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## Reflecting on the Transition from Practice to Education – The Journey to Becoming an Effective Teacher in Higher Education

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teacher to be dynamic, supportive, caring, empathetic, challenging and knowledgeable.

**Keywords:** Supporting new teachers, reflection, transition to higher education, facilitating learning, role boundaries

### Summary

This paper discusses the journey of transition from practice to education by reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of this process. It utilises reflective principles to identify strategies for universities and the higher education sector to consider when supporting new teachers. Higher education presents a significant challenge for new academic staff in becoming competent and overcoming the barriers that may impact on students' learning. Nurse education requires a

Maintaining the balance of the role in supporting students and sustaining identity for new teachers is the beginning of the journey to becoming an effective teacher in higher education.

### Introduction

To be a successful academic in nursing education, two core ingredients are required: practice experience and teaching skills. This enables new academics to facilitate development, identify professional boundaries and support students to acquire the skills necessary to become competent in practice. Transition is a process undertaken when professionals move into another speciality. A number of studies (MacNeil, 1997, Peel, 2005; Sinclair et al, 2005) aimed at addressing the transition into higher education highlighted local

<sup>1</sup> These were Becci's details when her piece was accepted for publication. Becci has since moved to the position of Child Tutor at the University of Surrey.

institutional issues but none identified have reviewed transition in its entirety. This paper provides a reflection of a nurse's transition to academia, drawing on the literature, and aims to identify implications for higher education institutions to consider by influencing policy and the key principles of support for new academics. The structure of this paper starts with a synopsis of my journey and then explores key themes which emerged in relation to the literature, before concluding with recommendations for teaching practice and further research.

### **Reflection of the Journey**

My journey into higher education began as a student nurse when I was inspired by the teachers who supported me. I recognised as a student the significance of investing passion and time in developing future practitioners, which was the catalyst to begin the journey to return this optimism and guidance within higher education. I specialise and lecture in Children's Nursing and my background was in the acute hospital sector both in the United Kingdom and overseas. I made the transition into nursing education in January 2010 and this article reflects on my first year in higher education.

On reflection I underestimated the transition process from being an expert children's nurse to a novice teacher and how much impact this would have on my personal and professional development (MacNeil, 1997). In practice I mentored students, supported and provided education to children and their families and I therefore felt these skills were transferable to higher education. In principle these skills were transferred but the level at which these needed to be adapted has impacted on my transition. My role is diverse and includes: facilitating learning, supporting and monitoring students, research involvement and maintaining practice placement links. I found it difficult to demonstrate professionalism and competence in *all* aspects while also adjusting to the academic environment which, I now recognise, was a culture shock.

During the adaptation to the new role, I focused on the challenge of understanding higher education policies and processes and I wanted to

appear competent and confident as a teacher. These aims became a distraction as I focused on my ability to perform without recognising the need for me to adapt to the new working environment. For example, the pace and structure of working in higher education is a direct contrast with my previous working practice norms. In clinical practice, I worked in pressured environments, managing wards and reporting tasks throughout my shifts. In comparison, the higher education ethos allows more independent working and time management.

The key themes I identified from reflecting on my transition are: culture shock, facilitating learning, entertaining and engaging students with the topic, supporting students and role boundaries. Each of these will be explored next.

### **Culture Shock**

Anderson (2009, p.203) defined the work role transition as: 'The human experience associated with entering a new community of practice. It is a dynamic, developmental process with associated emotional work, critical tasks, and a diffusion through role boundaries to assume the new identity with values and knowledge base for the new role.' Perhaps a key area for further exploration is to recognise the need to adequately prepare new teachers for the transition process prior to the commencement of the role.

A number of studies have identified the challenges experienced by teachers in the transition to higher education, noting the confusion of identity while becoming a novice within their new field of practice (Boyd and Lawley, 2009). Often the transition process is viewed as a culture shock by new teachers as most underestimate the impact of the journey from practice to education during the first year in higher education. I relate to this notion, and in particular McArthur-Rouse (2008) found that this may be due to a lack of understanding about the organisation's functioning; therefore the transition becomes a significant challenge as teachers strive to reform identity while maintaining links with practice. The transition process and the ability to cope and adapt may be dependent on the individual's personality. New teachers benefit from

mentorship to maintain the balance of transition and culture shock. This relationship needs both the mentor and the new teacher to work together and identify strategies to support, during adaptation to the new working environment (Stinson et al, 2006). The success of this relationship is dependent on the personalities, drive, commitment and enthusiasm of both the mentor and new teacher in directing the journey within higher education.

### **Facilitating Learning**

Facilitating students' learning requires a teacher with a multitude of skills, for example, the ability to engage students and share and inspire knowledge development. In particular, teachers need to recognise and adapt to the diverse needs of adult learners (Sinclair et al, 2005). Nursing students have specific needs for their development in both theoretical learning and the practical element of the course (Gopee, 2005). Obtaining these skills for new teachers is challenging and may be affected by confidence levels. Studies have identified that the level of confidence is linked to the transition process of being an expert in practice to a novice teacher (Daley, 1999). It could be argued that nurses should already possess these skills due to mentoring students and supporting staff in practice, and teaching and supporting patients and families, therefore the skills should be transferable. However, it is challenging applying these skills to prepare and facilitate teaching sessions which are inclusive to a wide number of students in an individual and group setting. Inclusive teaching is challenging as each student has different learning needs. Therefore, it is important to obtain feedback from students to review practice with a view to effectively facilitating learning. The ability to facilitate students' learning changes during the teacher journey (Di Leonardi, 2007) and is often connected with levels of confidence and new teachers recognising their facilitation ability.

When I started teaching, I relied heavily on notes and the sessions were largely teacher centred. As my confidence developed, I engaged in new teaching methods and progressed to a facilitation

role to enhance students' learning. This development was supported through my experiences and relationships with student groups whilst also participating in a postgraduate education course. Infante (1986) suggested that nurse education is not an information loading process, thus recognising the need to facilitate learning by engaging students with the process and leading them to develop their skills in becoming reflective and self aware of their own journey towards being a competent practitioner.

### **Entertaining and Engaging Students with the Topic**

Learning requires a number of ingredients to engage and enthuse students while developing the student-teacher relationship. For me, learning is all about fun and passion. I recognise that when I facilitate a session I need to perform and maintain presence with students to enable them to feel included and comfortable. Cunnane (2010) considered the notion that the teacher is the entertainer in order to appeal to all students and provide an inclusive and connective learning environment.

During my transition, I have had my teaching observed by more experienced colleagues on a number of occasions, which is pivotal to my development to receive constructive feedback on my performance and my interaction with student groups. Students have also fed back significant learning points when evaluating sessions; this not only consolidates their learning but will support continuous improvement for the next group (Gopee, 2005). It has helped me to reflect and identify strategies to move forward in my development and encourages excellence, supporting me to maintain a nurturing relationship with students.

### **Supporting Students**

The difficulty is striking a balance in the academic role in terms of being both a nurse and a teacher. Having a dual profession presents a challenge of discovering new boundaries with students (Peel, 2005). The rationale for this is that, as healthcare professionals, we are experts in providing compassionate support to individuals in a caring

and empathetic manner. However, in academia we need to provide support to the students but the dynamics of the relationship need to change in order for it to be successful. Striking this balance is often the most difficult aspect for new academics to grasp, but equally it is part of the teacher journey to develop understanding of the boundaries of the role.

Nursing is a demanding course and students may have issues in their personal life that can impact on their ability to cope. As part of my role and identity in higher education I am assigned personal students to support during their journey to become a registered nurse. I have found being a personal tutor challenging, as there is an expectation from students that tutors can resolve issues and act as a safety net. The success of the relationship is dependent on trust, access to the tutor and communication approaches (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006). Within academia, there is an assumption that tutors automatically possess these professional skills due to previous experience. I feel that I often need to counsel students but I do not believe I have the necessary skills, knowledge or training to support students competently. As a professional nurse I can provide transferable skills from clinical practice but in the context of higher education it requires a broader perspective in recognising how to signpost students to appropriate support (Gray & Smith, 2000). I have often felt during the transition process that I am unable to support students and meet their expectations. However, this may be due to the impact of my expectations of my role rather than believing that I have successfully supported a number of students in a variety of contexts.

The personal tutor-student relationship is similar to the relationship that I had with patients and families in practice. I support and counsel using the same principles, however in higher education personal tutors cannot hand over students, therefore a cautionary factor needs to be considered: that of balancing involvement and avoiding adopting a parenting role, which may confuse the boundaries of the role and the student-tutor relationship. During my transition, a colleague gave me a pivotal piece of advice to view

my students as my patients, therefore helping me to recognise what I have done for that student, and when I am happy with the support I have given, I can 'discharge' them from my thoughts. There are variations on students' expectations of the personal tutor and the level of quality support required to each individual.

### **Role Boundaries and challenges**

To some extent there is no end to the boundaries of the role of the teacher within higher education. Expectations appear to vary between institutions and perhaps a core understanding needs to be developed in order to ensure the appropriate support and guidance is put in place. Being assertive in response to intended workload, and knowing my boundaries and expectations, allows me to be precise in how I need to direct my energy and focus to ensure it is distributed equally between tasks. Understanding the transition process is a catalyst to identifying boundaries; for example, I believe I am a counsellor, facilitator, monitor, researcher, assessor, educator, supporter and entertainer.

Giving feedback has perhaps been one of the most challenging aspects as minimal guidance is given to new teachers. Certainly, I have reflected on my journey and recognise that students often don't engage with written feedback, so perhaps they perceive academic work to be of less value than practice. Engaging students with support and directive feedback will continue to be a challenge. From the academic perspective and the higher education ethos, we need to equip the academic team with the appropriate resources and skills to competently and effectively manage and meet the diverse needs of our student population. This is particularly significant in the widening participation of higher education institutions and the progression to an all graduate profession.

### **Conclusion**

The reason I have become a teacher in higher education is due to the passion and motivation I experienced from lecturers during my nurse education. I feel that now I am in this position, I can give back some of this passion in supporting the future nursing workforce. I have no regrets in

making the transition but I recognise that I still have a long journey ahead, while I continue to adjust and adapt from the novice to the expert within my role. Developing boundaries with students and understanding what constitutes an appropriate level of support will continue to be a challenge in nursing education, due to the unique needs of our students and the demands of the course. I think it will take time to adjust and accept the balance of support due to my previous role as a nursing professional. Establishing the boundaries will be developmental and progressive through experience and perhaps is an area for all new teachers to discover on an individual basis. Advice and support from colleagues is vital in this process but it is up to me as the professional to seek the appropriate methods and mechanisms to effectively manage and support students.

Further research needs to be considered to investigate the appropriate level of support needed for new academics and how best to nurture the attributes that new academics bring to the higher education sector.

### Recommendations

New teachers in higher education need support and guidance so they can reflect and review their practice to see how they can develop and improve. This puts the teacher in a strong position to progress on their journey and to reach their potential (Lovett & Gilmore, 2003).

Learning points and recommendations for the novice teacher and higher education institutions to consider are:

- Include time for new teachers to develop and reflect.
- Allow for adjustment to the culture shock and have appropriate support tailored to the new teacher needs.
- Nurture students' motivation and explore creative methods to support their journey from novice to qualified professional.

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