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Addressing the Theory Practice Gap in Nurse Education: Evaluating Teaching through Audit against NMC Standards and Final Management Placement

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Abstract

Introduction: This paper outlines an approach to auditing and evaluating the content of a management and leadership teaching module for undergraduate nursing students within a Northern Ireland University School of Nursing and Midwifery (UK).Normally evaluations of learning take place at the end of a teaching module and therefore do not properly reflect the value of the teaching in relation to practical clinical experience.In this case and certainly as an historical innovation, the value of the teaching and learning was assessed after thestudents'final management clinical placement was completed.

Aim: To explore both the practical value of the teaching and learning, and also the degree to which it the teaching reflected against the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Standards of Education and Learning (2010 domain 3).

Methods: This evaluation explored both a quantitative assessment/evaluation employing a Personal Response System (n =172), together with a qualitative dimension (n=116), thus delivering paper-based comments and reflections from students on the value and practicality of the module teaching theory to their final clinical management experience. The quantitativeaudit data was analysed for frequencies and cross tabulation and the qualitative audit data was thethematically analysed.

Results: Results suggest a significant proportion of the students, appreciated the quality of the standard of teaching, but more importantly,'valued or highly valued' the teaching and learning in relation to how it helped to significantly inform their management placement experience. A smaller proportion of the students underlined limitations and areas in which further improvement can be made in teaching and learning to the module.

Conclusion: Significantly positive evaluation by the students of the practical value of teaching and learning, to the theoretical management module, relative to the final clinical placement and management assessment.This has proved a useful auditing approach in assessing thetheoretical teaching to student's Level 3 clinical experience, and facilitated significant recommendations as far as developing the teaching and learning to better reflect the practice needs of nursing students.

Keywords
- *Nursing Students*
- *Management Teaching and Learning*
- *Evaluation*
- *NMC Standards*

I. Introduction And Background

This audit and evaluation of nursing students teaching and learning experience, relative to practical clinical experience, was undertaken within Northern Ireland (UK), but the approach could have resonance for teaching and learning evaluation more internationally.Within the UK the standards for undergraduate nursing education are established and enforced through the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).The currently debated new draft standards for nurse education within the UK, would appear to significantly enhance the management and leadership role of the newly qualified nurse. Within that context, and in reference to the existing NMC standards, this research study has significant resonance.

The primary purpose of undergraduate,pre-registration nursing education is to prepare students to practice as registered nurses (Sharif and Masoumi 2005; Benner et al.2009;Maginnis and Croxon 2010).

Thus,the nursing curriculumevolvesto reflect the dynamic nature of clinical environments and ultimately to produce competent nurses fit for practice at the point of registration (NMC, 2010; NMC, 2011). A significant debate continues in relation to the separation of theory and clinical practice `the practice gap', with ongoing concern as to the practical clinical relevance of some nursing theory and teaching to preparing the qualified professional (Ousey& Gallagher 2007; Wall, Andrus and Morrison 2014).

For educators in the health professions, the evaluation of learning takes on a dimension in terms of ensuring that graduates are competent, and thus safe, practitioners who are capable of maintaining professional standards (Lafferty 1997;Zasadny and Bull 2015).The clinical management of patient care assessment has become the final 'rite of passage' requirement for all undergraduate nursing courses. It is accepted as a 'fit for purpose' assessment by academics, mentors, the NMC (2010) other professions and the general public and has remained so for over thirty years; it is so recognised as such by the University and the clinical area (Danielson &Berntsson2007). A range of studies address links between theory teaching and clinical learning. Some examples include the sense of competence of newly qualified nurses (Loftmark et al. 2006), student nurses learning from both theory and clinical placement (Hesslop et al. 2001; Sharif and Masoumi 2005;Henderson 2007;Ousey and Gallagher 2007;Maginnis and Croxon 2010) the theory practice gap (Corlett2000; Whitehead and Holmes 2011;Scully 2011; Wall 2014) and movement from novice to expert (Gerrish 2000; Field 2004).
Historically (and within this UK University), the evaluation of this third year nursing student management module has taken place at the end of the University teaching period. This paper analyses students' responses toan audit undertaken with them on completion of their nursing degree programme, and after they had completed their final and summative management placement and assessment. The intention was to establish the currency, value and effectiveness they now place on the academic module content of 'Management and leadership'having been able to apply its content in their final year clinical management placement and successfully completed the final clinical management assessment. The management and leadership academic module's aim is to equip final year nursing students with knowledge of management theory and its application to clinical practice (**O**utline of module content Table 1). It focuses on assisting students to achieve competency in the NMC's professional standard 3(**Table 2**)and relates to what the public can expect from a nurse at the point of registration.

Table 1 Management and Leadership Module content	
Management theory	Leadership
Clinical governance, Quality, Risk management including audit	Managing conflict
Teams and team building and coordinating inter-professional working	Delegation
Communication and management	Change management and motivation
NMC fitness to practice and managing yourself	

Table 2NMC Standards (2010)	
1.	Professional and ethical practice;
2.	Care delivery skills
3.	Leadership, management and team-working & care management skills
4.	Personal and professional practice

The currently debated new draft standards for clinical nursing practice within the UK, would appear to significantly concentrate on and enhance the management and leadership role of the newly qualified nurse. Within that context, and in reference to the existing NMC standards, this research study has significant resonance.

Students'clinical experiences are widely acknowledged as one of the most important aspects of their educational preparation to become nurses (Sharif and Masoumi 2005; Benner et. al.2009). Furthermore, the assessment of learning ensures that students are safe competent practitioners, capable of managing and delivering clinical care and maintaining professional standards. The clinical element of this module assesses and measures the ability of students to effectively translate theory into practice and includes a practical clinical assessment thatmeasuresastudent's knowledge and clinical competency against the NMC's standards for proficiency for registered nurses. This final third year clinical module is divided in to 3 placements. The first 2 are 6 weeks long,and the final placement is 14 weeks during which time, the students undertake a summative clinical management assessment.

On completion of the theoretical module, and prior to going on clinical placement, the students in this cohort completed a standard university evaluation of the module. The group's responses to this evaluation were in the main, positive however, a number of the students appeared unclear as to why the module content was covered in such depth, and its relevance to clinical practice. In light of this concern, and by way of appraising the module's content to and for clinical practice, the audit of the students experience was undertaken at the end of their final clinical placement. This auditspecifically focused onstudents' perceptions of the relevance and

value of the management and leadership module's theoretical content to their individual practical clinicalmanagement experience, and whether the modulewascontemporary and responsive to their needs. It was also thought that the findings of the audit would better inform the module team on the students' perceptions of the value of the module to their clinical experience than the standardend oftheoretical module,evaluation.

Development and Piloting of the Audit Tool

The audit tool was developed by members of the teaching team and in discussion with student groups following an earlier piloting of the tool. Adjustments were then made to the structure and focus of some of the questions (to more fairly reflect the practicalities of the Management Module Practice and NMC Standards (2012:3), to the format for the written qualitative responses and evaluation, and particularly for the use of the Personal Response System (PRS).

The AuditTool

The audit tool comprised Part **A** and **B**. Part (**A**)addressed 7 questions developed from the Management and Leadership Module Content (**Fig.1**).

Clinical Governance	**Nurses as agents for change**
Question 1:	**Question 5**:
a. The clinical governance lecture and tutorial made me aware of the importance this quality system plays in care provision	h. The value of the lecture and tutorial on changing practice and improving standards was evident and relevant to my clinical management experience
b. The clinical governance lecture and tutorial made me aware of how it relates in the management of care	i. The lecture and tutorial on changing practice and improving standards enabled me to better understand the part that audit plays in clinical management and practice
Leadership and team-working	
Question 2:	
c. The lectures and tutorials on leadership and teamwork were relevant to my clinical management experience	
d. The lectures and tutorials on leadership and teamwork made me reflect on my performance in these activities	**Delegating**
Dealing with conflict and challenging behaviour	**Question 6:**
Question 3:	j. Addressing delegation in a lecture and tutorials gave me greater confidence in carrying out this activity in my clinical management placement.
e. Addressing the management of conflict and dealing with challenging behaviour in lectures and tutorials gave me a base upon which to apply their guidance and approaches in the clinical management placement	**Generally:**
	Question 7
Co-ordinate inter-professional working	k. I found the teaching and learning involved in the Leadership and Management module to be of significant practical value in my final management placement.
Question 4:	
f. The lectures and tutorials on inter-professional working were relevant to my clinical management experience	
g. The lectures and tutorials on inter-professional working made me more aware of my professional accountability for my own performance within the inter-professional team	

Figure1

Part (**B**) consisted of a paper-based reflection on the value of the teaching modelto their clinical practice and management placement experience.

The Audit

The audit was undertaken on the final day of the degree programme when all academic and clinically based assessments had been successfully completed, and the students signed off for entry to the professional register. Conducting the audit at this point in time allowed for full and frank responses to the questions based on the student's perceived value of the academic management and leadership module's content to their clinical management placement. There were (n=210) students registered to the module.In **Part (A)**172 students (n=172) completed the audit and in **Part (B)** 116 students (n=116).Part B comprised a paper-based reflective exercise and students were asked to complete this after completing part A. Just under 70% of the students stayed to complete the reflective exercise. The audit was administered by a member of lecturing staff not involved in the module teaching and took place in one lecture theatre. The students were advised that involvement was purely voluntary and anonymity was assured.An electronic Personal Response System (PRS) was used to capture and the responses to Part (A), and as regard the written responses to Part B, no names or other means of identification were included.

Analysis of Student Responses
Part A
**1**. The first section of the audit requested outline background demographical information: nursing field, student gender, age group and the clinical area where the clinical management placement took place – (the categories here were: general medicine, general surgery, specialist medicine, specialist surgery, community or other).
2. The second section was comprisedof7question areas that addressed the 3rd domain of the NMC Standards (2010), Care Management Skills,and was designed to assess the value of the module'scontent to the students' clinical experiences. The students engaged by indicating their preferences on a 5 point Likert-type scale and the overall responses were visible to them as percentages of response of the whole groupon screen at the time.To ensure impartiality, a member of teaching staff not involved inthe module asked the questions and gave the students the opportunity to select their responses to each question using the Personal Response System (PRS). The PRS was familiar to the students as it had been used by them throughout their programme.

Part B This was a paper based exercise where students were asked to reflect upon a statement asking them to "Tell us how you feel the Management and Leadership Module prepared you for your clinical management placement". Just under 70% of the students completed the reflections.

Participants
The participants were third year nursing students on the BSc (Hons) Nursing Sciences programme from 3 fields, adult, children's and learning disability. 172 students completed the PRS (**Part A**) audit of which 14 were males and 148 females. 78% of participants were aged 20 to 29 years, and 17% were aged 30 to 39 years with 5% aged over 40 years.The **Part B** reflective statements evaluating the module in relation to clinical practice were completed by 116 students
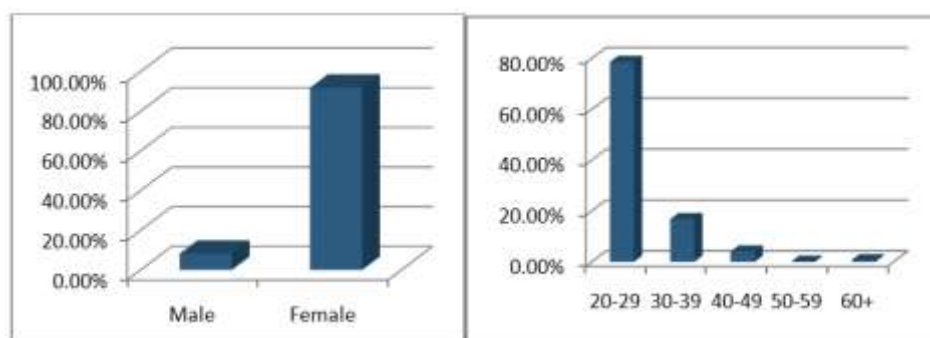
II.   Analysis And Findings
PART A. Analysis of the responses explored frequencies and cross tabulation;
(i)Frequencies
Figure1 (ibid)outlines some of the significant questions **and Figure 2** provide a synopsis of the students'responses in relation to the teaching and module's content as per the NMC'sdomain 'Care Management Skills',and the extent to which the content and teachingprepared them for the learning opportunities experienced in their clinical management placement.
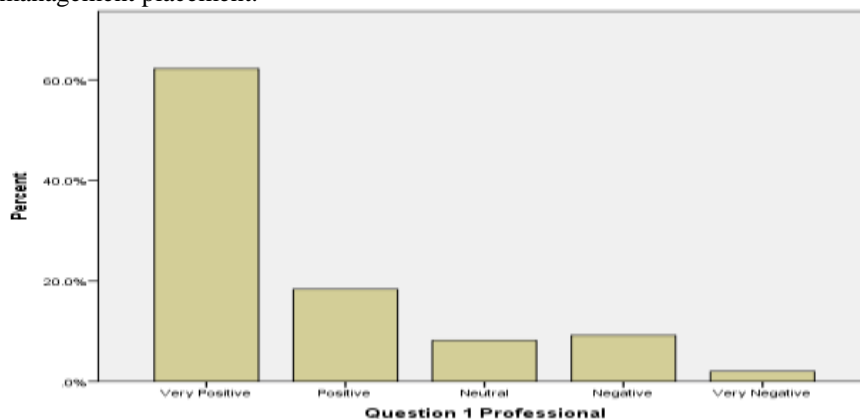

Figure 2

81% of the students responded that they agreed, or strongly agreed that the teaching was either positive or very positive. Also, 81% of the students agreed that the leadership and management module'scontent was of significant practical value to them during their final management placement. 71% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the lectures and tutorials addressing inter-professional working were relevant to their clinical management experience.
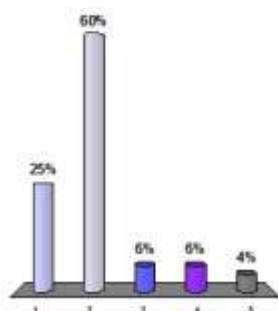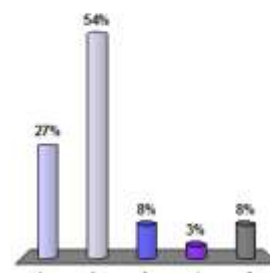

(ii) Cross tabulation
Cross tabulation of data was undertaken in relation to gender, age range, and length of time in nursing/caring role. No statistically relevant variation was found in relation to responses across all domains using Chi-Square with p-value 0.05.
Part B. of the audit required the students to comment without restriction on the following question: 'Please tell us how you feel the Management and Leadership module prepared you for your clinical management placement'. The comments were then thematically analysedto identify core categories (Speziale and Carpenter 2007; Polit and Beck 2010). This part of the evaluative data was qualitative,although a numeric has been added against each of the thematic categories to provide some impression of their relative weighting. Four core themes emerged from the analysis and these were used to categorise the responses:

1. **A positive experience**
2. **Theory to Practice Gap**
3. **Variability in relevance**
4. **Lacked Relevance**

1.   A positive experience
        The comments relating to this theme were particularly interestingwhen compared with the comments made earlier when the academic part of the module was evaluated, and suggests that evaluating student's perceptions of the theoretical content alone without them having had the opportunity to apply it in practice impacts negatively on how some students perceive its value as it only provides half the story.Analysis within this theme suggested the practical value of the teaching (n= 67);

> *'I feel that the theory in this module was well applied to practical experience and I hope to continue to apply my knowledge as a RLDN '*(P5)
> *'theabove module is vital in clinical practice as [it] aids effective management and leadership skills. Also paramount [that it is] in keeping with NMC Standards'*(P 10)
> *'it highlighted the complexities involved in management of the different strands and what makes a good leader and manager ….I felt it was an excellent module that challenged and provoked thought '*(J6)
> *`This module prepared well for my management in regards to effective delegation and being able to manage award effectively. I found the module was interesting and topics prepared me for my management. Tutorial lecturer was brilliant…[and] took time to explain everything very well. Using real-life stories was beneficial for learning'* (J26).

Furthermore, some responses demonstrated the very significant value, and practicality of the theoretical teaching (n=29);*'was an excellent module. Help me think more about my only the ship skills and qualities. Help me with my management placement----made everything easy to understand--- overall module was very helpful'*(J23)

2.   Theory to Practice Gap
        This emergent theme explored the relevance of the academic theory to practice, and while some of the students appreciated aspects of the theoretical teaching, they perhaps struggled to see their practical application to clinical reality? (n=13);

> `I felt it would be difficult to create a theoretical module which prepared someone for management placement as the leadership and management skills required during my management placement skills are developed during clinical placement under guidance from staff/mentors-although the module was helpful in emphasising certain legal and professional obligations-for example accountability delegation etc.'(J32).*
>
> `I definitely benefited from lectures/tutorials-but applying them in day-to-day practice was not my concern… it will be more applicable in a few years' (J33)*
>
> `I felt that the module was very ward/hospital focused; I feel that as the role of the learning disability nurse is changing, especially within the area of community nursing, the course would benefit from a wider view of management and leadership roles within the different areas of nursing (J37)*
>
> `was helpful with delegating and conflict management, felt could focus more on role of new band five nurse, as opposed to manager `(P36)*

One of the students, whilst significantly complimentary about their particular tutor commented that;

> *I feel that the module did prepare us to an extent. However, I feel that a lot more information and support could and would help in order to have the right management skills to fulfil the requirements for this management placement' (P 31)*

3. Variability in relevance

To some extent, this theme overlaps with theme 2 (Relevance), however some significant additional reflections emerged (n= 11).

> *'good info on accountability. Did not feel that this module prepared for management placement'(P2)*
>
> *'I feel teams [and] professional conduct were well covered. More time could have been spent role-playing specific scenarios' (J15)*
>
> *'good information on the importance in accountability and responsibility. Not much guidance on what exactly was expected from you in management [placement]as in what standards (sic) your learning objectives should be at'(P4)*

Oneof students felt somewhat under-enthused by the relevance of the teaching

> *`it helped prepare in respect of interview, however, most was common knowledge'(J26)*

Whilst 3 of the students commented on the structure of tutorials and a tendency to lose focus therein one further commented they;

> *'Enjoyed management and leadership module. However, often in tutorials we went of topic for a majority of the time. Possibly more structure?'(J52)*

Others questioned whether the teaching was entirely relevant to a particular clinical practice field;

> *`it prepared me to a certain degree but due to community management, taking on a leadership role was more difficult than it would have been on a ward(J27)*
>
> *`I think it prepared us well-although it is very different reading about leadership and management, then going out to placement and seeing this at face value (sic). It is going to be something that we truly learn as we go' (J28)*

4. Lacked Relevance

Only a small proportion of the students evaluated the relevance of the module particularly negatively (n=15), lacking application in terms of theory to their practical management placement and by implication, having not met the requirements of the NMC Standards (2010:3);

> *`hard to swallow-would have been more interesting and beneficial to have `interactive' sessions etc. The whole `I talk, you listen' routine was very boring' (J34)*
>
> *'I honestly feel that the M+L module does not prepare you for your management placement…. it was the staff and mentor whilst out on my final placement that guided and supported me through' (J51)*

Certainly some of the more critical evaluations addressed the lack of practical scenarios in the management and leadership module;

> *`No practical examples/classes on how to use the skills and as such they are forgotten easily' (J59)*

One student was particularly critical of the concentrated teaching and assessment time allocated within their final year;

> *`I didn't like the fact so much was crammed into the first eight weeks….then oral exams /assignments due in January-this would be better if spread throughout the year….then free to concentrate on management' (J64)*

Finally under this theme one student's `experience/evaluation 'drawn in the comment box possibly reflected their view of the quality of teaching and /or its relevance in practical application;

**Please tell us how you feel the management and leadership module prepared you for your phase IX
management placement**

Figure3

III. Discussion

The focus of this audit was of course drawn from a UK perspective and against the NMC standards, but helped to explore the practical application of the theoretical teaching to the management and leadership module in the students' final and critical phase 9 management placement. Historically, evaluations of academic modules take place at the end of the module's teaching. Significantly, this audit was undertaken at the very end of their time as nursing students after their management placement was completed, both to more fairly reflect the value/relevance of the teaching module, but also to obtain their perceptions of how the module content and teaching impacted on their clinical learning experience.

A triangulated approach was used within this audit to explore the breadth of their evaluations, but also to achieve an understandingof the student experience. The PRS system was used to capture the responses to the audit questions in Part A, and paper-based reflective opportunity was used to generate more qualitative responses in Part B. Analysis of Part A data suggests that a very significant number of the students appreciated the module's content and its value to their final practice management placement; with 81% of the students responding to the evaluation, acknowledgingthe quality and relevance of teaching to the module, but more importantly, the practical value of its application to their final clinical management placement.

Although not all the students completed the written reflection, the datagenerated some depth and interpretation inPart B of the audit (n=116). This comprised a paper copy reflection on the value of the management and leadership module in preparing students for their management placement. Significantly, in this section of the audit, students evaluated the module as relevant to their practice placement (N = 67), with a significant number acknowledging it having'particular' relevance to them.A significant number of students identified the following subjects from the academic module as beneficial and particularly relevant to their clinical management experience: 'Delegation, Dealing with conflict and challenging behaviour and Co-ordinating inter-professional working'. In addition a number of the students commented on the quality of teaching and learning within the module. Importantly, it is through the analysis of disconfirming evidence that the teaching and lecturing staff, as a result of students' feedback and reflection, can help to improve the quality of teaching and its relevance to the clinical experience. Whilst acknowledging the positive evaluation of the module by the majority of students, lecturers now have clear understanding that the management and leadership academic module must clearly address clinical experience both in hospital and community setting relevant to the NMC standards (2010:3).

IV. Conclusion And Recommendations

Overall the audit was a worthwhile exercise as it highlighted important issues for the future. The audit revealed that the students rated the module highly by indicating that it was well-organised and the content was relevant. Many of the students indicated that they realised the relevance of the module's content once they commenced their clinical management placement.The audit raised issues that are being addressed such as the need to incorporate more mixed methods teaching. This would reflect the comments of some students who found the subjects dry. The use of more simulation or simple role play would tie together the theory to practice issues more effectively. A number of students found running the management and leadership academic module alongside two other year 3 academic modules overwhelming. For this reason, the modules have been separated and will be delivered over a longer time-frame. It is common practice for Universities to evaluateacademic modules on completion. This is historical as few university courses provide the opportunity to test the value of theory to practise in such time-proximity. For this reason, it is essential that modules with a heavy clinical application should be evaluated once students complete the clinical phase as it gives a better indication of the

value of the academic element to lived clinical experience.Overall the audit and evaluation of teaching relative to domain 3(NMC Standards for Nurse Education 2010) was positive or significantly positive. The purpose of the audit was not to achieve a necessarily positive evaluation of the academic module, but rather to gain a better insight into the practical relevance of the academic module content to students' clinical learning experiences.

As a result of this audit the following recommendations are possible;
1. Modules must be evaluated, but in professional courses it is important that evaluations are undertaken at the end of clinical modules to ensure that the theory is relevant and current to the students' clinical needs and experiences.
2. The module content as outlined in the professional body's standards must remain current to clinical settings relevant to all fields of nursing.
3. Academic teaching must be mindful that the core lectures in leadership and management reflect the clinical experiences of students from the 4 fields of nursing.
4. Academic teaching must employ interactive and stimulating methods to encourage engagement with learning to promote understanding on a meaningful level.
5. The management and leadership academic module is challenging for students and needs to be offered at a time that allows the students to engage with their learning and not be over-burdened by other accompanying modules.

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