

Integrating Project Management into Nursing Education: A Best Practice Model

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The purpose of this paper is to describe the use of project management as a teaching-learning strategy, which promotes developing leadership skills for the RN to BSN student. This teaching-learning strategy is built on Mezirow's theory of transformative adult learning and critical reflection (1990, 1991) and is rooted in principles of best practice in adult learning (CAEL, 1999).

Introduction

The rapidly changing health care environment requires nurses to provide leadership in patient and client care in hospitals, schools, and public health settings. Acquiring the skills needed to be effective leaders is an essential component of baccalaureate nursing education (AACN, 1998). Some of the leadership skills identified in the literature (AACN, 1998; Loo, 2003; Porter-O'Grady, 2003; Scoble, 2003; Wolfe, Bradle, & Nelson, 2005) include communication, collaboration, negotiation, change management, conflict resolution, delegation, decision-making, problem-solving, budgeting, advocacy, planning, and allocation of resources. Nurse educators face a challenge in constructing teaching- learning strategies to promote developing these leadership skills. This is especially important for the associate degree prepared registered nurse (RN) who is returning to higher education as an adult pursuing a baccalaureate degree (BSN). One such strategy is project management.

The nursing literature suggests that that project management be utilized to “promote efficient and effective management” (Loo, 2003, p. 188). Among the strengths resulting from utilizing project management are team building, goal-directed and action orientated planning (Loo, 2003) and relationship management skills (Porter-O’Grady, 2003). Scoble & Russell (2003) identified finance and budgeting along with project management as the most frequently identified leadership experiences needed for emerging nurse leaders. They suggested nursing education curricula should include these components along with clinical internships/practica to foster the development of leadership and management skills. These suggestions are supported by the work of Wolf, Bradle & Nelson (2005). Their work in developing a Health Care Leadership Academy recommends a core curriculum for leadership, which included strategic planning and decision making, human resource development, and innovation and change strategies.

Project Management

Project management includes a project and a management process. Wysocki defines a project as “a sequence of unique, complex, and connected activities having one goal or purpose and that must be completed by a specific time, within budget, and according to specification” (2003, p. 3). The project management process includes planning, organizing, controlling, and implementing change (Weiss & Wysocki, 1992). The project manager’s job is to manage the work of the project and to develop and maintain the team member’s cooperation and support throughout a project without having direct authority over the team members.

The potential contribution of learning the project management processes to foster leadership development in the RN to BSN led to the inclusion of this teaching strategy in the final leadership course of the RN Degree Completion Program. This teaching learning strategy is called the Care Management Project (CMP). The CMP is designed to apply principles of project management within health care to influence client outcomes. The CMP allows students to experience the role of project manager in a small group setting (a team) where the group works together to accomplish a goal. Students receive theoretical content related to project management at the onset of the course. They then identify a problem or opportunity in their workplace. This is followed by completing a Project Overview Statement (POS) which requires a goal, objectives, action plan, completion date, success criteria, and assumptions, risks and obstacles (Appendix A). This POS must be approved by the course instructor prior to beginning the project. Once approval is given, students proceed to recruit team members and begin their project. During this 4 credit course each student is expected to spend approximately 50 hours during the semester for the project.

Throughout the semester students write progress reports. This experience offers them an opportunity to reflect on how their project is going and it provides the faculty a way to monitor the project. Each progress report has a specific focus such as teamwork, communication, conflict management, problem-solving and creativity, and delegation (Appendix B). Upon completing the project a final report is required as well as a project deliverable. The project deliverable is the finished product such as patient education teaching pamphlet or staff in-service education program. This final report offers the

student an opportunity to critically reflect on their project with a focus on growth in their leadership skills (Appendix C).

Throughout the semester while students are engaged in implementing the CMP class discussion focuses on key leadership skills/abilities as well as leadership concerns. This facilitates further integration of theory and practice and also provides a forum for rational discourse on leadership. For example, when learning theory related to group dynamics and teamwork, student engage in discourse about their own experiences leading a team.

The Care Management Project not only utilizes the theoretical framework provided from project management but also integrates adult learning theory. Jack Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (1990, 1991) is embedded throughout this learning experience, specifically, centrality of the experience, critical reflection and rational discourse.

Care Management Project as a Best Practice Model

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) *Findings from CAEL's benchmarking study* (1999) and *Serving adult learners in higher education: Principles of effectiveness* (2000) provided the framework for understanding the Care Management Project as a best practice model for adult learners. Key areas which demonstrate this include curriculum design and the teaching learning process.

In curriculum design a best practice model includes: 1) informal and formal assessment 2) ongoing dialogue with community based organizations to identify

knowledge, skills, and abilities needed, and 3) multiple perspectives from stakeholders in defining learning outcomes. These experiences are demonstrated in the Care Management Project.

Teaching and learning processes identified in by CAEL and demonstrated in the Care Management Project include: 1) high degree of interaction among learners and faculty, 2) learning experiences designed with cooperation with learners and relate to the adult learner's work and personal world, 3) assessment activities that build competency and self-confidence, and 4) integration of theory and practice. Table 1 illustrates best practice effectiveness and corresponding examples from the Care Management Project

Table 1.

CAEL's principles of effectiveness as related to Care Management Project

Curriculum Design	Care Management Project (CMP)
Informal and formal assessment	Student self-assessment of leadership skills Student reflective writing on selected leadership skills Faculty assessment of Project Overview Statement Faculty assessment of final report Project deliverable
Ongoing dialogue with community based organizations to identify knowledge, skills and abilities needed	Advisory board annual meeting Clinical agencies interviews Professional standards Employer surveys Current research and scholarly literature
Multiple perspectives from stakeholders in defining learning outcomes	Advisory board annual meeting Clinical agencies interviews Employer surveys Current research and scholarly literature
Teaching-Learning Process	Care Management Project
High degree of interaction among learners and between learners and faculty	Selection of project Review of Project Overview Statement
Learning experiences designed with cooperation with learners and relate to the adult learner's work and personal world.	Selection and completion of project in work setting
Assessment builds competency and self-confidence	Progress reports Final report
Integrates theory and practice	Project Overview Statement Final report Project deliverable

Outcomes

The learning strategy discussed throughout this paper was systematically followed and analyzed over three years during which time the course was offered six times. The results indicate that project management is an effective tool to develop leadership skills in RN to BSN students and is a best practice model. These results can be viewed from extrinsic and intrinsic perspectives.

The extrinsic results or the project deliverables have been well received by the student's workplace. Employer surveys of program outcomes indicate levels of satisfaction of the BSN graduate leadership abilities. These projects demonstrate leadership skills in completing projects that are complex, change producing, financially responsible, and most importantly focused on improving client outcomes. Table 2 illustrates the variety of Care Management Projects.

Table 2.

Examples of Categories of Projects and Completed Care Management Projects

Categories	Care Management Projects
Patient teaching materials	Postpartum Care Video (Bilingual) Patient Handbook: Bariatrics Welcome to Pediatrics Booklet Teaching Pamphlet: Sore Throat Teaching Pamphlet: Novantrone Therapy for MS Patients
Policy/procedure development	Minimum Lift Policy Oral Care Standard for Ventilator Patients Telephone Triage Pilot Protocol and Manual Development of Twin Cities Cath Lab Society
Staff teaching tools	Maternal-Child PHN Orientation Guidelines and Hints for Starting a Peripheral IV Development of a Charge Nurse Resource Manual 12-Lead MI Visual Learning Aid
Staff in-services	Basic Cardiac Education Seminar Skills Assessment Lab for Long Term Care
Staff and patient satisfaction surveys	ED Employee Satisfaction Survey Parent Satisfaction Survey of Pediatrics ICU
Implementation of new equipment, technology, etc	Development and Implementation of a Shoulder Cart for Surgery Center
Program development	Creation of a System Analyst Position for Emergency Care Department After School Teen Program Parrish Nurse Program

The intrinsic results or development of the leadership skills of the student are documented through reflective writing, personal stories, and project deliverables. The students' reflective writings in the progress reports and in the final report indicate that upon completion of the Care Management Project the students have:

- Increased confidence in leadership roles
- Improved communication and conflict management skills
- Increased understanding of complexities of health care systems
- New awareness of creativity and problem solving approaches
- Integration of novice project management skills into professional practice

More specifically students have identified leadership development in three areas: 1) project management; 2) relationship management; and 3) personal development. In the area of project development skills students report increased confidence and ability in team leading, problem identification and goal setting, planning and organizing, priority setting, and commitment to quality. When discussing their development of relationship skills, students identified increased skills in communication, change management, creativity and problem-solving, and teamwork. Finally in reporting their personal growth as a leader students identified increased initiative, self-confidence, flexibility, interpersonal awareness, and organizational awareness.

Summary

The Care Management Project required of all RN to BSN students in their final nursing leadership course provides an opportunity for students to develop leadership

skills while engaging in a workplace learning experience. This teaching-learning strategy is based on models provided by project management theory and adult learning theory. Results of implementing the Care Management Project over a three year period indicate positive extrinsic and intrinsic benefits for both the student and health care providers. Additionally it is a best practice model that can be adapted by other schools of nursing.

References

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Appendix A

Care Management Project: POS

Project Name _____ Project

Manager _____

Team Members: _____

Problem/Opportunity		
Goal		
Objectives	Action Plan	Completion Date

Success Criteria

Assumptions, Risks, Obstacles

Instructor Comments

This form is adapted from: Wysocki, R. (2003). *Effective project management*. (3rd ed). Indianapolis, IN: Wiley.

Appendix B

**Care Management Project
Final Report**

Project Name:_____ **Project Manager:**_____

Goal Attainment:

Objective(s) Achievements and/or Modifications: (3 points)

Project Strengths and Weaknesses: (3 points)

Project Team Recommendations: (4 points)

Personal Reflections (10 points) Focus on your leadership development. How has this project developed your leadership qualities/skills /abilities. Be specific and give examples. How has your leadership changed and developed over the past months while you have been in school? What challenges do you anticipate in your future development as a nurse leader? How will you meet these challenges?

Appendix C

Care Management Progress Report Focus: Teamwork

Name:

Date:

The focus of this report is teamwork. What objectives were you working on this week? What progress was made? What aspects of teamwork did you use? Continue on back of this page if needed.

What is your reaction this week to your role as the project manager? What did you learn about yourself in relation to being a team leader? Continue on back of this page if needed.