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# **PLATO: A Practice Education Tool to Support Learning and Professional Development**

## **Abstract**

It is important that nursing students are adequately supported during their clinical practice placements in order to promote effective learning and reduce student attrition. Educators have an important role and this paper offers an interactive tool, 'PLATO', (The Practice Learning and Teaching Orientations Tool) to support them to meaningfully engage with learners in the practice setting. To enable such engagement, four personal orientations are presented, (role model, advocate, legitimiser and respecter) which enable educators to explore their role, across both local and wider contexts. PLATO recognises the multiple and varied influences on practice education and supports educators to develop their practice in a positive way.

## **Key Words:**

Context, Educator, Relationships, Student

## **Background**

~~A positive educator/student relationship is crucial if effective clinical practice learning is to take place.~~ Education of healthcare students takes place both within university and the clinical practice setting and a positive educator/student relationship is fundamental to facilitate learning in both environments (Jack et al. 2018). Learning in the practice setting offers opportunities for clinical skill development and is also an important part of the professional socialisation process, as students learn safe and effective patient care as well as ethical practice (Ion, Smith and Dickens, 2017). However, dissatisfaction with clinical placement experiences can negatively impact

on students' learning and ultimately accelerate students' decisions to leave; therefore a supportive relationship with practice educators is essential (Crombie et al., 2013; Hamshire et al., 2011; Jack et al., 2018).

Given the international concerns around student attrition, the development of evidence based effective mentorship models remains a priority for the nursing profession (Navarra et al., 2018) and mentorship has been explored at length in the nursing literature. The seminal work of Darling (1984) reminds us of the multiple mentor characteristics central to an effective learning environment. Role modelling continues to feature as an important mentor quality, along with being caring, supportive and having an ability to explain things clearly (Eller et al, 2014, Foster et al, 2015, Jack et al, 2017).

Previously within the United Kingdom (UK) the NMC described the term 'mentor' as; '...a registrant who, following successful completion of an NMC approved mentor preparation programme... has achieved the knowledge, skills and competence required to meet the defined outcomes' (NMC, 2008: 23). However recently the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) have launched their revised Standards Framework for Nursing and Midwifery Education (NMC, 2018a) and Student Supervision and Assessment (NMC, 2018b), which although more flexible than previous standards, are clear about the importance of both individual educator characteristics and the wider educational environment. This change recognises that the educator/student relationship does not take place in isolation and the educative context will vary over time and place, based on past experiences. The historical work of Heidegger (1926/1962) outlines the unity of our own subjective experiences and the objective world we inhabit, and we cannot ignore the context of what is going on around us. Indeed, the role of the organisation in supporting the mentorship culture

and partnerships with clinical placement colleagues have both been recognised as important factors, along with supportive links to the higher education institutions (Jokelainen et al, 2011, Jokelainen et al, 2013, Foster et al, 2015)

In 2017, drawing on findings of a repeat regional study of healthcare students in the North West of England, the authors proposed a tiered mentorship model as a way of conceptualising and considering practice education for undergraduate nursing students (see Jack et al. 2018). The mentorship tool presented here was predicated on these research findings along with findings from the wider literature relating to practice education. Against the background of the new NMC Standards (NMC 2018) and in terms of addressing the concerns around practice education, the authors have developed this original model, which has grown from a way of conceptualising practice education, into an interactive practical tool. Indeed, concerns remain about the competence and motivation of mentors, lack of student support and the importance of the placement in determining students' decisions to leave health care programmes (Tuomikoski et al, 2018; Jack et al, 2017; Hamshire et al, 2011). The tool can be used by educators to support not only their students, but also their own development as a practitioner.

### **The Practice Learning and Teaching Orientations tool 'PLATO'**

22 nursing students across 9 institutions in the North West of England were interviewed using an unstructured approach. Students were encouraged to tell their stories of practice beginning their narrative at a point which was important to them. One of our aims during the analysis of the data drawn from the students' narrative interviews, was to identify 'broad patterns of meaning' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009); these are presented as 'orientations', which essentially describe how students made

sense of their learning experiences. Although narrative analysis is 'case-centered' in that it maintains individual stories, it can also generate categories or general concepts (Riessman, 2008) and as we analysed the students' interviews we identified broad 'orientations' in a way similar to the approach used by Gubrium (1993). With individual stories identifying broad orientations there were narrative linkages across the series of interview transcripts with commonalities across the survey data.

Using these broad orientations we have developed the interactive PLATO tool (see figure 1) available as both a paper and online version, to support practitioners to consider their educator role, enabling exploration of practice across multiple contexts. This tool is based on the following principles:

1. Learning and teaching in practice is a two way process between educator and learner and is transformative by nature
2. Learning and teaching in practice is influenced by context, which is ever changing over time
3. Learning is never 'complete' and is part of an ongoing journey of development
4. The principles of growth and support are inherent within the process

The tool is designed to be used by educators either alone or in groups with the focus on developing an enhanced understanding of practice education through identification of the barriers and facilitators within the practice setting. It is underpinned by the theory of Mezirow (2003) who described transformative learning as that which transforms assumptions and existing ways of thinking to make them more inclusive and open to change. Further, drawing on the central tenets of appreciative inquiry (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) the tool is fully affirmative as a

process of positive change, inspiring positive possibilities with a collective forward thinking vision, uncovering and bringing forth existing strengths. This is in contrast to a deficit model, where there is focus on what students have not achieved, rather than exploring and building on their progress. Unconditional positive prompt questions (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) are utilised to facilitate reflection and discussion about the orientations and influences within the tool, recognising that these can be considered both separately or in conjunction with each other (see figure 2). These positive questions are followed by a design and destiny phase in which educators draw on their answers to the questions to write proactive statements and inspired actions that will support their on-going learning and development (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Using the tool in this way affords the educator options to explore multiple different contexts and foci, thereby creating a process of self-inquiry, an openness to learn and ultimately potential for transformation (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The four broad educator orientations of role model, advocate, respecter and legitimiser can be summarised as follows:

#### Role Model

Positive role models have a great influence on student learning by showing enthusiasm for their role as both a professional and educator.

#### Advocate

Educators who advocate on the student's behalf and support them to access learning opportunities during clinical placements.

#### Respecter

Educators who respect the views and status of students, which affirms their sense of belongingness and wellbeing.

### Legitimiser

Legitimisers view mentorship as an integral part of their role and do not see education as an additional extra task.

### Figure One

#### The PLATO Tool

### Figure Two

#### The Prompt Questions

## **Discussion**

Recognising the importance of meaningful learning experiences, this interactive tool demonstrates the importance of the educator, team and wider orientations as well as the dynamic interplay between each of these; which is fundamental to the practice environment. The orientations within this tool reflect the ethos of the revised NMC Standards (NMC, 2018a, 2018b) and can be used to facilitate the preparation of educators, described as both 'supervisors' and 'assessors' in the clinical area.

Central to the tool is the importance of educators acting as a professional role model, advocate, respecter and legitimizer of their students (see Jack et al. 2018), the four personal orientations. Using these four fundamentals the tool encourages educators to think appreciatively about their roles and articulates ways in which they can respond to learning needs and supportive in their approach to supervision and

assessment of students. For example, educators are frequently required to advocate for students, enabling access to learning opportunities, which are congruent with their needs and stage of education. The PLATO tool can support reflection on how best to facilitate this process by assisting the educator to meaningfully explore their role and develop characteristics which were identified as important to students. Learners value an educator who connects with them and cares whether or not they succeed (Eller et al, 2014) and using the PLATO tool can support exploration of ways in which this state can be achieved.

The middle circle of the tool (Figure 1) supports educators to explore their role in the context of the leadership and educational philosophy of the clinical area in which they practice. Ineffective learning experiences are frequently linked to clinical areas where there is a lack of leadership and inconsistencies in the educational philosophy adopted by the team (Jack et al., 2017). Therefore, practice education must be viewed as a team approach, with less responsibility on the individual educator – student relationship. Transformational leadership has a beneficial effect on empowerment, motivation and knowledge sharing in team relationships (Masood & Afsar, 2016). This is important since mentorship relies on relationship building and the development of shared connections (Wagner & Seymour, 2007). Grounding educative relationships in a transformative shared philosophy which recognises the contribution of both learner and educator is important if learning is to be facilitated. Using the key questions in this tool to guide positive change, educators can enable creative exploration about the philosophy of the clinical area and how much it subscribes to a transformational leadership and educational ethos. Wagner and Seymour (2007) articulate the differences between task focussed and transformative mentoring with the latter leading to more connection and dynamism in the learning



relationship. Such relationships will enable the educator to respond to the individual learning needs of the learner, a key requirement of the revised Standards (NMC, 2018a).

The outer circle of the tool (Figure 1) takes into account the wider influences on education in the clinical setting. Professional body guidance and Policy influence all aspects of nursing life and standards such as those from the NMC prescribe the requirements expected from educators. The tool presented here prompts questioning which encourages appreciative exploration of the effect of such guidance on practice, which can then be made explicit through focussed role modelling behaviours. Indeed the revised Standards of Proficiency for registered nurses (NMC, 2018c) outline the need for nurses to understand and apply relevant policies and frameworks to all areas of their practice thereby reinforcing the need for educators to make this application explicit.

The tool shared in this paper was developed through research into nursing students' experiences in clinical practice (Jack et al. 2018). What was clear within the underpinning research was the importance of teamwork in order for student support to be effective as well as a shift from deficit-based change to appreciative inquiry. Support networks involving practice teams, academic and managerial staff have been shown to be essential particularly when assessing students' competence (Gopee, 2011). Engaging with others in discussion and reflection on practice education and specifically, forging robust links between practice and academia can support educators in understanding each other's context and thereby promoting connection between theory and practice. Practice assessors are required to liaise not only with practice supervisors but also academic assessors, all new roles developed through the revised Standards, in order to reach conclusions about

students' progress. The tool presented here has developed significantly from an earlier conceptual version to encourage such collaboration, tasking the educator to consider how they work alongside other professionals to support students. This paper has focused on education in a nursing context although acknowledgement of the input of wider professional groups is important when considering the working environment. Indeed, the need to promote effective educational environments is not only important to nursing programmes and the tool presented here might have use in other health professional courses that incorporate practice education.

In conclusion, this paper provides an example of an interactive tool, which supports educators to consider themselves, the immediate environment and the wider influences on their practice as an educator, with a focus on positive potential. It supports the exploration of aspects of the self against the context of clinical practice and the multiple influences upon it. Exploring the multiple orientations presented in the tool, as a process of positive change, enables educators to explore, discuss and review their role and how it can be developed. In doing so, learning becomes a two way process; both the educator and learner are engaging in mutual growth, which ultimately has a positive impact on the development of supportive relationships and ultimately the practice environment. Further research with multi-professional groups is ongoing, to validate the tool and explore its use in both individual and group settings.

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