

Passing on words of wisdom: Using graduating student nurses' experiences to influence the development of new entrants to a nursing programme

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Abstract

The Quality Assurance Agency (Mayes, 2009) recommends increasing student engagement in the first year of higher education. Peer learning can maximise student engagement and facilitate learning. This reflective paper explores the use of 'welcome' letters as part of an orientation and transition programme to year one of a pre-registration nursing programme. Welcome letters were written by final year students to inform new entrants about the realities of studying in an honours degree programme. The letters were distributed on the first day of induction. New students shared their letters as part of an icebreaking exercise and completed an evaluation form, reflecting feelings upon reading the letters and identifying any further issues. New entrants reported to feel more reassured about starting the programme and meeting new people. Other issues raised by the letters; clinical placements, the role of the personal tutor and expectations in class work, were responded to by faculty in the remainder of the induction. Using the letter as a tool, new entrants actively constructed their own learning needs about the forthcoming programme. The use of peer written welcome letters appears to be a powerful tool in engaging year one students during induction and may promote conditions for effective adult learning.

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Introduction:

QAA (Mayes 2009) encourages educators to seek to raise the level of student social and academic engagement particularly in the first year of higher education. The ability of students to integrate into academic and social aspects of university often influences their decision to withdraw or persist at university (Tinto, 1987). A planned induction/ orientation programme in the first few days of higher education can increase social and academic engagement especially if it can help students develop a sense of belonging, 'connectedness' to the university, direction and future career (Bovill, Morss & Bulley, 2008).

For new entrants to the BSc Hons Nursing programme at Queen Margaret University-Edinburgh the first element of year one studies comprises an induction and orientation programme which include study skills courses, provision of a student welcome pack and handbook and peer mentoring (Johnston & Kochanowska 2009; Whittaker 2008; Murray, 2003 & 2006). This aims to help students adapt to the new environment and to begin the process of socialisation into the profession of nursing (Saarman, Freitas, Rapps & Riegel, 1992; Bradby, 1990). New entrants typically include a mix of school leavers, mature age students, international students and those with non standard qualifications. Lecturing staff sought to devise a student centred induction programme that would engage and appeal to this wide range of adult learners.

Teaching and learning approaches which encourage students to learn from peers appear to maximise student engagement with course content and facilitate effective adult learning (Gordon, 2005; Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2003). This reflective paper focuses on one educational initiative; the use of 'welcome' letters written by final year students to inform new entrants about the realities of studying in an honours degree programme.

The terms 'Reflection' and 'Reflective practice' are associated with learning from experience (O'Conner, Hyde & Treacy, 2003; Johns, 2000). Health professionals and

educators in Higher Education are encouraged to use reflection to analyse and refine practice (Tate & Sills, 2004; Biggs, 2003). Reflection-on -action can help professionals to identify how things might have been done differently, or equally to recognise that things were done well (O'Regan & Fawcett, 2006).

A framework can aid reflection by providing a structure and trigger questions to stimulate critical analysis (Johns, 2000). This paper is informed by the three stage reflective model proposed by Driscoll (2000) (table 1). The model has been selected because it offers a simple and accessible framework for reflection used by students and educators (O'Regan & Fawcett, 2006). This structure also echoes reflective conversations carried out between the authors after the pilot intervention of the 'welcome' letters.

Table 1. Driscoll (2000) Model of reflection

What? Returning to the situation
So what? Understanding the context
Now what? Modifying future outcomes

What?: Returning to the situation

Final year graduating student nurses were invited to write an open letter to one of the new first year entrants. They were encouraged to remember how they felt on their first day on the course and to consider how the new entrants may be feeling at this time. The students were asked to articulate in the letters what they wished they had known then but did not, what information they found useful or interesting in their first year and what they wished they had done differently during their time studying.

Participation was voluntary and students consented to their letters being distributed, discussed and disseminated. Time was allocated for students to complete the letter on a study day in the final week of the nursing programme. The letters were submitted anonymously, although, students understood that lecturers would read the letters. This is likely to have led to some self censorship. The lecturers read the letters prior to distribution to review readability and content. However, none were discarded. All of the

graduating students attending the study day consented to participate. Students had previously undertaken a Teaching and learning module in preparation for the mentorship role they would adopt after qualification and it was pleasing that they were willing to offer support to the next generation of nursing students.

The letters were distributed individually to new entrants on their first day of induction. This included year 1 students (n= 29), and graduate/ direct entrants (n=6). In small groups the new entrants were asked to share their letters as part of an icebreaking exercise. Trigger questions were created to encourage reflection and to give structure to the session (table 2). Entrants were subsequently asked to complete an evaluation form, which reflected their feelings on reading the letters and the specific issues that arose through reading the letters.

Table 2. Reflective Questions used to evaluate new entrants' responses to the 'Welcome' letters.

How are you feeling now that you have read the letter?
Were there any surprises in the letter?
Was there anything that you wish had been included in the letter
Do you think it will encourage you do anything differently?

So what?: Understanding the context

Letter writing is described as one of the oldest, most intimate and sincere forms of literature (Pyle, 2006). In health care, letter writing is commonly used as a therapeutic intervention particularly in the context of mental health services and counselling. Literature exploring the use of therapeutic letter writing documents its use with survivors of sexual abuse (Kress, Hoffman & Thomas, 2008), in couples and family therapy (Fishcel, Burns, McSheffrey & Murphy 2001) with adolescents (White & Murray 2002) and individuals with eating disorders (Davidson & Birmingham 2001). Such accounts suggest that letter writing assists documentation of lived experiences which can promote learning and self development (Oliver, Nelson, Cade & Cueva, 2007). These studies generally focus on the perspective of the letter writer. However, a small scale study by Pyle (2006) explored the use of letter writing as a supplement to

counselling and analysed the experiences of both counsellors and their clients. While there are differences between using letters for therapeutic and educational purposes, one of the findings of Pyle's study was that letter writing could promote client engagement and connection to therapy (Pyle, 2006). This has some commonality with the aims of letter writing in the intervention at QMU - to help increase engagement in student transition.

Letter writing has been used in an educational context to help children cope with the transition to school. Garrett (1992) described a 'Pen Pal project' using letter writing to help children become more engaged at school and to raise self esteem. The study was conducted in a school in Florida with a large mobile population. Seasonal variations in parental employment resulted in many children moving in and out of the school during term time. As a consequence some children experienced difficulties in making friends and settling in. The project involved children writing six letters to an older student in another class. It was conducted over 12 weeks and 369 pupils participated. Evaluation was carried out through a post intervention survey. From the survey 68% of the students responded that the letters made a difference to the way they thought about school and 99% reported enjoying getting to know another person in school. Students and teachers responded enthusiastically to letter writing as the project helped to enhance feelings of student belonging and to increase interest and involvement in school. Garret (1992) advocates letter writing as a simple and inexpensive intervention that can be transferred to a variety of locations. However, it could be argued that strategies that appeal to young children may not be as appropriate for adult learners. A recent study by Ciuffetelli-Parker (2010) uses letters in adult education to explore the experiences of student teachers on teaching placements. This longitudinal study reports on the lived experiences of 30 student teachers and their reflections on learning to become teachers. The students formed small groups and exchanged reflective letters over a period of 4 years. The writing and receiving of the letters were found to be valuable for facilitating reflection. Students reported that the letters helped them to make meaning of experiences, establish relationships with peers and hone written communication skills. As reflection is a valuable transferable graduate attribute (Tate & Sills, 2004) and an important element of practice for health professionals, it would be advantageous if receiving welcome letters at this early stage of the QMU nursing programme could help entrants to begin to develop skills of reflection.

The use of letter writing to facilitate reflection is also identified in a study by Crespo (2000) which explored the effects of reflection on subsequent practice. Letter writing exchanges between student teachers and pupils were used as an adjunct to a mathematics curriculum. The children explained in their letters how they had attempted to solve problems, and the student teachers' replies provided written feedback and guidance. After each letter writing session the student teachers were asked to write in their journal about insights the children's letters had evoked. The researchers analysed both the letter content and the journals to explore patterns of interaction between the student teachers and the children and found that the exchange of letters prompted reflection on learning, and identified changes in the responses from the student teachers over the period of the study. Responses early in the initiative focused on identification of whether the children's answers were right or wrong. Later the teachers' comments appeared to demonstrate increased awareness of the process of learning, what and how the children had learned and what they did not understand. The letter writing intervention prompted reflection which in turn led to increased awareness of children's' mathematical thinking and 'sense-making'. Crespo (2000) asserts that such reflection can help educators to better orientate the learning environment to student need. Thus, the welcome letter intervention offers nurse educators opportunities for reflection on teaching and to adjust their practice in response to student need.

It appears from the available literature on the topic that the writing and receiving of letters from a colleague, teacher or peer is a powerful tool for professional and personal growth. Examples of peer support initiatives used to support transition of students to university include mentoring, 'academic family' and 'buddy' systems (Gordon, 2005). Support is usually provided through face to face contacts such as drop in sessions or planned activities, although a 'telementoring' initiative implemented by Central Queensland University in Australia (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2002) offers an example of peer support offered through telephone and e-mail communication. This article appears to be unique because it explores student and faculty learning as a result of letter writing to support transition into the context of a nursing curriculum.

The letters

The final year students readily engaged in the activity of letter writing with many taking considerable time and effort to compose a welcome letter. Most students submitted at

least one page of A4 paper. The letters were each reviewed line by line. Recurrent topics were coded and clustered into 5 major themes.

- You are not alone
- Use support mechanisms
- Balance academic and social life
- Time management and planning
- Placement advice

These are briefly discussed below:

You are not alone:

The majority of the final year students acknowledged that they had experienced a mixture of emotions on their first day of the programme. Their letters reported they had felt 'daunted', 'scared' and 'overwhelmed' as well as being excited about starting the nursing programme. The following excerpts demonstrate that the final year students recognised how the freshers might be feeling and offered reassurance that they were not alone.

One student wrote

on my first day I was very overwhelmed and scared of the four year course ahead, these feelings are very normal for everyone.

Another suggested

I'd like to reassure you that everyone is feeling the same

Some students offered suggestions to help the new starts reduce their anxieties and meet classmates

If you are reading this and it is your first day, just remember that everyone is as nervous as you.... Smile and they'll smile back.

One letter emphasised that these feelings were usually temporary:

the initial feeling of fear will rapidly disappear and it won't be long until you are calling your lecturers by their first name- something I thought I could never do.

Use support mechanisms

Many final year students advised the new starts to make use of the support services offered by the university. In particular the letters encouraged new students to approach lecturing staff and personal academic tutors for support and guidance. Evidence of this is found in the following excerpts

Having an academic tutor is an excellent resource, not just for academic purposes but to chat in general.

Make use of your academic tutors...it will reduce the repeats! These people are there to help. Don't be scared of them or scared to use them.

All the members of the team are full of support, advice and encouragement- make sure you use this to your advantage

Time management and planning

The letters discussed the importance of effective time management. One student highlighted the difference between expectations at university and school

If like me you have come straight from school I'll warn you that the learning style is very different and the emphasis is hugely on you- attend classes, read material and keep your notes up to date.

A number of students made other suggestions about how keep up to date with class work or preparing for assignments

Never stop reading... it is amazing how much it helps.

I would recommend being organised and starting assignments a good few weeks in advance.

Try to read a couple of things off each reading list before it comes to essay time.

Balancing academic and social life: party hard and work harder:

The social element of university life was a common theme in the letters. However, many letters advised that social activities should be balanced with academic work. One student suggested

the next four years will be hard work but also good fun.

Another student explained

Maintaining a work/ social life balance is really important, so don't feel guilty about letting your hair down every once in a while. It actually does you a lot of good

One student surmised this point thus

party hard and work harder.

Some letters demonstrated insight into the potential pitfalls that year one students may encounter

Do not underestimate how important 1st year is... go to class even if your friends from other courses aren't going to theirs.

A number of students discussed the personal consequences of failing to achieve this balance

First year for me was definitely filled with lots of partying but I would say that my academic work suffered. I did not do enough studying out of class time.

All the students who wrote about such set backs in their letters emphasised that they had managed to succeed in the end

Five years... I've been here a bit longer than most but every moment has been worth it. Failing a module is not the end of the world if you are determined you will make it!

Placement

The importance of clinical placement learning featured in almost all the letters. Many graduating students identified placement as their favourite element of the programme

I loved going out on placement. It's a chance for you to really see why you have chosen nursing as a profession.

The main highlight of the course for me has been placement...Ask lots of questions wear your uniform and badge with pride... start and end each shift with a smile

Some letters offered advice on how to behave in the clinical environment or to cope with challenges in placement

Placements are good... you learn so much....never let someone push you into doing something you do not feel ready to do.

Placements- Make the most of them and no matter how much you might not enjoy some of them, keep smiling and look enthusiastic

Central to the placement experience was the importance and availability of support from lecturers and course mates

talk to staff whenever you...are having a hard time on placement or if you are just needing direction.

These reflective commentaries provided insight into the students' personal and professional experiences of learning to be a nurse. On reading these narratives we recognised the potential value of this advice for new students because it addressed real student concerns and may be deemed more credible as it originated from peers rather than academic staff (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2001).

Feelings on reading the letters:

As a result of reading the letters, new entrants reported feeling reassured, that they were not alone in their anxieties about starting something new. One student wrote

[I feel] *A bit more relaxed now, knowing that someone else knows how I feel!*

Most new entrants expressed excitement about starting the programme but some highlighted elements in the letters advising about maintaining balance between the social and academic aspects of university life. One wrote

I feel encouraged to work harder and have a good time at the same time.

This demonstrated that the exercise had achieved its primary aim of helping students to feel more relaxed during induction and helping them to gain insight into the different spheres of student life. Gordon (2005) notes that new entrants often have an inaccurate perception of academic life which may include a more modest academic workload and a rich, full social life. The letters reinforce information given by the class tutors, but these messages appear to have been afforded more credibility because they originated from peers. This corresponds with the assertions of one educator who states 'students *listen* to staff, but they will *believe* students' (Harris, Moir, Bamber & Allardice, 2010 p 5).

Surprises

Some surprises were expressed at the content of the letters. One new entrant discussed the entry written by a student who had failed a module, but had still managed to finish the programme successfully. The entrant reported feeling encouraged that it was possible to succeed despite setbacks. Other students expressed surprise at the different kinds of academic support available to them

I was surprised on the advice to use academic tutors as a resource. I wouldn't have thought of that

and another

A lot of emphasis has been placed on the support that is available to the students. Very good to know.

Identification of these issues helped the students orientate themselves to the culture of the university where much of the responsibility for learning and achieving rests with

them selves. In particular, school leavers may have previously experienced close monitoring by parents and teachers and find transition to a more self directed form of education difficult (Gordon, 2005).

Anything that you wish had been included in the letter?

Results from the student reflections identified social and academic issues causing concern and allowed staff to address these in the remainder of the induction programme. One student suggested that it would have been interesting to hear more about how to cope with being away from home. This enabled faculty to reinforce issues about relationships, opportunities for 'buddying' and give information about international student support. The letters also enabled new entrants to actively identify their own learning needs for the forthcoming programme. Some new entrants suggested that they would have been interested to hear more detail about practice placements in the letter

more on difficult and enjoyable aspects of placement.

These findings were useful to staff for planning subsequent activities for the year group.

Do you think it will encourage you do anything differently?

Three main areas for attention were identified by this question.

- Making use of academic tutor support
- Asking lots of questions
- Keeping up with coursework

One student summarised these issues thus

Keep up the work as you go along and do not leave everything to the last minute. Make use of the tutors and enjoy it.

It was encouraging that students had embraced the need to be vocal in class and not to be frightened to ask questions. This was a positive step and could help empower new entrants to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Now what?: Modifying future outcomes

From our experience at QMU the use of welcome letters appears to be a powerful tool to engage year one students during the induction period and may promote conditions for effective adult learning. The letters written by graduating students offer personal and up-to-date insights into navigating the programme. In addition, as a result of reading and reflecting on the letters new entrants begin to identify their own learning needs for the forthcoming programme. This was an unexpected finding although aligned with constructivist theories of adult learning (Tusting & Barton, 2003). As a result we have implemented some additional elements within the longitudinal induction programme such as preparation for placement sessions and additional targeted sessions on identified areas of academic weakness e.g. literature searching.

We recognise that there are professional and ethical considerations associated with this intervention. In particular, there is potential for sensitive issues to be raised in the letters that warrant further attention e.g. fitness to practice (NMC 2010¹, NMC 2010²). It is also possible that such letters could lead to negative, rather than positive, messages being relayed from final to first year students. It is expected that students at the point of graduation should demonstrate professional values in both academic and practice settings and it was reassuring that all the letters written by final year students offered supportive and constructive messages. We conducted a brief discussion at the beginning of the session to make explicit the expectations of the letter, although this focused more on professional values than content as we did not want to stifle student creativity (Brookfield & Preskill 1999). In addition, the final year students were fully informed of the purpose of the letters in advance of writing them, and it was stressed that participation was voluntary.

We have developed a briefing paper for use in subsequent years which outlines the aim of the letter and requests that graduating students give written consent for their letters to be used. We also ensure that participating students understand how we will use their work and what will happen to their letters once they are disseminated to year 1 students. A summary of the guidance paper follows:

Welcome letter activity

Do you remember how you felt on your first day on the course? What do you wish you had known then but didn't? What information did you find useful or interesting at that point? What do you wish you had done differently during your time studying here? Take this opportunity to share your 'words of wisdom' about your experiences on the programme.

- Write an open letter to one of the new first years who start in September [date] on the paper provided. We will distribute them to the new year 1 group

Suggestions:

- What were the highlights of the course:
- The lows of the course:
- Finish the following sentence

I wish I had known when I began.....

Guidelines

This letter is about **you** and **your** experiences. Remember-it is likely that the new students may be feeling vulnerable on their first day. Not all students will be school leavers, or even from the UK. Think carefully about the tone of your letter and who might be reading it.

- Participation is voluntary. If you wish to participate in this icebreaking exercise please sign the form overleaf.
- Please anonymise your letter. i.e. do not sign it or give out biographical details
- Do not write any information that you would not be happy to share in a public forum.
- Remember your professional responsibilities. Do not breach the NMC Code (2010¹) or University regulations i.e. do not discuss specific patient care issues, or identify students or members of staff by name.
- The letters will be distributed to year 1 students on the first day of term and collected in at the end of induction. The letters will be maintained as an archive for five years during the current term of the programme and will then be destroyed.

In terms of equality of opportunity, there may be entrants who do not find it easy to read handwritten text. Facilities exist for students to write and read the letters electronically. Faculty should also explore innovative methods such as development of 'talking heads' so that students can access on line presentations. It is our intention to continue to use welcome letters to support and engage students in the induction programme.

Conclusion

The literature suggests that student to student dialogue is more credible than lecturer led dialogue (Harris et al 2010; Gordon, 2005; Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2003). In addition, writing and receiving letters can help to foster skills of reflection, leading to personal and professional growth. The use of 'welcome' letters appears to be a powerful tool to engage year one students in the induction period. As a result of reading the letters, new entrants actively identified their own learning gaps. Encouraging students to construct their own learning and reflect upon it sets the scene for a constructivist approach throughout the rest of their education.

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