

**The Assessment of a Clinical Preceptor Course
for Psychiatric Nursing Programs**

Final Report

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Sara Horton-Deutsch, RN, APN, PhD, Associate Professor

Angela McNelis, RN, APN, PhD, Associate Professor

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We thank the Program Review and Assessment Committee for their support for our project that assessed a clinical preceptor course for psychiatric nursing programs. The course is reusable module entitled, “Ensuring Preceptor and Student Success” (ePASS). This course was designed to address the Bureau of Health Professions’ National Goals for improving access to quality health care through appropriate recruitment and education of health professionals. Because there is a shortage of faculty to educate student nurses in the psychiatric area, our programs utilize community-based expert nurse preceptors to assist with clinical teaching. To be successful teachers, community-based preceptors must be taught how to facilitate student learning and understand the philosophical underpinnings of our program. This course acquaints the preceptor with the preceptor role expectations, how to work with the students in both online and practice learning environments, and how to assist students to effectively apply their learning in a clinical setting. Moreover, we recognized the need for students to understand the expectations and roles of the preceptors, so the module was also designed to address student orientation.

The module provides preceptors and students an overview of the philosophy of the program, orients them to their roles and to expectations, and outlines the students’ practicum. The training module and practicum are designed to support learning in a distance-learning environment and assure attainment of clinical competencies for the advanced practice level. ePASS was developed to ensure that the preceptor, student, and faculty form a relationship that facilitates students’ achievement of clinical competencies. ePASS orients the preceptor and student to the reflection-centered framework, use of Typhon, and to the ePortfolio being used in IUSON. It also includes an essential resource

component that links to each clinical course's learning outcomes; to Typhon, the electronic charting system used in our program; and to evaluation forms. Preceptors who complete the module receive contact hours required for their ongoing certification.

Background

The goal of our clinical preceptor course was to orient clinical preceptors to their role expectations and responsibilities while in the clinical setting, and to facilitate reflective practice to enhance student learning. This course was developed based on a triad model (Billings et al., 2006) that involves the working together of the preceptor, learner, and educator. The preceptor course had not been tested and the purpose of the assessment project was to evaluate its impact on preceptor abilities and student learning.

Outcomes of the Project

The outcomes of this project were to assess the effectiveness of the psychiatric clinical preceptor orientation course: (1) to increase preceptor ability to meet the role expectation and responsibilities of a preceptor; (2) to increase preceptor ability to assist students in using reflective practice; and (3) to increase student learning outcomes related to the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Findings

Data were collected using electronic questionnaires and interviews to assess to what extent the clinical preceptor course achieved its goals and objectives. Preceptor survey questions were derived from the standards of practice for Psychiatric Mental Health Clinical Nurse Specialists (PMHCNS). Preceptors (N = 44) responded to items using a 4-point Likert scales from 1 (no opportunity) to 4 (excellent performance). Results

indicated that preceptors perceived students use quality of care activities to initiate changes in practice ($x = 3.02$), use practice opportunities to exchange knowledge, skills and observations with others (3.70), maintain a therapeutic relationship with clients at all times (3.77), students consult with other health care providers on client care (3.39), and base consultation activities on models, systems principles, and other theories (2.56).

Students ($N = 24$) responded to items using strongly disagree to strongly agree. Results indicated that students perceived that their preceptors were appropriate role models in patient care (87.5% strongly agreed), were willing to teach students (79.2% strongly agreed), helped students to think critically (78.3% strongly agreed), were knowledgeable (91.7% strongly agreed), and could explain difficult material clearly and concisely (87% strongly agreed).

Focus groups with preceptors and students were also conducted to evaluate ePASS related to increasing student reflective practice and assess student learning outcomes related to the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Data indicate that preceptors perceived the module prepared them to facilitate skill development of reflective practice. More specifically, they shared that they used the sample probes/questions contained in the module to facilitate more reflective thoughts and practices, as well as to assess students' level of reflection during their clinical practicum. Preceptors stated that the module provided great detail on program outcomes, and that the information on adult learning styles allowed them to more specifically orchestrate clinical experiences to meet course objectives. In this way, they felt they were able to arrange more opportunities for students to develop and practice interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Data from student focus groups indicated that students were appreciative of understanding expectations for both themselves and their preceptors during the clinical practicum. They felt more prepared for the experience and felt their preceptors were able to tailor client encounters to more specifically meet the course objectives. They also felt that they were able to employ reflective activities within their nursing practice, which allowed them to deliver higher quality care to clients.

Additionally, we continue to assess to what extent the course helps students to practice within the reflective learning paradigm. Preliminary findings from our first cohort of students to complete the program suggest students embody the reflective framework that is emphasized in the course.

Using reflection ourselves, we continually modify assignments and activities based on self, student, and preceptor reflection. Our appraisals are less focused on quantitative measures of course and faculty student evaluation, but rather on perceptions of preparing advanced psychiatric mental health nurses who can develop intrapersonally and interpersonally through reflection. As evidence, we put forward the following student quotes to illustrate that reflection is a learned skill that improves with practice, that skills learned in school are transferable to practice, and that strategies learned are useful and growth enhancing, respectively. Examples of students' narrative responses include:

“As I progress through the program it becomes clearer to me that my thoughts on my practice experiences are actually quite reflective, but the process needs to be guided more by a structure such as this to enable me to use my thoughts and analyses in a more constructive manner. It will be important

for me to practice and build my reflective skill as I gain experience and collect knowledge throughout my journey to becoming an expert advanced practice psychiatric nurse.”

“The reflective assignments help me to recognize in myself a talent that I have often considered a curse. I will be now able to direct my reflection in a structured way that will help me gain knowledge and intuition that will help me to become an expert nurse and therapist, enabling me to help patients improve their lives. Now that I understand the process and purpose of reflective practice, I will use it to improve myself instead of using it to beat myself up. While it is important to use reflective practice to change negative behavior and poor technique to improve performance, we are reminded that it is equally important to use it to recognize our positive attributes and contributions to enhance good performance. I feel that this knowledge will give me more self-confidence and help me to learn more efficiently because I will be able to process life lessons more easily and effectively.”

“Because of guided reflection, I will always be open to my own thoughts and ideas, as well as those of others. It will be important not only to reflect upon my experiences with

patients and colleagues, but also consider the reflections of others as well. I will make use of suggested activities including journaling, empathetic reflection, and feedback to enhance my understanding and processing of thoughts. I will embrace my own tendency to reflect and celebrate it as a gift. It is a gift that will ensure that all of my future clinical practice experiences will be learning opportunities which will keep my career endlessly interesting and my ability to help my patients always improving.”

Summary

We are just beginning to conduct more comprehensive evaluations from the preceptors and students as they use each component of the program. This continuous evaluation approach will enable us to make changes that will improve the program. Ongoing evaluation will allow us to analyze the impact of the program on the desired outcomes, and will provide data for dissemination. Preliminary findings from this project were used in a Health Resources Services Administration Grant application that was successfully funded in July 2008.

References

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