Increasing confidence of first-year student nurses with peer mentoring

At Staffordshire University we have explored how the process of peer mentoring of first-year student nurses by third years could benefit both groups. The aim would be to assist the first-year student nurses adapt to university life and clinical placements, and to help final-year students in their transition to becoming qualified nurses.

Many factors increase the daily stress for university students. This may be the case for undergraduate student nurses in particular, as they need to juggle intensive studying with ever-changing and complex placements. Magnussen and Amundson (2003) stated that these stressors can affect students’ physical health and their mental health, which could lead to lower academic achievement and a slower adjustment to university life.

Mentoring is widely promoted as an effective strategy for supporting student nurses and new practitioners in clinical settings. As well as having motivated students to learn, mentoring programmes have also improved academic performance (Christiansen and Bell, 2010). Such programmes do not only help with studies, they also encourage teamwork and improve human relations.

Goldsmith et al (2006) stated that, ideally, mentoring has a positive impact on mentors as well as mentees: mentors can gauge their own personal growth by reflecting on their interactions with mentees (Sprengel and Job, 2004). They have the chance to:

- Practise forming relationships;
- Improve their understanding of others;
- Acquire an increased sense of responsibility (Ragins and Kram, 2007).

Peer mentoring

Mentoring is a complex process that requires the development of bounded and purposeful relationships, which should be underpinned by knowledge, experience and opportunity for reflection (Dennison, 2010). Mentors and mentees need face-to-face meetings, discussion, effective communication channels and role preparation. But does mentoring always need to be this complex or this formal? Could a more straightforward solution be envisaged, in which an experienced undergraduate student would mentor and support an inexperienced peer?
Christiansen and Bell (2010) defined peer-assisted learning as a general term to describe a range of strategies, including:
- Cooperative learning;
- Collaboration;
- Peer coaching.

Benefits for both senior and junior students have been highlighted: often, senior students gain a deeper understanding of their subject area, which can help them with their confidence, their communication skills and their transition to qualified practitioner (Dennis, 2010).

To find out how peer mentoring would work in practice and with what results, I conducted a pilot study with 39 student nurses on the undergraduate children’s nursing course at Staffordshire University.

Informal feedback
A first step was to discover what first-year student nurses felt would help them, and to canvass third-year students on the idea of peer mentoring. First-year undergraduate student nurses were asked informally, during induction week, what they thought might help improve their confidence and their experience during their first year at university. Their suggestions included:
- Someone to talk to who would not be intimidating;
- A fellow student with whom they could share their experiences – both good and bad;
- Someone they could ask anything without feeling stupid;
- Someone who would be a listening ear and who would not judge their lack of knowledge.

We then approached third-year undergraduate students to ask them what they thought about mentoring a first-year peer. Responses were largely positive; examples included:

“Think it is such a good idea, but my head is so full of my dissertation at the moment that I am not an ideal role model.”

Students mentoring students

We decided to set up a mentoring study for which we recruited:
- 21 first-year student nurses who agreed to be mentees;
- 18 third-year student nurses who agreed to be mentors.

The participants agreed to take part in a peer mentoring programme that would last through the academic year. The principle of the programme was that first-year students would seek support from their mentors whenever they felt they needed it. Students were free to meet up regularly or on an ad-hoc basis. There were no requirements for them to organise a more formal schedule of meetings.

This initiative was not about senior students adopting a formal counselling role. They were simply going to share their experiences, offer guidance and tips, and, as one third-year student put it, “make the journey a little less daunting and scary” for the newcomers.

The third-year students wanted academic staff to have minimal input, as they felt this would make the junior students feel more relaxed and comfortable when seeking support. However, support and supervision would be readily available for any participating student if required, and this was highlighted to all participants before the start of the study.

Mentees and mentors were allocated randomly. A lunch was held at the university and each first-year student was introduced to their third-year mentor.

The academic staff provided lunch in an informal setting and introduced the study, but then withdrew to foster a more relaxed approach. Feedback was sought after the lunch from the two student groups and appeared to be positive. Telephone numbers and email addresses had been exchanged. The students had also agreed to set up a discussion forum for all participants on social media, which was done the next day.

Peer learning or peer mentoring have been used to assist students in their clinical area and with the development of their clinical skills (Sprengel et al, 2004). However, this was not the purpose of this study: although mentors and mentees were welcome to share concerns relating to their clinical area, the focus was on general support for the transition to university and the start of a career in healthcare.

Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire was sent to both groups after six months and again after a year – that is, when the third-year students would have been completing their degree programme; the response rate was excellent, with 19 first-year students (out of 21) and all third-year students (18) completing both questionnaires.

The questionnaires asked:
- Whether mentoring had been happening;
- How regularly this had been done;
- What the outcomes (positive and negative) had been.

The data was anonymised to encourage openness. A constant comparative method (Denscombe, 2014) was used to analyse the data collected via the questionnaires. Box 1 explains the method and its advantages.

Benefits for junior students

It was evident that junior students experienced some of the same anxieties that senior students had also gone through. These were categorised into five themes:
- Unsure what to expect;
- Fear of seeming inexperienced;
- Others had gone through the same.

By using the constant comparative method, the researcher can never lose sight of the data accumulated, or ‘shift’ the analysis too far away from what is happening on the ‘ground’. Denscombe (2014) explains that this ensures any theory that is developed as a result of the study remains closely in touch with its origins in data – it remains grounded in empirical reality.
Fear of seeming incompetent; Failing; Gaining confidence.

Many junior students were not sure what was expected from them or what to expect in general. For them, the senior students represented “a safe place to ask questions that may sound basic”. The advantage of being able to speak to a senior student was that “they had lived through the experience so could really tell me what to expect”. Junior students said they felt they could ask another student, but not a tutor, about “stuff that maybe I should know, and didn’t”. As one of them put it: “It’s perhaps little things that are really insignificant but would be helpful to know – so I just ask my mentor as they seem to have all of the answers.”

First-year students had concerns about being viewed as inexperienced: “I feel as if I should know stuff that I really don’t, so I will just randomly email my mentor because I feel that she will not judge me”.

“I’ve never been into a skills lab before and was really worried that I might faint or do something embarrassing. I emailed my mentor to ask about what happens and she totally put my mind at rest. I was getting into such a state about it!”

The junior students were also concerned about their academic achievements but, again, their feedback about the support they had received from their senior counterparts was encouraging. “It’s good to know that I am not the only one who had to resubmit. It doesn’t mean that I am going to be thrown off the programme after all.”

“I felt so stupid, I felt that I was never, ever going to be at a degree standard, but my student mentor was the same – she failed two assignments and has still managed to make it into third year. It was really reassuring.”

“Although my module lead is very approachable there are some questions that I really don’t want to ask. It was good to be able to ask my mentor as I felt that they didn’t think of me as being really dim!”

Interestingly, two of the junior students said it was possible that they would not have continued their training if it had not been for the support from their peer mentor. This would seem to indicate that a peer mentoring system could have a positive impact on student retention.

“Participants reported feeling inspired, challenged, rewarded, confident and generally happier”

Benefits for senior students

Senior students also found the initiative beneficial. They described feeling a sense of belonging, a sense of importance and a “confidence boost”. A number of them described the experience as “empowering” and felt that it was a good grounding for them before qualifying:

“I felt that perhaps I did actually know something – I often wonder how on earth I will cope as a qualified staff nurse, but this really helped.”

“It made me reflect upon my training and wish that I had had this when I started. I really think that it would have made a difference to me.”

“My mentee asked me all of the questions that I had always wanted to ask someone – anyone really – when I first started – and in fact for the following two years!”

“It made me realise how much I knew but also how much I still had to learn – and where the gaps in my knowledge were. This was a really good thing!”

By helping other students, peer mentors appear to realise, and acknowledge, the wealth of experience they themselves have. Peer mentors reported being challenged by the variety of questions they were asked; some said they were “going to find out the answer if I didn’t have it…[thereby] helping myself too”. This fits in well with their chosen profession, in which seeking evidence for best practice is a key principle.

Peer mentors were encouraged to create an interactive learning board for other students. They created a board for frequently asked questions (with responses), which was regularly updated and added to. The board was evaluated positively both by students participating in the pilot study and by other nursing students.

Benefits for academic staff

In addition, peer mentors provided constructive feedback to teaching staff about modules, teaching styles and inconsistencies in the information/skills being taught. They provided a link that helped ‘close the gap’ between academics and students.

Peer mentors were able to provide one-to-one support to new students on a whole catalogue of issues and were able to answer questions relating to assignments, documentation, university policies and procedures, and clinical placements. With the ever-increasing demands on academic staff, this is a valuable service in terms of freeing up time.

Conclusion

The student mentor role appears to improve leadership, knowledge, communication, networking and confidence. Participants – both mentors and mentees – reported feeling inspired, challenged, rewarded, confident and generally happier. In light of the benefits that have emerged from the pilot study, peer mentoring should be made available to more student nurses.

At Staffordshire University, the peer mentoring scheme has become a rolling programme that is offered every year in the undergraduate children’s nursing degree. In the next academic year, it will be introduced in the mental health undergraduate degree programme. Further longitudinal studies are required to assess the effectiveness of peer mentoring – a larger study is currently being planned to be undertaken later this year. NT

References


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