The student nurse's experience of summative assessment in clinical practice - the findings from a small scale study

Liz Gormley-Fleming

Facilitation of learning in the clinical practice setting for pre-registration nursing students is a much-debated topic and there are many inherent assumptions about this place of learning. The criterion of what constitutes a quality-learning environment is well documented, likewise the requirements of a good mentoring, (Andrew & Robert, 2003). Assessment is known to drive learning and the assessment of practice is challenging. The assessment of this learning in practice from the students' viewpoint is not well known and this was the primary purpose of this piece of research. The purpose of this small-scale study was to test to the methodology: intrinsic case study approach that employed-semi structured interviews and document analysis with a view to identifying their appropriateness for the larger scale study in the future.

Case study methodology

Case study methodology has a resonance with professional practice (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006). By examining specific cases, professional issues can be identified and addressed. It identifies the individuality and uniqueness of the service in question. The philosophical assumptions that phenomena cannot be studied objectively but only from the individuals perspective is my starting point as a researcher undertaking this study. The interpretivist paradigm is the belief that as human beings we are continually constructing our social world and also striving to make sense of our social world (Parahoo, 2006: 41). I want to understand the experience of the student nurse being assessed in clinical practice from their world view and I want to interpret the data to make it meaningful to future students by utilising the findings to prepare the mentors of the future and to aid the design of assessment tools for use in clinical practice, hence why I have chosen to use a case study approach to this small scale study.

Case studies have been defined as:
'*A valuable means of investigating a contemporary phenomenon in its real life context when the boundaries between the phenomena and context are not clearly evident*'.
(Yin, 2003:13).

Knowledge of the students experience is relative to the world of clinical practice. This is as a result of complex human interactions so thus is social constructed. The student experience is influenced by many factors and when articulating that experience and it is likely that it will be context dependant, person specific and influenced by the social situation. Socially constructed knowledge in nursing practice is recognised as a result of interactions of communities of practice (Gabbay & LeMay, 2004). As my aim is to explore rather than measure, case study, as a methodology, is appropriate for this initial study as the underlying philosophical assumption is that the case is rooted in the natural setting (clinical practice setting). This requires a holistic elucidation of the phenomena being studied. In order to ascertain a true picture of the experience of student nurses' assessment of learning, the context of clinical practice setting requires consideration, as this is the foundation of professional learning.

Various types of case studies exist. Determining the type of case study that will be undertaken is guided by the purpose of the study, (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) used the categories, explanatory, exploratory or descriptive whereas Stake (1995) identified case study as intrinsic, instrumental or collective. With this caveat my study would be considered to be that of an intrinsic case study as my aim is to gain a deeper insight and understanding into the experience of student nurses assessment in clinical practice.

Intrinsic case study design alludes to the fact the researcher has a genuine interest in the case with the intent to understand the case as it is the case (in its own right) that is of interest with the opportunity to build theory. A single case study design (Yin, 2003) was used in this small scale study due to the time constrains attached.

The purpose of the inquiry should determine the type of case study employed and the number of cases considered. Increasingly used to undertake qualitative inquiry, case studies are not a methodological choice but a strategy thus allowing a number of methods to be used, (Stake, 1995). It is the interest in the case and its theoretical orientation that defines the case study and not the research methods (Hartley, 2004:324).

A number of steps are required to complete the case study method: posing a research question, the studies proposition,

the unit of analysis, the linking of the data to the proposition and identifying criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2003). In addition to these requirements, consideration to selecting the participants, data collection, identifying the goals of the study, the theoretical perspective and the reporting of the study's findings are also required. One of the reported advantages of case study as a methodology is the collaboration between researcher and the participants, (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). It is the latter telling their story that I wish to explore.

Ethics

Full ethical approval was granted for this study. A participant information sheet was emailed to the participants detailing the study. Informed consent was obtained.

The participants

The participants in this study were third year nursing students who were on their final clinical placement. This selection was deliberate: thus purposive sampling was utilised for this small-scale study. This is congruent with qualitative research as it is from the individual that the required rich data will be sourced (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006:164). It remains important thought that rigour is considered in this type of sampling so consideration was given to whether to invite the entire year three cohort or just select one field. Due to the time frame when data could be collected and accessibility the latter group were identified. Mays & Pope (2000) suggested that the full range of possible cases be considered so that conceptual generalisations are made by the researcher in an attempt to maintain rigour but as this was a small-scale study to test the methodology.

Data collection

Data was collected from two sources: semi structured interviews and from the practice assessment document. The relevant sections of the Practice Assessment Documents (PAD) were photographed and stored securely.
The rationale for this method triangulated approach (Denzin & Lincoln 1989:152) was to enhance credibility albeit the data in the PADs was significantly less that that ascertained in the interviews so direct comparisons were limited. In keeping with case study methodology exploring the phenomena through a variety of lenses is advantageous as it allows multiple facets of the phenomena to be exposed and comprehended.

Data analysis

Data analysis is the constructivist element of the research study as it requires identifying conceptual meaning from those manageable amounts (Polit, Beck & Hungler. 2001:388).
The data was transcribed verbatim from the interviews and this was completed on the same day as the interviews. This was beneficial as the experiences were still fresh and I could then consider the field notes that were recorded at the time of the interview within the context of that interview. The recordings were re- listened to over a number of days.
The transcriptions were returned to the participants for 'member checking'. This is important when aiming to establish the credibility of the data (Lincoln and Guba: 1985)

Content analysis was employed as it was considered that this method allowed themes to emerge and enabled unanticipated insight into the phenomena being explored. Defined as a technique for making inference through systematic and objective identification of the key characteristics of message, (Berg, 2001:240) content analysis in qualitative methodology is a debated practice. Its potential to be reductionist is considered to be a limitation (Silverman: 1993).

Constant questioning is required from the researcher when analysing the data, e.g. what is happening? Why has that occurred in an attempt to make further sense of the data? This was useful as it enabled clarity about the location of categories against certain segments of the data. This process was repeated for both data sets.
Once all of the data had been categorised into major and minor categories, it was further reviewed for accuracy. The original transcripts were then re-read as I needed to be confident that all of the data recorded at the interviews had been considered and categorises accordingly.

Document analysis

Documents as a source of data are treated with reticence but are also considered to be underutilised, inappropriate or unable to provide adequate insight into the phenomena being considered (Miller & Alvarado: 2005). Yin (2003) referred to document analysis as equally relevant to case study research as other methods of data collection. My rationale for using the PAD as a data source was threefold, firstly this captures 50% of the students' programme of education so is a very important document as it contributes to their award so I expected this to be information rich, secondly it is through this lenses that I anticipated that I would be able to verify/authenticate the findings from the interviews albeit on a small scale and thirdly it would give me an additional insight into the student experience through a different lenses-that of their mentor. I had also viewed the analysis of these documents as a means to triangulate data thus increasing validity.

The findings

The case study report is:
"Generically a story, with concert narrative details of the actual events"

(Boehrer, 1990:41).

Reporting the findings in case study research is context dependent (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006:312). Considerable detail is frequently included in the case study report regarding the unit of analysis which potentially could lead to a breach of confidentiality so as this was a small scale study undertaken with participants from a relatively specialised area of nursing practice this does need to be considered in reporting the findings as I assured anonymity. This study was undertaken from the purpose of identifying my skills as a researcher and to test the question and methodology.

It is not possible to focus on all of the findings from this case study within the confines of this paper. The themes that emerge thought were the 'willingness to learn': students identified that their needs were not always met even when they had clearly articulated their learning outcomes. Students knew what the final assessment process should entail but that they were often on the peripheries of their assessment and thus removed from their assessment. There was an appreciation of the challenges of being a mentor.

Conclusion

Case study as a methodology was interesting to use and did serve a purpose and it has it has helped me to validate the research question at this point in time. The challenges of data analysis even thought the sample was very small have provided sufficient insight into the many stages required from obtaining the data to the production of the case study report. Each stage of this study identified areas for me to reflect on and consider for future development.

Author details
Liz Gormley-Fleming
School of Health & Social Work, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane Campus, Hatfield, Hertfordshire, AL10 9AB, UK

Supervisors: Dr Jon Berry. Professor Michael Biggs. Dr Stefan Perry

References

Andrew, A., Roberts, D. (2003). Supporting nurses learning in and through clinical practice: the role of the clinical guide. Nurse Education Today. 23 474-481

Berg, B., (2001). Qualitative Research Methods for Social Science. 4th Edition. Allyn & Bacon. Boston.

Boehrer, J. (1990) Teaching with cases. Learning to Question. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. 42. 41-57.

Crabtree, B.F. & Miller, W. L. (1999) Doing Qualitative Research. Sage Publications Inc. Thousand Oaks

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (1989). The Landscape of Qualitative Research.

Sage. Thousand Oaks.

Gerrish, K. & Lacey, A., (2006). The Research Process in Nursing. 5th edition. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Oxford.

Hartley, J. (2004) Case Study research. In: Cassell, C. & Symon, G. (eds) (2004) Essential guide to qualitative methods in organizational research. Sage. Los Angeles.

Mays, N. & Pope, C., (2000). Assessing quality in qualitative research. British Medical Journal. 320:50-52.

Miller, F.A., & Alvarado, K. (2005). Incorporating Documents into Qualitative Nursing Research. Journal of Nursing Scholarship. 37(4) pp348-353.

Parahoo, K., (2006). Nursing Research. Principles, Process and Issues. 2nd edition. Palgrave. Basingstoke.

Polit, D.F,. Beck, C.T. & Hungler, B.P., (2001). Essentials of Nursing Research. Methods, Appraisal, and Utilization. 5th edition. Lippincott. Philadelphia.

Silverman, D. (1993). Interpreting Qualitative Data. Thousand Oaks. CA. Sage.

Stake, R.E. (1995). The Art of Case Study Research. Thousand Oak. CA. Sage.

Yin, R.K. (2003). Case Study research: Design and methods. 3rd edition. Thousand Oaks. CA. Sage