

Learning the Way to Advanced Practice Nursing



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The Master of Nursing program prepares nurses for advanced practice. Advanced practice involves “analyzing and synthesizing knowledge, understanding, interpreting, and applying nursing theory and research, and developing and advancing nursing knowledge and the profession as a whole” (CNA, 2008). Advanced practice competencies include providing expert guidance for both nurses and clients, consultation to all members of the health care team, acting as a change agent by moving evidence into practice, and collaboration specifically in the context of ethical dilemmas (Hamric, Spross & Hanson, 2005). Nurses learn to enact these competencies through the acquisition of clinical expertise combined with an understanding and application of nursing and related theories to actual practice situations. The curriculum is designed for students to develop the leadership, problem-solving and application of theory necessary for advanced practice.

Two of the courses in the program will be used to illustrate

how the learning experience can be varied. These courses are NURS5435 and 5436 Adult Nursing: Theory and Practice/ Clinical I and II. These courses are sequential and have a weekly classroom seminar and in addition to this, the students spend six hours a week in a selected clinical setting where they identify, develop, implement, and evaluate a project to improve care delivery while enhancing the quality of life for patients and families. During NURS5435, students are challenged to explore and reflect on a series of societal issues such as the economy, technology, human resources, generational variations, gender, social inequities, sources of knowledge, processes of care delivery, and to examine how these issues play out in the clinical setting. This learning is intended to prepare the students for the contextual issues that may be encountered in NURS5436, as they endeavor to implement the projects developed in NURS5435. Initially, students are challenged in finding a fit between the identified project and theory. This process, however, is soon replaced with the challenge of being the change agent as implementation nears. Despite the fact that students have worked with a core group of individuals over a period of time on a project of

interest to all involved, as the time approaches to move the work into practice there are always surprises. This serves as a very worthwhile lived experience for students to take with them into advanced practice where they will be regularly relied upon for expertise, leadership, and change.

On my arrival at Dalhousie I had been in clinical practice for more than two decades and spent one decade as an advanced practice nurse. In this role I worked to advance nursing clinical practice by integrating evidence into practice, undertaking major clinical change

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projects, and mentoring nurses to advance their clinical practice. This served as the ideal backdrop to prepare me to teach The Adult Theory/Clinical courses. One unique aspect of these courses is the clinical practicum

associated with the courses.

Purpose

The clinical practicum component of these courses provides for the direct application of theoretical concepts relevant to the course, and first hand experience as a change agent. Students in these courses are practicing nurses primarily in hospital settings and from a variety of specialty areas. A master’s degree is a requirement to be an advanced practice nurse

and to fulfill roles such as the Clinical Nurse Specialist or Nurse Practitioner. Students must conduct the practicum in an area other than where they currently work. This requirement puts students outside of their comfort zone and helps them more fully experience the process of project conception, development, implementation, evaluation, and collaboration.

Course Objectives

Upon completion of the course students should be able to:

- Critically analyze the existing literature, and in combination with one's clinical knowledge and expertise, assess the present state of the knowledge for theoretical relevance and application to practice within the context of the selected clinical nursing specialty.
- Critically examine the altered health states that are using most of the existing illness care resources in relation to the design of health care interventions and determine if these interventions are aimed at providing ethical care and improving quality of life.
- Identify in collaboration with stakeholders in the chosen practice setting and the course professor a project aimed at improving the health and quality of life of care recipients and their families.
- Explore the notion that nurses are historically and culturally constituted as persons with expert clinical and theoretical knowledge and are therefore capable of and responsible for transforming the healthcare system.
- Evaluate the effects of research (new knowledge) transfer strategies

on the process and outcome of care delivery in selected clinical practice settings.

Clinical Practicum

In these courses students work with a clinical preceptor to identify areas of practice requiring innovation or development. The preceptor is normally a Master's prepared nurse who serves as a mentor and a facilitator on the project. The student uses nursing and related theories learned in the classroom to guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of their identified projects. For many students this represents the first time they have been responsible for all phases of a project situated in their workplace context in an organizational setting and they learn first-hand how organizations work, how committed employees can be to maintaining existing practice, and the difficult, yet important work of collaboration. Students also learn that not all groups are ready for change and that this can be an opportunity to help prepare a group for change.

Evaluation of student learning has four components. In NURS5435 students (a) prepare a personal reflection (5 page) paper on the proposed project and briefly outline the theory, (b) submit a progress report in conjunction with the preceptor, (c) deliver an oral presentation to the class explaining the theory and its' application to the project, and (d) submit a 15-20 page paper describing the project, setting, stakeholders, objectives, literature review of the project topic, in-

depth theoretical explanation, plans for implementation and evaluation. In NURS5436 students proceed with implementation and evaluation of the project, (a) submit a progress report as outlined above, (b) present the implementation and evaluation process in class paying particular attention to linking the theory to the practice project, and (c) submit a final version of the paper that was started in NURS5435. This paper will incorporate the feedback given at the end of NURS5435 as well as a detailed presentation of implementation and evaluation, once again linking these aspects to the selected theory.

Student Experiences

Students select the areas where they want to conduct the practicum and they also select a preceptor as well. The areas normally chosen are of some particular interest to the student, and the preceptor is normally in a leadership role in the area chosen by the student. Organizing the practicum requires reflection and initiative on the part of the student. Once an area has been identified, then the student works with the personnel to identify what the project will be and carries out the work necessary for development, implementation, and evaluation of the project.

To illustrate how the practicum works, two project examples are briefly outlined and a third is presented in detail below.

The first example is of individuals with kidneys that do not function properly who are placed on a procedure called dialysis. These people need to learn to do

a lot of their own care. Part of the care process is learning to start and stop treatments. One of the projects involved developing the teaching materials necessary for patients to be independent in self-care related to treatments. The theory used to guide this project was Orem's Self-Care Deficit Nursing Theory. This theory guides the student in the assessment and intervention necessary to determine the client's level of ability to manage self-care, and to intervene to the extent necessary to support the client in being as independent as possible in self-care.

A second example involves improving nurses' success in maintaining long stay catheters placed in patients' veins. These catheters have become widely used in the past ten years and have contributed to patient comfort because patients do not need to be pricked as often to obtain blood samples or to start fluid therapy through their veins. The consistency and length of these catheters lends to the possibility of them becoming clogged. The purpose of this project is to develop a combined instructional and self-learning module for nurses guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. This theory is based on the premise that individuals will successfully acquire new skills if attention is paid to the factors of environment, personal, and behavior. Environmental means assuring the quality of the content and the instructor, personal means motivation to learn and is assessed using a self-efficacy scale, behavior is the result of the interaction of

the environment and the personal factors.

A third example will be focused on in more length and concerns the well-known phenomenon of crowded hospital Emergency departments (ED). Children with sore throats are often taken to the ED and since this condition is not considered to be an emergency, the wait times can be long. Many of these cases are viral in nature and do not need an antibiotic. Advances in technology have provided what is known as the rapid strep antigen test. Results can be known in twenty minutes and if the test is positive the client needs to see a physician for a prescription. If not, the nurse can provide sore throat management information to the accompanying adult and discharge the client.

Statement of the Problem: Prior to the clinical practicum project, all clients presenting to the ED with a sore throat had to wait to see a physician before any test was ordered. The focus of the clinical practicum project was to have nurses follow an approved protocol to assess clients arriving with sore throat, order the rapid strep antigen test if indicated, verify the results, and based on the results, either inform the client they needed to wait to see the physician, or the nurse proceeded with the necessary counseling and discharged the client.

This sounds like a reasonably straight-forward project, however, considerable groundwork was necessary before any of the actual project development began. First, the medical staff, who traditionally

ordered all tests and discharged all clients from the ED, needed to be in support of the project. Second, the administrative staff of the hospital and the ED nursing staff had to be in support of the project. Third, this new process represented an expansion of the scope of practice of the ED nurses and the College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia was consulted for their approval. This phase was not linear and a great deal of back and forth negotiating occurred among all stakeholders with the student as the point person for all areas of concern.

The adaptation of an existing evidence-informed assessment form for nurses, and the development of client/family information packages was a straightforward process. At the outset of the practicum the student had some sense of the number of players who would be involved but was most surprised by the amount of time needed to bring all stakeholders to consensus. The student used Kotter's (1996) Leading Change Theory to guide the project, and came to realize the value in the use of theory not only to guide the project but also in sustaining the momentum that the change agent needs to see a project through to completion. The student went on to publish this work (Houk & Macdonald, 2008), demonstrating how projects can not only expand the student's professional development experience, but also have the potential to inform the community more broadly beyond the specific location of the original project.

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