A virtual appreciative coaching and mentoring programme to support novice nurse researchers in Africa

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Abstract

The conventional model of nurse research education and support has shown itself to be deficient in the face of the rapidly changing health care and educational environments. This is more so in the open distance learning (ODL) context where institutions embark on cross border initiatives to build the capacity of novice nurse researchers. The purpose of this study was to develop a virtual appreciative coaching and mentoring programme to support novice nurse researchers in Africa. The programme was based on the opportunities and challenges experienced during the supervision of students across distance and the need identified by stakeholders for further support. A qualitative, exploratory, single descriptive case study design was used. The participants included 15 post-graduate midwifery nursing students and one external supervisor. Data were collected through guided narrative reports and debriefing interviews. The data were analysed through an inductive thematic approach. The findings indicated that there were positive experiences that could be capitalised on such as the personal motivation of students, personal resilience, innovative ways of research education and the possibilities that technology offered. Challenges included issues of language, culture, resources and skills deficiencies. An appreciative virtual coaching and mentoring programme underpinned by an appreciative inquiry philosophy is proposed. Connectivism formed the pedagogical approach with training, coaching and mentoring forming the main teaching and learning strategies. A blended cyber learning approach is recommended in order to manage the ICT challenges inherent in the African continent. Virtual coaching and mentoring may provide a novel means for supporting novice nurse researchers in African countries.

Keywords: Nursing, coaching, mentoring, research, distance teaching, learning.

Introduction

Nursing is at a critical juncture in the history of the health care profession. The significant role of public recognition of nursing in shaping the future of health care demands for more doctorally prepared nurses (Institute of Internal Medicine, 2011) and, thus, calls for innovative ways to educate and support novice nurse researchers. A clarion call is made for national and international nurse education research to align resources within and outside the discipline to create a knowledge base and to prepare the future generation of researchers who will advance this knowledge (Valiga & Ironside, 2012).

International trends in nurse research education have shown to be deficient both in the quality of research produced as well as building disciplinary capacity for research (Valiga & Ironside, 2012). Few faculties establish research trajectories to guide nurse research training or provide support for post graduate nurse students. A study done by MacGregor et al. (2006) found four factors that affect research output, namely research management, research nurturing, research indicators and research priorities. Research nurturing was found to be one of the most important factors affecting research production. Research nurturing included the facilitation of research, the mentoring and encouragement of academics and students and quality assurance of research supervision. Pearson and Brew (2002) and Zhao (2001) postulate that the conventional model of research education and support has shown itself to be lacking in the face of the rapidly changing education environment. The same could be said of nurse research education. This is more so in the open distance learning (ODL) context where institutions embark on cross- border initiatives to build the capacity of novice researchers. Issues of diversity such as power, gender, culture, language and socioeconomic status place unique demands on capacity building initiatives. Supervising and supporting students' remote research projects poses additional challenges such as building relationships, access to resources, language, communication and cultural barriers (Sussex, 2008).

In addition to the above challenges, Yonge, et al. (2005) found in their inventory of nursing education research that the bulk of nursing education research evidence is generated in the industrialised parts of the world; notably North America and Europe. Their recommendation was that research programmes need to be developed. Therefore, it is necessary that similar research programmes be developed in the African context and realities in order to promote local research capacity and relevance.

Coaching and mentoring initiatives

Coaching and mentoring are both forms of learning conversations (Brennan, 2008) which require reflection during and after learning conversations. Coaching, however, has a stronger element of performance management. The emphasis is often on the quality of the learner or coachee's thinking. Mentoring, on the other hand, is usually more holistic in addressing issues such as personal and professional growth and offering psychological and career support or encouragement (Vance & Olson, 1998). The mentor frequently acts as a role model. As a result, mentoring relationships often last longer than coaching relationships. Although the centrality of mentoring to the development process of self and work has been acknowledged from the times of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Chinese, a renewed focus has emerged in both nursing practice and research education.

Coaching and mentoring initiatives are gaining prominence in nursing practice as a strategy for improving health outcomes (Hayes & Kalmakis, 2007), as a means to enhance leadership and role performance in nursing (Byrne, 2007), and to improve the performance of clinicians (Driscoll & Cooper, 2005). Coaching and mentoring is similarly entering the post graduate research education milieu as a capacity building and developmental support strategy for novice researchers (Geber, 2010; Maritz & Visagie, 2011) and as a career management strategy for fast-tracking newcomers (Geber, 2003). Pearson and Brew (2002) add coaching as one of the models for achieving skilful performance, with the emphasis on developing expertise. Maritz, Visagie and Johnson (2013) found that coaching and mentoring provided opportunities for the personal and professional growth of students through acquiring new skills, generating opportunities for intellectual discourse, risk taking and challenges as well as easing integration in the formal and informal research communities of practice. These programmes provided students with a supportive space in which their learning could be accelerated and provided a formative social context to negotiate the tensions of engagement, while improving accountability and building a shared repertoire of research practice.

Virtual coaching and mentoring refer to a developmental partnership in which all or most of the learning dialogue takes place using synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (Clutterbuck, 2010; Rowland, 2011). These relationships typically cut across organisational boundaries, geographic and time zones, and have the capacity to be more egalitarian than face-to-face coaching and mentoring. A review of the literature indicates that virtual coaching and mentoring have been under researched thus far; especially in the context of providing support to postgraduate students and in this instance, novice researchers. According to Stokes (2010) the lack of empirical work underlies the wider challenge to researchers in the coaching world to develop more academically robust accounts of the work done on coaching. Biao (2012) suggests that careful trails of delivery modes or systemic researches be conducted to ascertain in the course of minimal time the suitability of any mode of delivery on the African soil.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to develop a virtual appreciative coaching and mentoring programme to support novice nurse researchers in Africa. The programme was based on the opportunities and challenges experienced during the supervision of cross- border nursing students in Africa and the needs identified by stakeholders for further support. This support was deemed crucial for the sustainability of the project programme.

Methodology

Participants

The participants included 15 black post-graduate midwifery nursing students (they formed part of the first cohort of post graduate midwifery students to enrol for a Master's degree in Nursing Midwifery), and one external supervisor. The sample comprised of six females and seven males. The external supervisor was a white female from South Africa. The students were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The students were adult learners and their ages ranged between 41 and 53 years. The students were all French speaking with no functional English literacy. The external supervisor was English speaking with no functional French speaking literacy. The services of an interpreter were used throughout the programme.

Research design

A qualitative, exploratory, single descriptive case study design (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010) was used. The qualitative design enabled the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon. The phenomena in this instance refer to virtual coaching and mentoring novice nurse researchers and supervisors in an ODL context. A qualitative design is also appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon (Brink & Wood, 1998). Case studies focus on contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Yin, 2009).

Measures of trustworthiness

Strategies employed to ensure the quality of data included the following measures of trustworthiness (Guba, 1981): credibility (triangulation, reflectivity and member checking); applicability (rich descriptions and purposeful sampling); dependability (code, recode procedures); confirmability (triangulation and reflectivity); and authenticity (fairness, awareness, understanding, action and empowerment) (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008).

CHENMA programme

The CHENMA (Collaboration for Higher Education for Nurses and Midwives in Africa) project was launched in 2008. The aim was to strengthen nursing and midwifery expertise in Africa and build capacity in Southern African universities. The University of the Free State's, School of Nursing, was one of the institutions that participated in developing a master's degree programme for nurses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (the context of this paper). The DRC's educational system was not yet geared towards such a programme at that time. The project was completed in 2011 and a need was

identified by the stakeholders to provide further support to the students as they moved towards becoming nurse leaders and researchers in their country. At the time of the report, four students from this programme accepted positions in nurse training institutions and three were considering embarking on PhD studies in future.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through 15 guided narrative reports (Ness, Duffy, McCullum & Price, 2010). The narratives were in French. They were pragmatically translated (Burns & Grove 2009) by a French/English language professional as well as back-translated for accuracy. Two debriefing interviews (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008) were held with the external supervisor. The interviews were conducted in English.

Data analysis

Data were analysed through an inductive thematic approach (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010). The aim was not to measure and observe variables but to build a complex and holistic picture by means of the analysis of words and the reporting of the specific views of the coach educators (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A consensus discussion was held between the researchers to verify findings and as a means of interpretive convergence (Saldaña, 2009).

Ethical considerations

The following ethical considerations (de Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011) were taken into account: consent to conduct research was requested and granted through the Institut Superieur Des Techniques Medicales De Lubumbashi in the DRC. Informed consent was obtained from all participants by means of a letter communicating the necessary information pertaining to the project. Confidentiality was maintained through the anonymity of responses. Participation was voluntary.

Results

A summary of the findings is provided in Table 1 in order to situate the appreciative virtual coaching and mentoring programme in the empirical data collected. A short description of the findings is presented with some verbatim quotes by the participants in italics. A detailed report of the findings was presented at the 12th Annual Tau Lambda-at-Large Conference in Malawi held in 2012.

Table 1: Summary of the findings

Theme	Sub-theme	Theme	Sub-theme
Opportunities that sustained the students		Challenges experienced	
Positive learning environment	An appreciation of what worked	Language barriers	
Competent facilitators		Lack of resources	Technology Eductional material
Personal attributes of the students	Personal resilience	Lack of subject knowledge (research methodology)	
	Passion and enthusiasm	Negative emotive responses resulting in stress	
	Perseverance		
	Self-responsibility		
	Self-regulation		

Opportunities that sustained the student referred to the learning environment, the facilitator and the student. The learning environment was experienced by the students as '*serene and in harmony of service*'. The facilitator was an experienced individual who '*showed good workmanship of the study domain*'. Personal attributes of the students that sustained them included personal resilience in the face of adversity and when there was a perceived lack of support, was passion and enthusiasm; perseverance; self-responsibility and self-regulation. The students clearly indicated that they wanted to continue their education and have '*upper knowledge*'. The students and supervisor both experienced challenges. The most important challenge was the language barrier. One student phrased the problem as follows: '*We had two different systems of knowing, the English speaking and the French speaking systems.*' The lack of resources such as educational resources and technology was a continuous challenge that had to be overcome. A lack of subject knowledge with specific reference to the qualitative paradigm was mentioned culminating in the '*need for additional training after this period of study.*' The challenges often left the students feeling '*unsettled in the sequence of the job at hand, leaving me feeling disentangled.*' This clearly indicated the need for both professional and personal support.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a virtual appreciative coaching and mentoring programme to support novice nurse researchers in Africa. Based on the findings of the study, we believe that a virtual appreciative coaching and mentoring programme is a novel and fitting solution for providing support to

novice nurse researchers and in an open distance learning context. A programme refers to a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences (Council on Higher Education, 2004). Emelo and McGee (2012) view a web-based coaching and mentoring process not just as a strategic advantage, but as a strategic necessity in the 21st century. Technological connectivity is transforming the way people live and interact. Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) argue that more transformational than the technology is the shift in behaviour that coaching and mentoring enable.

Virtual coaching and mentoring allow us to form communities, relationships and learning in new ways. A description of the proposed appreciative virtual coaching and mentoring programme for novice nurse researchers in Africa will now be discussed according to the outcome, philosophical approach, educational pedagogy, educational medium, facilitators and teaching and learning strategies. Nurse researchers who completed the CHENMA project will be the first cohort of this programme. The length of the programme is envisaged as 12-18 months from the time of active engagement. A programme outcome refers to the results of the educational experience (Olivier, 1998). At the end of this programme the nurse researchers will have a basic understanding of both quantitative and qualitative designs and methods. The programme is however open to alternative models of research and exploration. Nurse researchers will demonstrate proficiency in academic writing and reasoning and use technology as a resource and social network medium. They will be able to establish and maintain professional networks in the research context. These outcomes will be assessed through a completed PhD proposal at the end of the programme in the case of students continuing their studies or a draft article for publication for those who are not embarking on further studies.

How does one harness the opportunities identified and manage the challenges? Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a philosophical approach seemed most suitable to harness the opportunities highlighted in the findings with reference to the students' positive experience of the learning environment. AI represents a 'constructive inquiry process that searches for everything which gives life to organisations, communities and larger human systems when they are most alive, effective, creative and healthy in their interconnected ecology of relationships' (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004). AI concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then tries to work out ways in which this can be built on (Reed, 2007). The emphasis is on appreciating activities and the responses of people rather than concentrating on the problems. The educational pedagogy deemed to be most suitable for this programme is situated in George Siemens' Theory of Connectivism (2006). According to Siemens, learning is a network phenomenon influenced and aided by socialisation and technology. He claims that knowledge does not only reside in the mind of the individual, but in a distributed manner across a network. The

networked act of learning exists on two levels, namely internal as neural networks (where knowledge is distributed across our brain, not held entirely in one location) and external networks that we actively form through socialisation. Context shapes the nature of knowledge and learning requiring that we consider contextual factors when engaging in cross- border initiatives. The choice of connectivism would address the contextual reality of the programme in a virtual environment as well as the need for students to improve their technological proficiency and develop professional and social networks.

Language is a critical issue in international education (Jowi, 2009). Lackoff and Johnson (1999) highlight the crucial role that language plays in the continuity between perception and thought. Language becomes the expression of a way of seeing, sensing and being in the world. Creative thinking depends on language expressing novelty by means of new words, images and concepts and associating them with elements of the existing culture (Konopka, 2002). Larson (2011) explains that metaphors are part of the fabric of knowledge production in science and greater sensitivity should be developed to their presence and implications. Within research, language barriers may influence the dissemination of knowledge. African academic discourse has been dominated by the use of English, French and Portuguese with English being the most dominant. The CHENMA programme will initially be facilitated by the authors who are both English speaking. All materials will be translated into French. The services of a French translator will be acquired for all other instructional media. Although costly, the initial project demonstrated that the language was a challenge, but it also showed that it was possible to facilitate learning across language barriers. Our knowledge in this area may prove valuable in the future.

The facilitators of the programme, henceforth referred to as the coaches and mentors, should demonstrate specific attributes. The coach and mentor as a scholar, who is committed to research capacity development has experience and training in the fields of research, coaching and mentoring and has a proven research track record (Maritz & Visagie, 2011). In this context familiarity with the distance education environment is vital. The primary responsibility of the research coach and mentor is to facilitate or enable the personal and professional development of the novice nurse researchers.

Personal development is concerned with progressive growth in areas such as self-awareness, identity formation (as a scholar), confidence and accountability (Visagie, 2010). The coach and mentor are responsible for creating a safe environment in which the individual can experiment with his or her own potential (Hillary, 2003). A mentoring approach will also address the need for psychological and career support that was indicated by the students as a challenge.

Professional development consists of activities to enhance the emerging researchers' research profile and career. These activities may include obtaining higher degrees, peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, and supervisory throughput of postgraduate candidates in good time and grant funding.

According to Siemens (2006), learning involves varying combinations of cognition, memory, emotions, beliefs and perceptions. The CHENMA programme aims to involve the stimulation of all these aspects. We hold the assumption that knowledge acquisition does not equate with learning, therefore, the ability to internalise and apply knowledge is vital; so is the development of meta-cognition and reflection. All material will aim to contain 'African realities' (Biao, 2012). This means that the learning content will be injected with scenes and images familiar to the learners. This has the potential of motivating more than a situation devoid of the realities of the milieu. A bended cyber learning approach (Zi-Gang, 2012) will be followed for the development of the skills (research methodology, time management and learning how to learn) aspect of the programme. The rationale for the synchronous learning through satellite or TV broadcasting is included as Zi-Gang (2012) found that cyber synchronous learning offers additional assistance to learners. It is hoped that the synchronous and asynchronous learning would complement each other. The asynchronous learning promotes cognitive participation through the discussion of complex issues in which time for reflection is needed. Instructional and communication medium will include text, images, video and multi-media.

Our main instructional foundation lies in the Socratic premise of dialogue in which both parties seek the so-called truth by means of critical questioning (Frick, Albertyn & Rutgers, 2010). Coaching conversations can be described as a focused (sometimes fierce), stimulating learning conversation that leads to transformation or change in both people and processes (Brennan, 2008). Coaching conversations rely on critical, evocative and probing questions that are designed to elicit assumptions rather than mere information (Hall & Duval, 2003). Text- based coaching discussion provides an opportunity to test the rigor of logic, to explore assumptions and to clarify the processes and heuristic approaches of the students. The mentoring approach will provide opportunities of acting as a listening partner, being a sounding board, helping with the developing of coping strategies and exploring career paths.

The availability and reliability of ICT on the African continent remains a challenge with limited or expensive internet access or extended periods of no internet access or power failures. We may not be able to run a fully ICT- based ODL project without an adequate supply of electricity and internet access. Biao (2012), however, recommends a combination of ICT- based strategies with conventional face-to-face meetings and printed materials. We suggest at least

three face- to- face meetings to establish and develop the relationship: one on the outset to familiarise the nurse researchers with the coach/mentor and the research context; at least one in the middle to sustain the work through the inevitable rough patches; and one at the end for final write up and submission. The main strategy will, however, be virtual and conversational (between peers and coaches) as it forms a rich tapestry of resources and interconnection created not only by experts but most importantly the learning community.

Conclusion

Technological connectivity is transforming the way people live and interact. Research education programmes need to acknowledge and adapt to these changing environments. A virtual appreciative coaching and mentoring programme is a novel and fitting solution for providing novice nurse researchers support in an open distance learning context. It is proposed that an appreciative virtual coaching and mentoring programme situated in an appreciative inquiry philosophy. Connectivism formed the pedagogical approach with training, coaching and mentoring forming the main teaching and learning strategies. A blended cyber learning approach is proposed in order to manage the ICT challenges inherent in the African continent. Once implemented, the programme should be evaluated and refined, if necessary. The outcome will be reported in popular and scientific media in future.

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