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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

PLATO: a practice development approach to reconsidering student learning partnerships

Claire Hamshire and Kirsten Jack*

*Corresponding author: Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

Email: k.jack@mmu.ac.uk

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Abstract

Background: This article explores the use of a practice development approach to support nursing students' engagement in learning partnerships in clinical practice settings.

Aim: To reflect, using the model proposed by Rolfe and colleagues (2001), on the development of 'PLATO' – an educational tool to help nursing students explore their role in building learning partnerships in clinical settings.

Conclusion: A practice development approach to clinical learning partnerships can support an effective learning culture. As a result, nursing students can gain greater empowerment and take increased responsibility for their learning.

Implications for practice:

- Facilitating learning partnerships with students is important for achieving person-centred care
- Partnership working provides opportunities for true collaboration and for learning with and from our students
- Developing collaborative spaces can facilitate nursing students to reflect in and on their practice

Keywords: Nursing students, partnership, practice education, reflection

Introduction

Clinical practice learning is central to nursing education, providing an environment in which students can develop and contextualise theory and skills learned in the academic setting. As such, the issue of how best to support learning within the practice environment has been much discussed and debated. The relationship between clinical teams and students is fundamental, and fostering an environment in which students feel they belong and are valued as members of the professional team is essential for effective clinical learning (Jack et al., 2018).

In the UK, the focus has recently returned to defining the role of the clinical education team (the multiprofessional team supporting students during their clinical education sessions), following review of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards for student supervision and assessment (NMC, 2018). However, while this review noted the importance of the relationship between students and their educators, there has so far been limited emphasis developing active learning partnerships. In recent years there has been a shift within the wider higher education literature towards the development of partnership working with students: a more democratic relationship in which the students' voice is drawn on and the educator role evolves to one of facilitator and co-learner (Bryson, 2014). Some of this development has taken place within nursing practice education research and such partnership working, using models of coaching and peer support, has been shown to be beneficial to nursing students, enabling them to develop greater empowerment and responsibility for their learning, compared with past mentoring arrangements (Williamson et al., 2020). Developing collaborative educational spaces supports nursing students to actively engage in their learning, promoting self-efficacy and better readiness for employment on graduation (Henderson et al., 2018).

Partnership working can provide opportunities for true collaboration and energise students to use their skills and experiences, as well as learning with and from staff (Hamshire et al., 2019). If meaningful learning is to occur within the practice education space, then educators and students need to learn from the relationship in a process of mutual growth, acknowledging the complexities of the practice environment and how constraints and cultures can impact on their experience. To develop staff-student partnerships further in practice, we need to reconsider how power dynamics can shape and influence relationships and explore how we can potentially unlearn what we know (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot, 2020). Practice development is a way of working and learning that is person-centred and facilitates flourishing of individuals and groups (Scates and Harrison Denning, 2018). It is the aim of this article to reflect on practice development work to support the growth of partnerships in clinical practice education in order to enhance learning. Our practice development approach draws on the principles described by Manley and colleagues (2008), who state that the promotion of person-centred care requires enabling and effective workplace cultures. Workbased learning is part of practice development and operates alongside formal systems to enable learning and ultimately transform care. Our aim was to support positive culture change, based on the development of partnerships to enrich clinical placement learning.

Reflections on practice development for health and social care students

We used the reflective model suggested by Rolfe and colleagues (2001) as it offers a pragmatic way to explore our practice development. These authors proposed three headings: What? (a description of the current situation); So what? (building the theory); and Now what? (how to continue the practice development). The model enabled us to consider our practice development work through a reflective lens and, importantly, prompted us to explore how we could continue to build our thinking through the 'Now what?' phase.

What?

Our journey began in 2017 when we drew on the findings of our repeat regional survey of students' learning experiences (Hamshire et al., 2017). The aim of this mixed-methods study, conducted in 2011 and 2015, was to explore the reasons why students leave health and social care programmes and

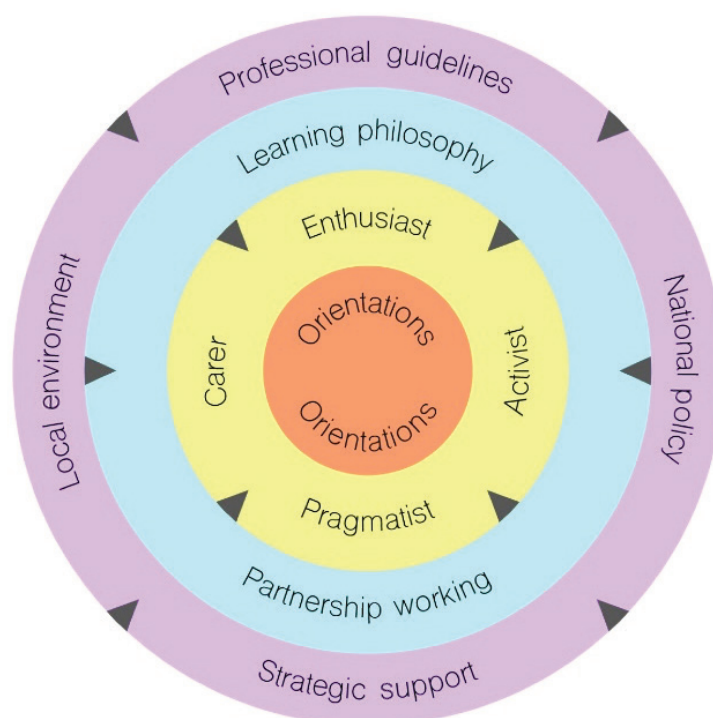
the factors that contribute to their retention. A significant theme within the data collected from the students was their relationships with clinical educators (Jack et al., 2018). Based on these findings, alongside the contemporary research, we proposed a tiered model of mentorship, which was further developed in 2018 into the Practice Learning and Teaching Orientations Tool (PLATO, Figure 1, page 4). The aim of PLATO (Jack and Hamshire, 2019) was to support clinical educators to explore how they develop effective educational partnerships with students and engage in transformational growth. Findings from the original study placed emphasis on the importance of individual support from clinical educators, adapted to meet each student's learning needs. Students highlighted the importance of feeling welcomed as a part of the practice team and the positive impact this had on their health and mental wellbeing (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008; Hamshire et al., 2011). However, on reflection, what was missing from this initial model were the ways in which educational partnerships can enrich learning in the clinical environment. Rather than placing the responsibility solely on the educator, we recognised the students' role: to engage proactively in their learning. Our aim was then to articulate that role and the influences on it. Reviewing the wider literature on higher education pedagogy and student engagement, we noted a move towards co-creation and collaboration, in which students' voices are valued and the educator's role develops into one of facilitator and co-learner (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot, 2020). The purpose of this is to improve teaching and learning experiences and promote active engagement of all partners involved in the educational relationship (Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). If students do not have such agency, they do not enter the educational relationship as equal partners. This is disempowering for students and removes opportunities for collaboration and developing a sense of community and belonging (Hamshire et al., 2019) – both valued by learners in the clinical arena (Williamson et al., 2020). We aimed to support nursing students to engage in active learning partnerships.

So what?

We began by returning to our original student data, which revealed the importance of the educator, team and wider orientations of student learning as well as the dynamic interplay between each of these (Jack et al., 2018). In doing so, we recognised the need for proactivity on the part of the student to become an active collaborator in their learning, with the development of a more democratic relationship with the educator as facilitator (Bryson, 2014). Drawing on the literature exploring the power of student partnerships within higher education (Mercer-Mapstone and Abbot, 2020), our focus shifted to what the students are doing, rather than what is being done to them, which Matthews (2016, p 2) described as, 'engaging with rather than doing to or doing for students'. We were inspired by Mezirow's transformative learning theory (2003). Transformative learning enables examination of previously held beliefs, potentially leading to a different way of viewing the world – a process known as perspective transformation (Cranton, 2016). This might happen gradually or through a single event and central to the process is discourse with others, for example, through an educator-learner partnership (Mezirow, 2000). The use of transformative learning theory in such partnerships provides opportunities to take on assumptions and stereotypes, and challenges both partners to rethink the teaching-learning relationship.

Our reflection culminated in the development of a student-focused tool (Figure 2, page 6) to support placement learning as a dynamic process in which co-production is nurtured and encouraged and, when used together with our original PLATO educator tool, can facilitate a true partnership. We reflected on the potential to embrace shared responsibility, shifting students from a position of 'learning from' to 'learning alongside'. This is in line with the NMC (2018) philosophy, which embraces a coaching rather than a mentorship approach to learning. Through these reflections, we became aware that learning is most effective when it occurs via an active partnership with the clinical practice education team in which students are fully engaged. Highlighting this notion of true partnership is a development of our previous consideration of educator-student working and potentially points towards a future reframing of practice education, recognising it as a social space in which students' identity and sense of belonging to a community are shaped (Hamshire et al., 2019).

Figure 1: The Student Practice Learning and Teaching Orientation tool (PLATO)



The tool has several 'orientations' that support thinking about personal qualities and the influences of the immediate and wider environment on learning. The development of the tool was grounded in the data from our original study, alongside contemporary research on nursing student practice learning. Central to this interactive tool, and fundamental to the social construct of the practice environment, are the personal qualities of the student and the importance of their roles as carer, enthusiast, activist and pragmatist – all of which emerged as key themes in the data from the repeat regional study. These broad orientations, developed in a similar way to the approach used by Gubrium (1993), can be summarised as:

- **Pragmatist:** A student who makes the best of situations and chooses ways of learning that meet the demands of the practice environment
- **Activist:** A student who promotes and directs learning in an active way, advocating learning opportunities
- **Carer:** A student who embodies the premise that to care for another person, we need to care for ourselves and be able to consider the skills and qualities brought to the caring role
- **Enthusiast:** A student who shows great interest in their learning and is excited to be present in the clinical environment and take part in activities

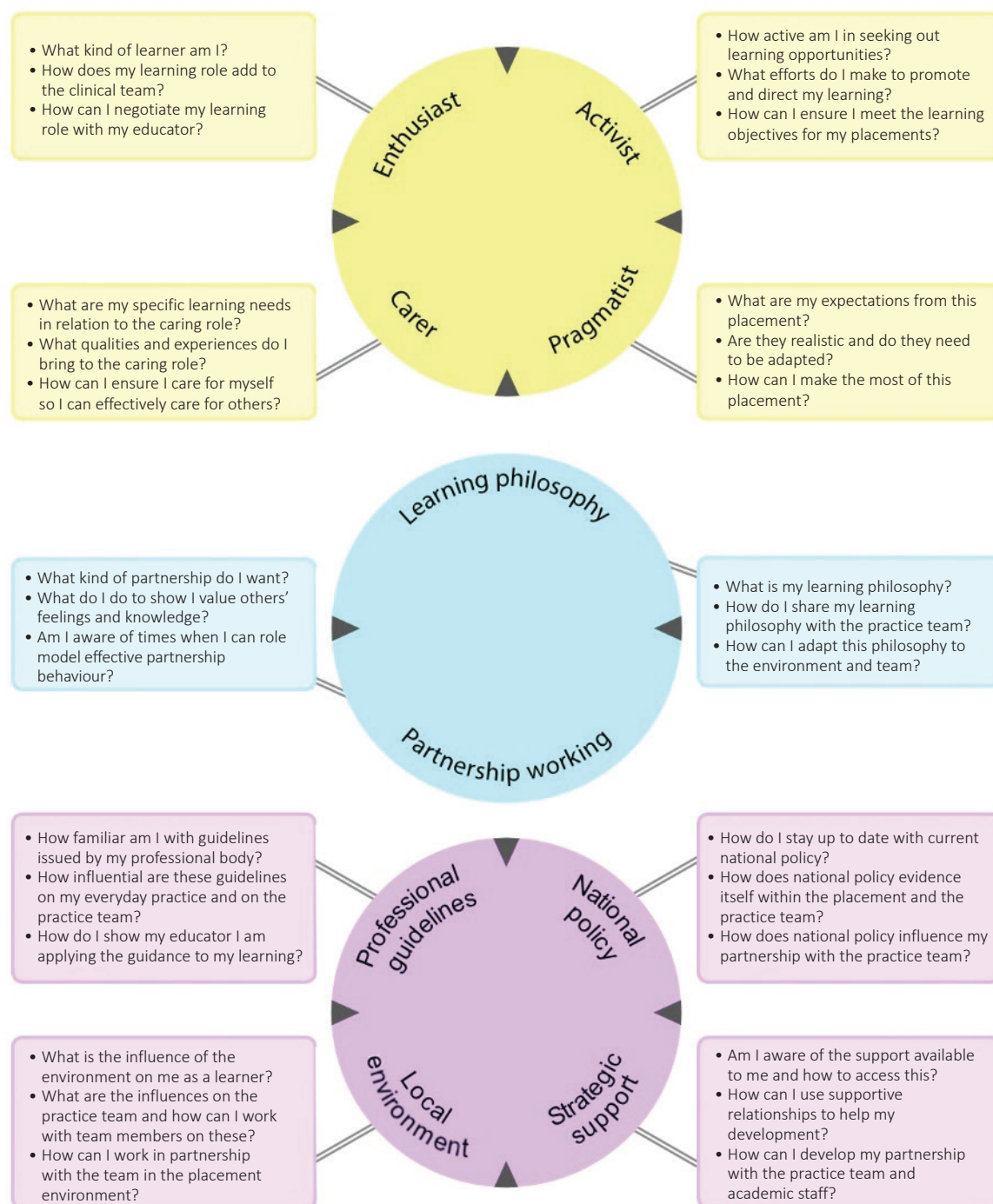
These four personal qualities prompt nursing students to explore their roles and their agency as learners working in partnership with the practice team. For example, students will often need to be pragmatic and flexible in their expectations of what the setting can offer. Learning in practice can be challenging and students may perceive that their supernumerary status, and the support and mentorship it involves, is being ignored and that they are simply treated as part of the workforce (Jack et al., 2018). Beyond these personal qualities, students are encouraged to reflect on their own learning philosophy and how this can be integrated into partnership working with the practice team, as illustrated by the middle (blue) circle of the tool. For example, nursing students can set out with an idealistic view, which changes over time as they focus more on knowledge and skills development. It is beneficial to explore such changes in perception (ten Hoeve et al., 2017). The outer circle covers the wider influences on education in the practice setting. Students are thus encouraged to consider professional body guidelines and national policy, as well as to reflect on the local environment and the strategic support

available to them as learners. For example, depending on the area in which the student is placed, support roles such as that of the link lecturer might vary and be open to interpretation (MacIntosh, 2015). By prompting students to consider the opportunities, constraints and competing priorities that may govern the work of practice teams, greater understanding and appreciation is fostered.

We wanted to promote an asset-based approach to practice education, and based the development of the tool on the premise that positive practice can be found in all situations. We were guided by a philosophy drawn from the central tenets of appreciative inquiry (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Developing prompts in this way encourages students to locate existing good practice and consider how they can build on it, taking an asset-based rather than deficit-based approach.

We developed paper-based and online versions of PLATO. Both formats enable users to rotate the circles and review how each of the orientations influences and articulate with the others. For example, a pragmatic view will influence how students maximise learning opportunities when working in partnership with the practice team; having enthusiasm (or not) for learning can have a profound effect on the building of working relationships and influence the local environment. The tool can be used either as part of a facilitated student group session or alone as part of a student's personal reflection process. In this way, users can engage with the questions and consider all the dimensions of practice education either alone or with the support of peers.

Figure 2: The appreciative prompts



Now what?

Having developed the tool, our priority is now to foreground the importance of partnership working to achieve positive learning experiences. Effective learning partnerships between practice staff and students are achieved when all those involved recognise the importance and benefits. We plan to build on our existing communities of student learning to include clinical practice colleagues; such communities of learning will help students to navigate their journey of development in a supportive environment. However, we also recognise there can be barriers for practice staff and students in

the development of a partnership-based model of learning, including poor communication (Jack et al., 2018), students' lack of a sense of belonging within the practice environment (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008) and negative cultural practices (Hamshire et al., 2011). Negative practices, such as indifference or incivility on the part of staff, often leave students feeling excluded and devalued, and do little to promote a sense of partnership in the educational relationship (Thomas et al., 2015; Kristensen and Kristensen, 2020).

The practice environment can often be unpredictable; in recognising this and adapting to potentially difficult situations, students can gain positive learning experiences. We hope our PLATO tool can support this process. Further, being a nursing student involves far more than the learning of clinical skills and acquisition of knowledge. It is the opportunities to learn relational care, develop empathy and engage in therapeutic relationships that are fundamental to their becoming caring practitioners. Indeed, building partnerships that reflect the holistic nature of learning and person-centred care is central to the development of nursing pedagogy and practice.

Conclusion and implications for practice

As educators, we recognise the need for ongoing reflection to support innovation in practice development and enhance student learning. Using the PLATO tool can facilitate students' development by acknowledging their active partnership role while considering the multifaceted influences on their learning experience. It promotes engagement in self-exploration and supports the shifts in perspective that may be needed to develop skills for learning in the clinical environment. The practice space provides rich opportunities to learn with and from the clinical team as well as from service users, their families and carers. Working in partnership has the potential to highlight and address conflicting priorities and tensions in this setting and, as a process of engagement, provides limitless opportunities for growth on both sides of the educational relationship and the transformation of learning experiences.

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Claire Hamshire (PhD), Faculty Head of Education, Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, England.

Kirsten Jack (PhD, RN), Professor of Nursing Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, England.