-disclosure, supporting the Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973).

As students entered their clinical practicum courses, discussions centering on nursing practice arose. Emotions ranged from disbelief to frustration to self-satisfaction. Dreyfus (2004) quoted Benner,

who found, “...that, unless the trainee stays emotionally involved and accepts the joy of a job well done, as well as the remorse of mistakes, he or she will not develop further and will eventually burn out trying to keep track of all the features and aspects, rules and maxims that modern medicine requires” (p. 178–9). Group mentoring provided a means for students to begin to assimilate into the professional nurse role.

Students identified that faculty mentors provided support not only related to academic issues, but personal issues as well. Carvin (2011) noted that many of the topics dealt with in a mentoring relationship fall outside the realm of classroom training. As time progressed, students began to support their peers and mentor each other. Rosen et al. (2010) believed that “having that group of peers is a huge advantage because it really helps to hear that you’re not alone. You go to hear how other people are grappling with the same issues right now and you get an affirmation of how hard it can be, as well as good ideas for how to proceed” (p. 52). Through group mentoring, students learned the importance of caring for one another. As students engaged in this practice, they were able to identify that “a caring relationship sets up the conditions of trust that enable the one cared for to appropriate the help offered and to feel cared for” (Benner and Wrubel, 1989, p. 4).

Implications

Mentoring must be viewed with a larger and different lens. Resources, both money and personnel, are no longer available for the traditional one to one mentoring. Thus, group mentoring is an option for students. In a group experience, students learn to work as a team. Moss et al. (2008), discussed the results of peer group mentoring; “Participants did indicate that they developed a greater sense of collegiality and were more likely to turn to each other for help as a result of participating in the program” (p. 234). As health care becomes more complex, multi-disciplinary care is essential. Consequently, many disciplines must learn to work together as a team. As students experience working together in mentoring, they will be better prepared to work as a team upon graduation. As the IOM (Finkelman and Kenner, 2007) reports, working in teams, especially interdisciplinary teams, utilizes the “best healthcare professionals for the needs of the patient and work together to accomplish effective patient care outcomes” (p. 9). Teamwork will be the hallmark of professions in healthcare.

Furthermore, as on-line and distance education continue to explode, opportunities for “e-mentoring” must be explored. These virtual students’ needs are as great as the students who physically enter the classroom—perhaps even greater, since there are not the same opportunities to connect with classmates as a classroom environment provides. As confidentiality in mentoring is a foundation for the openness and trust that is developed, this environment must also be established for the on-line community of students. “On-line groups allow participants from different geographic regions and cultures to participate and share their perspectives” (Carvin, 2011, p. 51).

While the findings from this study are not generalizable, further research into the efficacy of group mentoring is needed. Retention was a goal of these mentoring classes. Anecdotes from students suggest that participation positively impacted retention. While no exit interviews of students leaving the program were conducted, retention rates were maintained.

Model of Transition into Professional Practice

The conceptual model (Fig. 1) evolved as a result of the reflective analyses of student data with the emergence of themes. The investigators assumed that students entering a nursing program have hopes of becoming a professional nurse and that students aspire for

greater involvement in their career. Thus, faculty defined professional aspiration as a strong desire to achieve the goal of becoming a nurse who is characterized by conforming to ethical standards while exhibiting a thorough knowledge of nursing, being conscientiousness and demonstrating caring behaviors that embrace the person holistically. In semester one, conversations flowed from the students and included any subject that was of interest to them, but often was specifically focused on the curriculum and their experiences in the nursing program. These informal conversations were the building blocks to deeper communication.

In the second semester, superficial conversation deepened to communication in that the students experienced a sense of trust and security in sharing more personal feelings, difficult situations, fears and hopes. With heightened communication students reported feeling supported by their mentor as well as their fellow mentees. Communication facilitated connection among group members.

In semester three, communication was enhanced with the students experiencing a sense of connection which was strengthened as listening skills increased. Students truly felt they were an integral member of the group characterized by respect and valuing of one another. Confidentiality was now the norm in the mentoring group. There was more acceptance and understanding of the differences of mentees supporting group cohesion.

In semester four, the group members began to work more closely as a team and a sense of cohesion among them evolved. As teamwork unfolded, students recognized how valuable the team was as a resource for problem solving and critical thinking when caring for patients. This belief in one another will provide a foundation for transition into the profession of nursing. No individual person can deliver health care for patients independently. The maturation of mentees in a mentoring group prepared the students with knowledge, skills, attitudes and enthusiasm to transition to assuming the role of a professional nurse. The sense of belonging to a group and being supported and accepted as an individual enhanced their confidence and competence to embrace this new challenge. The collaboration, cohesion and teamwork experienced in mentoring are important skills to bring to the professional table. Pickersgill (2008) found that one of her students felt that through mentoring she was "more aspirational and more systematic about developing (her) career" (p. 63). Students also believed that the organization will benefit from staff

who are motivated and use their strengths in productive ways (Pickersgill, 2008).

Conclusion

To better prepare nursing students to transition to the role of professional nurse a group mentoring program was implemented. During the four semesters students enrolled in the mentoring program, themes emerged. The initial theme of conversations deepened to communication and cohesion over time. The Social Penetration Theory (Altman and Taylor, 1973) originally identified this development of interpersonal relationships based on research with freshman college students. The mentoring group evolved in part due to the safe environment created with the small number of students and a consistent mentor. Another variable was the trust that was established among students and mentor. Students expressed themselves openly, sharing both intimate and non-intimate information. The group discovered how important openness and honesty in communication was in establishing and maintaining relationships.

Through involvement in the mentoring program students experienced a sense of support from their peers and their mentor. "The complexity of a nursing career requires a substantial and consistent support system to ensure success and satisfaction" (Vance and Olson, 1998, p. 13). Consequently, this group mentoring experience will provide a foundation for the students as they transition to the role of professional nurse.

Scott and Smith (2008) identify that group mentoring programs for new graduates are becoming more prevalent in hospitals, recognizing the need to retain new graduates. To retain novice nurses, they must feel competent and confident. Additionally, new graduates must have positive socialization encounters to achieve long term professional goals. A group mentorship experience as a nursing student will provide a foundation for these new graduates to excel in their new positions. Carvin (2011) believes, "Group mentoring solves the problem of too few mentors and too many mentees" (p. 52). As group mentoring gains acceptance and is implemented in professional nursing, the experience in undergraduate education will serve these novice nurses well. These students will more fully reap the benefits of this opportunity.

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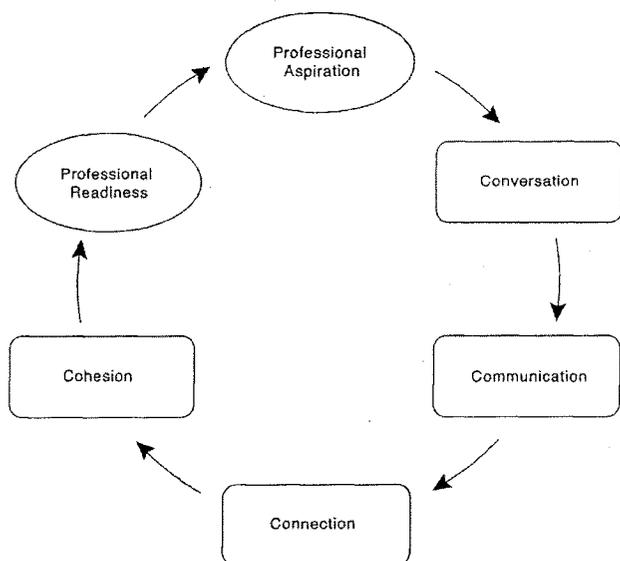


Fig. 1. A model of transition into professional practice.

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