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Published version

DAVIES, Angela and TAYLOR, Deborah (2011). Information literacy skills and the transition to professional practice. *Libraries for nursing bulletin*, 31 (3/4), 13-22.

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Information Literacy skills and the transition to professional practice

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Abstract

This article describes a teaching innovation by health librarians at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) delivered to final year nursing students which was designed to demonstrate the value of their existing information skills to professional practice. Using NHS Evidence as the information resource and a theme of 'transitions' - moving from an academic to a professional environment - the sessions illustrated how search skills could be transferred to the workplace. Work based scenarios were used to raise awareness of the potential of fast access to quality information in an attempt

to overcome some of the perceived barriers around access to information.

Background

Newly qualified nurses are expected to routinely draw on information to support their own practice. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) identifies the importance of evidence based practice in its Code (2008) and in its Standards for Pre Registration Nursing (2010). Further, the recent Department of Health (2010) consultation document on the information revolution outlines the need for healthcare professionals to access best evidence in patient care. The Royal College of Nursing (2011) also highlights the importance of information literacy within evidence based practice and has published its own competencies.

However the literature around the information seeking behaviour of nurses identifies various barriers. Nurses are time poor (McKnight 2006) and often rely on colleagues for their information (Younger 2010). Some studies indicate that nurses feel they are lacking in search skills and do not attribute value to using research in practice (Beke-Harrigan, Hess and Weinland 2008).

During summer 2010, as part of wider university discussions around employability, we began to examine the information literacy attributes we would expect our graduates to possess. We determined more could be done both to strengthen the link between the academic and professional worlds and to reinforce the message that these skills are transferable and not solely confined to an academic environment.

Setting the scene - Sheffield Hallam University (SHU)

SHU has two large intakes of pre registration nursing students per year, averaging around 600 students across four branches (adult, child, mental health, applied nursing and social work). The students' time is spent evenly between studying on campus and placement.

Advisers in the Health and Wellbeing Faculty team in Learning and Information Services deliver an information literacy (IL) programme across all three years of the courses, which, is embedded into the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing's interprofessional learning programme - a series of modules undertaken by all health and social care students, focussing on evidence based practice and collaborative working. The IL programme broadly follows the Sconul 7 Pillars model (Sconul 2011) - building skills in identifying, scoping and carrying out information searches, evaluating, managing and incorporating the results.

Our first attempt!

Whilst NHS / professional resources were introduced to the students, the IL programme was largely based on SHU resources, so some additional time was needed to tackle the issues around transferring information skills and knowledge to the workplace. A final year nursing module - Transition to Professional Practice - was deemed to be a suitable starting point as it focussed on consolidating the skills required by a professional nurse. The module leaders were supportive of our ideas and a lecture was designed as an efficient way of reaching all students on the module..

The lecture ran twice in November 2010 focussing on the theme of transitions. NHS Evidence, introduced as the nurses 'professional library', was the main information source used. The team behind NHS Evidence were interested in what we were doing and volunteered to participate in the lecture. The session covered alerts and news feeds, the Specialist Collections, and briefly the Core Content resources.

Reflection and evaluation

It was clear that students were very focused on their module assignment so whilst they were attentive and responsive in the lecture, we were concerned that they might struggle to see the immediate relevance of the session. Whilst it seemed highly appropriate to be discussing employability skills in the module we didn't feel the lecture contained enough attention grabbing 'hooks' to stimulate further exploration by students. We concluded that a greater understanding about the early professional life of a nurse was needed in order to demonstrate more clearly how existing skills and knowledge could and should be used.

We researched further into the literature and found that the same problem was described repeatedly - whilst professional requirements demanded that nurses routinely access good quality information, nurses described a range of barriers to achieving this in practice, most notably lack of time and lack of skills (Flynn and McGuinness 2010). At SHU we explored these issues with a newly qualified nurse, with teaching staff

and student mentors. Our findings tended to chime with some key points in the literature. Newly qualified nurses, it seemed, generally work under direction, use colleagues as a key information source, find it difficult to gain access to computers at work and don't have much of a need to independently search for evidence.

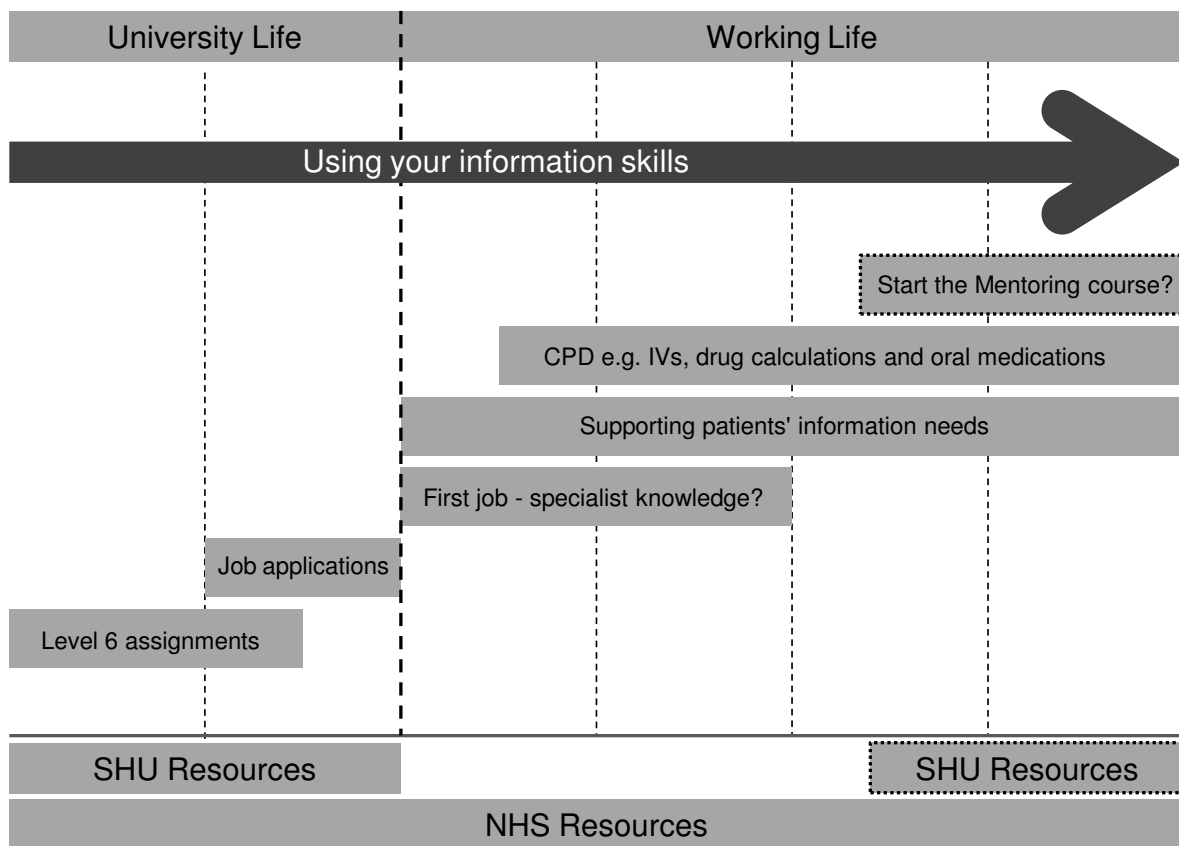
However the nurse we interviewed did see a need for information in relation to her CPD activities. She was working for her IV exams and realised that she needed to use good quality information sources in this respect. Additionally she did remember using NHS Evidence at university but had not used it in professional practice and didn't know where to find it on the hospital intranet.

During this period, we presented a short paper at the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC) (Davies and Taylor 2011) and discovered that other health librarians were also grappling with these issues. Following encouraging feedback we were motivated to continue to develop the approach further.

Our second approach

We felt we needed to be more sensitive to the 'real world situation' of the newly qualified nurse and, informed by the nurse interview, should identify occasions in their early career when there would be a need for information. A realistic approach could acknowledge the pressures present in the workplace but would also allow us to indicate how NHS Evidence could be used quickly and effectively to access good quality

information. In collaboration with tutors, we developed a timeline of key milestones (see fig 1). The timeline started in the present with their final year assignments and their hunt for jobs, and for each scenario we discussed suitable academic and/or professional resources to use. In the professional context, the scenarios included needing to acquire specialist knowledge of a condition or ward, supporting patient information needs and using evidence to underpin CPD activities. Our message was 'resources may be different, skills stay the same'.



(fig 1)

The focus moved from the 'how to' of the first lecture to a discussion on the reality of every day information needs in nursing practice (Jones, Schilling and Pesut 2011). Nurses may not need to be independent, in-depth researchers early on in their career but by focussing on real life

scenarios we aimed to demonstrate how information skills could facilitate fast access to quality information when the need arose.

The revamped lecture ran twice in September 2011. Feedback from students suggested the content would be relevant for the duration of the course and also for their ongoing and future needs. The lecturers thought the timing of the session fitted better this year. We felt that the lecture had improved as it was targeted to student needs and more accurately reflected the real world situation that they would face as nurses.

The future

It is anticipated that changes to the nursing curriculum for 2013 will present opportunities to develop this approach. We plan to expand the model to other health disciplines at SHU over the next couple of years and will investigate its applicability to other professional areas such as teaching. Alternative formats such as screencasts and leaflets will be considered so that these messages can be delivered to remote students.

Nationally, the recent initiative of granting NHS Core Content access to students on NHS commissioned courses will help to show the complementary nature of information resources across the academic and professional contexts. Developments in NHS technologies and use of mobile devices may have an impact on our teaching as will any future changes to search facilities and resources.

Within SHU and across our professional networks we intend to continue the discussions about the role of academic librarians in preparing students for and supporting them to maintain successful careers in an information dependent society. In particular, we have identified a need for improved information sharing with NHS librarians to strengthen and promote the continuity of library support for nurses.

We see IL skills as a vital component in a nurse's toolkit and we feel we can help promote the messages around evidence based practice by

- stimulating discussions with students on the transferability of their information skills
- using real world scenarios to show how these skills might be used
- developing strategies with NHS librarians to keep the information skills of newly qualified nurses "warm" so that they are ready to be used when needed.

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