Student-Led Clinical Orientation

Faculty put much thought and effort into the planning of student learning experiences to provide the optimal learning environment, experiences, and reflection tailored to learners’ specific needs. Despite course planning, the best outcomes are sometimes achieved by relatively unstructured student-led activities.

A group of first-semester Foundations in Nursing Practicum students enjoyed their clinical rotation at a long-term care facility, and wanted to revisit the facility at the start of the following semester, so they offered to orient the next group of students to the facility and the residents.

Days before the start of the semester, it was discovered that implementing the students’ idea would not require much adaptation to the first- and second-semester schedules. The schedule was changed so that the first-semester nursing students would orient to the facility on the same day the second-semester medical-surgical rotation nursing students were scheduled for a laboratory skills day. The start time for the laboratory skills day activities was delayed, allowing the experienced second-semester junior nursing students to spend a couple of hours at the various long-term care facilities used with the new group of students.

The comments from the first-semester students were overwhelmingly positive. A reoccurring theme from the first-semester students was the ability of the experienced students to calm their nerves and anxiety about their first clinical experience. One student commented, “It eased me into the clinical experience—I wasn’t so anxious after all that.” Another student commented, “I felt comfortable asking the ‘newbie’ type of questions that you would probably only ask another student.”

In addition to speaking with the students, answering questions, and showing them around the facility, the experienced students were able to introduce the first-semester students to some of the staff members and residents. The second-semester junior students not only introduced the first-semester students to the residents, but also described how they had cared for and developed a relationship with the resident. One beginning nursing student commented, “It made me very excited to develop relationships with the patients.” Several second-semester students stated that they enjoyed the feeling of confidence they had when returning to the clinical site and were reminded of how much they had grown and improved since the first day of the prior semester, when they were the “newbies” at the clinical site. Bringing experienced nursing students to the facility provided optimism and excitement to the beginning nursing students and helped them feel confident that they also could succeed.

Students experience a high level of stress and anxiety related to the first clinical nursing experience, especially if they do not have prior health care experience (Moscaritolo, 2009; Sprengel & Job, 2004). This stress can be attributed to a new and complex environment, seeing individuals suffer, failure to recall lessons learned in the classroom, and fears about communicating with patients and staff (Karabacak, Uslusoy, Senturan, Alpar, & Yavuz, 2012). Establishing a peer mentor model, where experienced higher level nursing students are at the Foundations in Nursing Practicum course clinical site to assist beginning nursing students, is an effective strategy to decrease stress in beginning nursing students (Becker & Neuwirth, 2002; Moscaritolo, 2009; Sprengel & Job, 2004).

The literature describes peer mentoring programs in which peer mentors interact with students throughout the clinical day, assisting with the care of patients (Becker & Neuwirth, 2002; Moscaritolo, 2009). The peer mentoring programs described in the literature included orientation of the student to the peer mentor role and either included a paid position for the student or included the peer mentor role as part of the objectives for another course. The use of peer mentors described in the current article required minimal effort by faculty, yet yielded a noteworthy impact on the beginning nursing student’s first clinical day.

A simple collaboration among faculty and a schedule change made this first day in a new clinical setting experience less frightening for first-semester nursing students. Faculty often can be so focused on the cognitive aspect of delivering the right information to the students on that first day that the psychosocial and emotional aspects of a first clinical rotation are not addressed. What began as a last-minute decision based on students’ ideas became a significant, powerful experience for beginning nursing students and a strategy that faculty will continue to incorporate into future orientation days.

References


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