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Sandra L. Spoelstra
Grand Valley State University, spoelsts@gvsu.edu

Lorraine B. Robbins
Michigan State University

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A Qualitative Study of Role Transition from RN to APN

Sandra L. Spoelstra*

Lorraine B. Robbins†

*Michigan State University, spoelst5@msu.edu

†Michigan State University, robbin76@msu.edu

A Qualitative Study of Role Transition from RN to APN*

Sandra L. Spoelstra and Lorraine B. Robbins

Abstract

Role transition from registered nurse to advanced practice nurse is a difficult process. A qualitative thematic analysis guided the integration of various experiences of 24 students in a two-credit, web-based role development course in a Master's of Science in Nursing program at a large Midwestern university. Findings supported that students had developed an understanding of the core competencies and complexity of the advanced practice nurse role, and that beginning role transition had occurred. An overarching theme, 'the essence of nursing' was evident. Three sub-themes supported the occurrence of role transition, which included the importance of: a) building a framework for nursing practice, b) direct patient care, and c) comprehension and exemplification of professional responsibilities. This study has implications for nurse educators interested in promoting advanced practice nurse role transition early in the educational process.

KEYWORDS: role, transition, advanced practice nurse

*Lorraine Robbins is an Assistant Professor in the College of Nursing at Michigan State University. Sandra Spoelstra is a doctoral student and State of Michigan Nurse Corp Fellow in the College of Nursing at Michigan State University.

Advanced practice nurses (APNs) are registered nurses (RNs) with advanced knowledge and skills that enable them to function in expanded roles as health care providers (Carryer, Gardner, Dunn, & Gardner, 2007). Since APNs are already RNs, a transition from the RN to the APN role needs to occur (Cleary, Matheson, & Happell, 2009; Cragg & Andrusyszyn, 2005). Nurses engaged in advanced practice have expanded levels of autonomy, skill, and decision-making. Focusing on role transition early in the educational process helps promote adaptation and adjustment to the APN role in the clinical setting after graduation (Gardner, Chang, & Duffield, 2007; Manning & Neville, 2009).

Initiating role transition in the first semester in an APN program will establish a foundation for increasing awareness of the APN role throughout the educational process (Anderson, 2009). Nursing faculty strive to identify innovative and effective evidence-based educational strategies to assist students in role transition (Kim, Ellefsen, Han, & Alves, 2008). Facilitating APN role transition calls for a teaching strategy based on evidence (Cragg & Andrusyszyn, 2005). However, evaluating a teaching strategy is difficult when an abstract construct such as role transition is involved (Griffith, 2004).

Strategies for successful transition of undergraduate nursing students to the RN role are well documented (Barton, 2007; Brennan & McSherry, 2007; Danielson & Berntsson, 2007; Newton & McKenna, 2007). However, studies examining APN role transition are limited to socialization after graduation (Carryer et al., 2007) or in specific work settings (Cleary et al., 2009), or they involve only nursing educators (Anderson, 2009; Manning & Neville, 2009). A gap in the literature exists with few studies examining APN role transition during educational programs.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the role transition of beginning APN students enrolled in a graduate-level role development course. The two research questions were: what is the student's transitional experience of 'becoming' an APN in a master's level course?; and, does the course design support the role transitional process with regard to the initial steps of 'becoming' an APN?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role transition from RN to APN begins during the educational program and continues throughout the first few years of practice (Barton, 2007). APN students have the responsibility of acquiring new knowledge and skills, as well as

learning to use their previous nursing knowledge in a new way (Cragg & Andrusyszyn, 2005; Griffith, 2004; Heitz, Steiner, & Burman, 2004). APN education is a time of change, with RNs struggling to learn and practice in a different nursing role (Manning & Neville, 2009; Steiner, McLaughlin, Hyde, Brown, & Burman, 2008).

Learning environments that support critical thinking and synthesis of information (Forbes, While, Mathes, & Griffiths, 2006), and have a learner-centered approach to teaching (Heitz et al., 2004) are known to facilitate role transition. Role content can be incorporated into the overall curricula, specific courses, or assignments. Strategies known to facilitate role transition for APNs include: role rehearsal (Kelly & Matthews, 2001); reflective journaling (Hamric & Taylor, 1989); students' selection of preceptors (Hayes, 1998); planning for the first position following graduation (Hunter, Bormann, & Lops, 1996); and understanding the expectations associated with being an APN (Stahl & Myers, 2002). Furthermore, RNs with clinical experience have reported less difficulty with role transition to the APN role (Griffith, 2004).

Expanded levels of autonomy, skill, and decision-making (Gardner et al., 2007), as well as competence and capability, (Gardner, Hase, Gardner, Dunn, & Carryer, 2008) need to be considered in understanding the complex role of an APN. Shaping the new role involves a balance of role loss as an RN and role expansion as an APN (Holt, 2008). Role transition can be a difficult process, and those who have realistic expectations may experience less stress during the actual transition (Cleary et al., 2009).

DESCRIPTION OF THE ROLE DEVELOPMENT COURSE

The initial premise of this web-based course was that students must understand basic elements of the APN role before they can begin to progress toward achieving clinical expertise and specialization. The course included didactic content directed toward expanding theoretical knowledge related to the 'essence' of the APN role (adult or family nurse practitioner), and an innovative, individualized, and experiential component. The course was structured around the seven competencies identified in Hamric's Model of Advanced Practice Nursing (Spross & Lawson, 2009): 1) direct clinical practice; 2) expert coaching and guidance; 3) consultation; 4) research; 5) clinical, professional, and systems leadership; 6) collaboration; and 7) ethical decision making.

Throughout the course, students compared and contrasted APN role domains and competencies with those of other health care professionals, applied theoretical concepts to role development, devised strategies to meet role competencies, integrated historical information into the development of the APN role, and analyzed parameters of function of the APN. Textbooks used to facilitate the learning process included: *Advanced Nursing Practice: An Integrative Approach* (Hamric, Spross, & Hanson, 2005) and *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice* (Benner, 2001). A New Global Environment for Learning (ANGEL) (2010) served as the online platform for the web-based course.

To assist the students with role transition, the course included two distinct elements: 1) a weekly online discussion forum in which students explored each of the seven competencies in depth in small teams of six to seven members each, and 2) an interview with an APN to further explore the competencies. For the discussion forum, team leaders rotated weekly and submitted brief papers summarizing the team discussion during their assigned week. For the interview, students selected an APN who was prepared at the master's level, had a minimum of one year of experience in a practice setting, and was functioning in a role similar to what the student had planned to assume after graduation. To ensure a comprehensive discussion of the core competencies with the practicing APN, the student first developed open-ended questions related to the competencies and then provided the APN with the questions two weeks prior to the interview. The interview culminated in a 5-page final paper integrating course content with the practicing APN's perspective regarding the core competencies of an APN.

METHOD

The qualitative research paradigm (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007) was used to describe and interpret multidimensional phenomena. The research questions were addressed through thematic analysis. Techniques used enabled the themes to emerge from the student's own words explaining the phenomena in question, rather than imposing themes from an existing theoretical framework (Leininger, 1985; Speziale & Carpenter). To sense themes, a structured process of combining and cataloguing related patterns was used to encode information. This approach brought together components or fragments of ideas allowing themes to emerge and form a comprehensive picture of the students' collective experience (Curry, 2006). An argument was then formulated to support the themes (Benner, 2001; Curry).

Sample

The university institutional review board approved the study. All 34 first-semester students who had enrolled and successfully completed a two-credit online role development course in a Master's of Science in Nursing program offered through a large Midwestern university during the fall of 2007 were invited to participate in the study. The students were mailed a packet of information containing a letter explaining the study, a brief demographic survey, a consent form, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Twenty-four students (70.6%) returned the signed consent forms and agreed to participate.

Data Collection

Data were obtained from 24 final papers written by the students and based on the interview with a practicing APN. The purpose of the interview and paper was to assist the students in synthesizing the core competencies of an APN (Hamric, Spross, & Hanson, 2009). To promote in-depth analysis of the APN role, reflective writing was required in the paper.

Data Analysis

To maintain participant anonymity, a trained research assistant de-identified the student papers. Atlas.ti 5.0 software was used for analysis. The 24 student papers were read in their entirety; then reread line-by-line and coded (Curry, 2006). After the first 10 papers were coded, themes began to emerge. After discussion and reflection, the researchers reread the initial papers to assure coding accuracy, as more abstract and refined ideas about the domains of interest evolved. Then, the remaining 14 papers were reread and coded. Finally, the researchers analyzed the content and context of the codes using thought processing and reflective thinking to categorize the items. Once the categories were identified, discussion occurred amongst the researchers, and category names were identified. Relationships among the categories emerged from the discussion, and postulates began to form. Further review and discussion of the relationships allowed the themes to emerge. A PhD-prepared university faculty member and expert in qualitative research reviewed each step in the process.

Rigor

Researchers used established standards of rigor (adequacy, dependability, reflexivity, credibility, and relevance) to enhance transparency of the process (Hall & Stevens, 1991). These criteria determine whether findings are plausible

and detailed enough to approximate the experience, if participants disclosed in-depth enough information, and whether researchers have continually examined their own values.

Adequacy and trustworthiness were assured by having the research team discuss the methods, design, analysis, results, and conclusions among themselves, as well as consult the expert in qualitative research. Dependability was established through the writing of analytic decision memos, and confirming each decision with the expert in qualitative research. This process assured results were consistent with the data collected. Credibility and reflexivity were assured by first identifying, then bracketing personal assumptions and biases during data analysis as a reminder of the extent to which researcher values may have influenced the study. Finally, generalizability was achieved by sharing study findings among the research group and identifying implications and relevance to the education of APNs (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007).

RESULTS

Of the 24 students participating in the study, 23 (95.8%) were female and white. The average age was 35, with a range of 25 to 55 years. Fifteen (62.5%) students had been RNs for fewer than ten years, and 16 (66.7%) worked full-time. Fourteen (58.3%) had prior on-line course learning.

One overarching and three sub-themes emerged in response to the research questions stated earlier. Figure 1 depicts the thematic coding scheme and relationships drawn from the student papers.

The overarching theme was 'the essence of nursing'. The three sub-themes included: 1) importance of building a framework for nursing practice; 2) importance of direct patient care; and 3) comprehension of the importance of exemplification of professional responsibilities. In the following paragraphs, findings are presented according to the identified themes. Use of direct quotes gives meaning to the themes (Sandelowski, 1994).

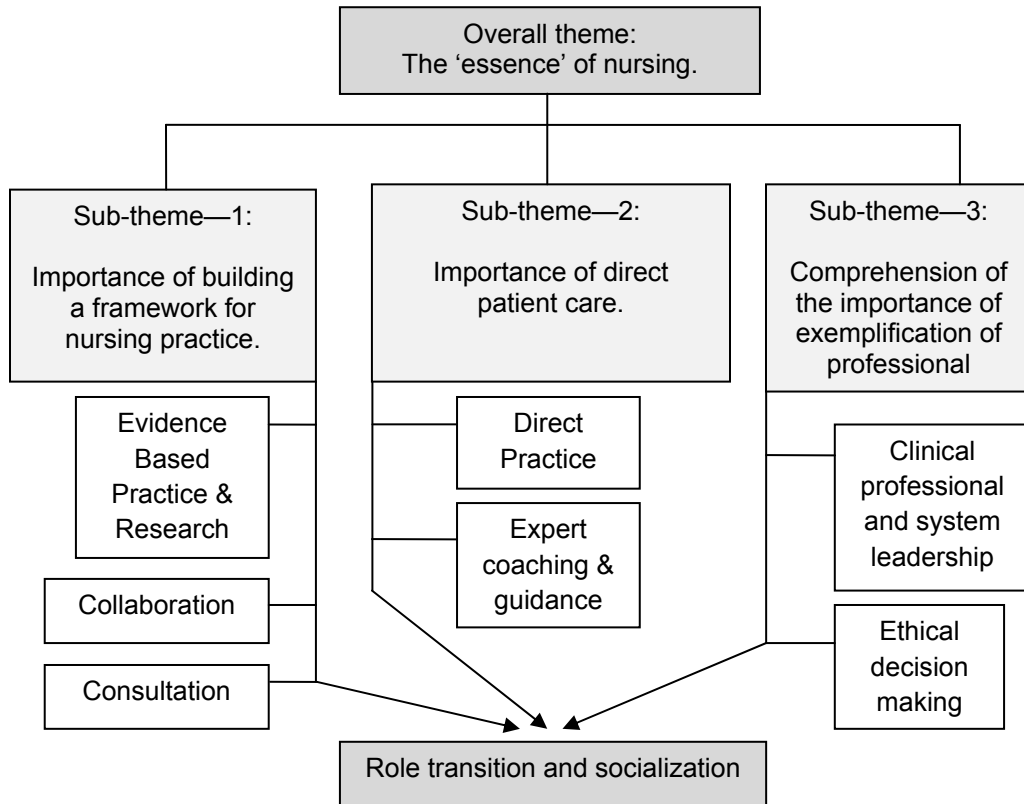


Figure 1. Thematic coding and relationships drawn from scholarly papers.

Themes

The essence of nursing. In each student paper, an overarching theme was found. Each student’s commitment to nursing excellence and innovation was evident from the synthesis and integration of the seven core competencies of an APN. This perspective was reported by one student who stated that being an APN involves “having the expertise, caring, values, ethics, spirituality, cultural sensitivity, with a common vision and strategic plan to adapt to the rapidly changing health care delivery environment.” Statements were made about the core role of an APN, as illustrated by another student who described the APN as “an empowering collaborator and advocate who is responsible for instilling knowledge of health promotion or health care in others.” What emerged from the papers was that the foundation for becoming an APN is built on a synthesis and integration of the core competencies. The foundation reflected ‘the essence of nursing,’ providing real meaning for eventual role transition. Therefore, it can be considered the starting point or ‘heart’ of the APN role.

Importance of building a framework for nursing practice. The APN framework for nursing practice incorporated evidenced-based practice and research, collaboration, and consultation. The students indicated that the framework used by APNs involved “asking questions, collecting and integrating relevant data, logically organizing and displaying the similarities and differences across multiple research findings, implementing change, and evaluating outcomes.” Supporting the use of an APN practice framework, the majority of the students provided a similar rationale, which was to “enhance and advance practice to promote positive patient outcomes.” Every student recognized that the role of the APN was to provide patient care based on empirical evidence by means of collaboration and consultation with other APNs and health professionals. The importance of using a framework that underscores evidence-based practice and research, collaboration, and consultation as a means to guide nursing practice emerged as an essential component of APN role transition.

Importance of direct patient care. The students shared compelling, vivid, and poignant stories from the practicing APNs, affirming that direct patient care is the most important competency and an essential foundational component for successful APN role transition. One student stated that “the ability to conduct a thorough assessment is essential for acquiring an awareness of factors, such as the accepted practice for the treatment of illnesses, progression of disease trajectories, and health promotion practices of a patient population.” A second student indicated that the interviewed APN viewed patients “holistically” as “physical, emotional, spiritual, and social beings” who deserve comprehensive and evidence-based care that meets their needs. Other students emphasized that direct patient care associated with the APN role was characterized by “expert clinical thinking and skillful performance, diverse approaches to health and illness management, and the formation of partnerships with patients.” Another student reported “establishing a trusting and caring relationship with patients” was essential for “determining what interventions could maximize their physical and mental health.”

Comprehension of the importance of exemplification of professional practice responsibilities. The students presented their perspective of professional practice responsibilities by emphasizing the importance of APN leadership supported by ethical values. Students identified leadership skills as including: 1) “being knowledgeable in an area of clinical practice”; 2) “utilizing evidence-based research results in patient care policy and protocol updates”; 3) “communicating effectively with others”; 4) “identifying goals and providing tools to accomplish the goals”; 5) “role modeling professional behaviors to staff nurses and other health care providers”; and 6) “collaborating in multidisciplinary

teams to improve patient outcomes”. Some defined leadership as a process in which the “purposes of the leader and followers become fused, with the resultant creation of unity and wholeness”. Others stated leadership was a “commitment that includes giving of self personally and professionally, balancing professional and private life, planning ahead to make change happen, and self-reflecting”. Students repeatedly articulated that APNs use “introspection”, a “non-judgmental approach”, and “strong core values” to “contemplate contradictory ethical perspectives”. All student papers underscored that APN role transition required being a leader with ethical values.

Research Questions

The discussion forums, interview, and writing of the final paper were invaluable to answer both the first and second research questions: what is the student’s transitional experience of ‘becoming’ an APN in a master’s level course?; and does the course design support the role transitional process with regard to the initial steps of ‘becoming’ an APN? The team discussions showed that students could apply course content to articulate their understanding of the core competencies of an APN. The interview provided a vicarious experience that reinforced what they had learned to further assist them in comprehending their future role and the behaviors and attitudes of the “aspired to” APN group. Consequently, the final papers culminated in a rich description of the students’ transitional experience, as noted in the results.

As evidenced in the final papers, the multiple opportunities for engagement in experiential and reflective activities were instrumental in assisting students to synthesize and apply the course content. Figure 2 depicts the new model.

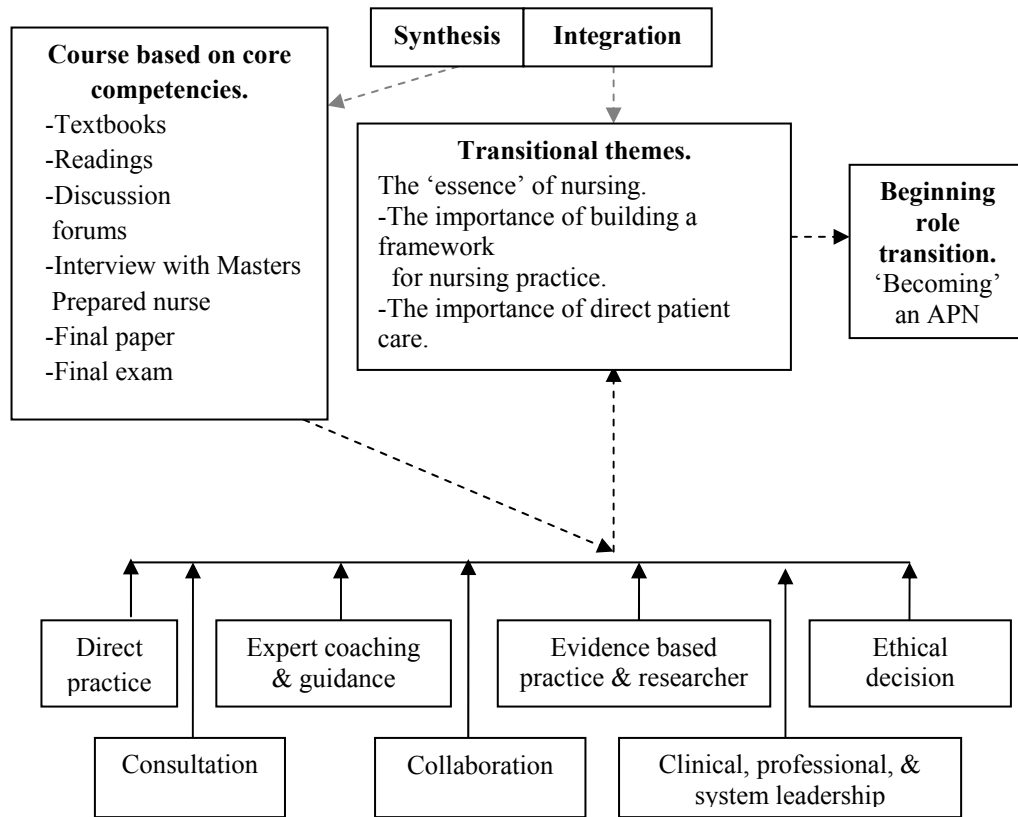


Figure 2. The transitional process of becoming an APN.

Summary of research question findings. Themes identified in this study supported that an educational approach can assist first-semester graduate nursing students in beginning APN role transition. Furthermore, constant comparative analysis resulted in the emergence of themes that led to a framework reflecting the transitional process of becoming an APN.

The role development course is based on the seven APN core competencies. Information about the competencies from the required textbooks, readings, discussion forums, interview, final paper, and final exam is synthesized to reflect themes that assist students in beginning the process of role transition. Students experienced the process of role transition as they began to adopt a new world view and way of ‘being’ that enabled beginning role transition and socialization to occur. Demonstrating an effective teaching strategy, the final

papers from the students clearly reflected the attributes of the APN in the themes that emerged.

DISCUSSION

Findings in this study are similar to others, presenting insight into the experience of APN role transition (Anderson, 2009; Barton, 2007). Competence and capability need to be considered in understanding the complex role of the nurse practitioner (Cleary et al., 2009; Gardner et al., 2008), and developing both can begin during the educational process. Furthermore, role transition is a difficult process (Brennan & McSherry, 2007), that involves building on the values and attitudes from the baccalaureate level (Cragg & Andrusyszyn, 2005; Newton & McKenna, 2007). The behaviors of preceptors enhance critical thinking in graduate nursing students (Gourde, 2005) and as a result facilitate role transition (Gardner, Chang, & Duffield, 2007; Wieland, Altmiller, Dorr, & Wolf, 2007). Because the shaping of a role demands a balance of role loss and role expansion (Holt, 2008; Johnson, 2008), both are important for role transition to occur.

The global theme of the transitional process of ‘becoming’ an APN emerged from the student papers through thematic analysis. Although the commonly used metaphor, ‘the essence of nursing’, as an overarching theme, seemed universally applicable, each student’s paper was quite unique with richer and more meaningful stories told by the students than had been anticipated. Synthesis of the core competencies with role identity, exposure to the APN role, and integration of the role under the guidance of a practicing APN all played a part in the students’ beginning role transition (Brennan & McSherry, 2007). As a result, each student experience of ‘becoming’ an APN was reported in the final paper, supporting the belief that the course design built a foundation for the initial steps of APN role transition.

According to Hayes (1998), student selection of mentors can result in increased self-efficacy. Students were required to select a practicing APN for their interview who held a position similar to what the student had planned to assume after graduation. Because reflective writing is identified as a learning technique that encourages role integration (Hamric & Taylor, 1989), the course faculty encouraged students to reflect on the practicing APN’s role when writing the final paper. Promoting a deep understanding of the core competencies (Stahl & Myers, 2002) and complexity of the role (Brykczynski, 1996, 1999) facilitates role transition. The purpose of the discussion forums, interview with a practicing APN, and final paper was to assist students in synthesizing the core competencies

to better understand the complexity of the APN role. The interview also served to minimize the gap between education and practice by developing realistic post-graduation expectations, thus supporting APN role transition (Hunter et al., 1996; Stuart & Oshio, 2002). Finally, another purpose of the interview was to promote students' understanding of the APN role in a setting where they plan to work after graduation so that realistic expectations could be developed.

Implications for Nursing Education

Nurse educators are challenged to find effective teaching strategies based on evidence to reshape the learning process in graduate nursing education. The components of this course, including the team discussions of the APN core competencies, interview with a practicing APN, and writing of the final paper, together facilitated beginning APN role transition. This design can be used as a model to promote beginning APN role transition in other graduate nursing programs.

CONCLUSION

This study described the transitional process of 'becoming' an APN from the perspective of students ending their first semester of graduate nursing education at one university. Broader examination in multiple venues is recommended to enhance generalizability. Utilization of a course design based on evidence can show how an educational approach works (Arslanian-Engoren, Hicks, Whall, & Algase, 2005; Cragg & Andrusyszyn, 2005; Stahl, Lewandowski, & Connolly, 2008) to support APN role transition.

A limitation of this study is that the findings are not generalizable to other populations because purposive convenience sampling was used. However, themes that emerged provide a basis for understanding APN role transition and may be transferable to other settings. Another limitation is the homogenous nature of the sample (all from a large, public university; all females and the majority being white). In addition, member checks that involve reviewing data with respondents were not conducted.

Further studies of students' transition should be conducted after graduation to determine the effectiveness of their education in promoting the transitional process of 'becoming' an APN. Program graduates could reflect and report on what facilitated role transition during their education.

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