Mentoring Online Students: Developing and Testing a Mentorship Model for the Capstone Practicum

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Purpose: Students completing a master’s in nursing degree in my online program are required to complete a practicum project working with a master's prepared mentor. During the practicum, students implement a scholarly project to meet an educational need or administrate a project in a facility, such as the workplace, or in the community. Given that students have no face-to-face contact with faculty who supervise the capstone practicum course, effective mentors are critical to student success. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the collaborative process used to develop, implement, and evaluate a mentorship model to guide both students and mentors in their critical roles during the online capstone practicum project.

Methods: The practicum course is divided into two parts. During part A, students develop a self-directed learning agreement. In part B, students report on their projects and submit all evidence of fulfillment of their learning agreement. The model was initially developed through a qualitative study that included content analysis of student reports (n=263 representing 28 part A classes) of characteristics of effective mentors and then Part B student confirmation of the identified categories. I organized the major categories of characteristics of effective mentors into a pyramid-shaped mentorship model for online program practicum experiences. The base or foundation of the pyramid was comprised of mentor characteristics including background, experience, and education. The central core of the pyramid was formed by mentor qualities and ways the mentor interacts with the mentee (resourceful, inspires and challenges, caring relationship). I presented this model at an international conference and dialogue with the audience suggested the need to refine the model.

Consistent with the collaborative approach used for initial development, to allow for student collaboration in model refinement, I posted the model and supporting materials in five (n=65) practicum B classes for student input. Based on their recommendations, I reorganized the mentor qualities and characteristics within the pyramid. They believed that the bottom of the pyramid that includes the two cornerstones is the foundation of the model. Thus, the two cornerstones are now nursing knowledge and nursing experience, for without these two key elements, there is not a profession known as nursing. Interconnected between the two cornerstones, in the middle and a very important part of the foundation is caring. The core of the model is now Resourceful with the apex being Inspire and challenge. Professional ladder categories (educator, clinician, researcher, manager) support the base and the core of the model. Once these changes were made, I posted the model in four (n = 52) practicum B classes and students confirmed that this model represented their positive experience with their mentor.

The model was again shared at an international conference two years after the first presentation. Student quotes indicated that the pyramid structure was too rigid to capture the essence of mentorship. Other images shared and discussed were a tree, lighthouse, and rainbow. I have continued to gather information (17 "A" n=221; 21 "B" n=207). The tree model is the one that most students connect with although there is interest in further exploring the lighthouse image. Students find that the image that resonates with them assists them to communicate about the model more clearly with their mentors (Scogin, 2016).

Since refinement, I implemented the model by presenting it to students in the first practicum course. Students are encouraged to use the model as they select their mentors and form working relationships. When students check in at required times during their 6-month project, I ask them about the use of the model and whether it helps or hinders. Their narrative responses are analyzed as well as data about frequency of use (Frahm, et al., 2013).
Results: Students in part A of the practicum have been using the model to help them select an appropriate mentor for their project experience. Additionally, they have been sharing the model with their mentors and using it to establish a relationship and determine the best ways that they can work together throughout the project. Students and mentors report that this provides clarity on how to work together, and gives them additional ideas for creative approaches to use. They find that the model facilitates reciprocal communication between the mentor and mentee (Sherman & Camilli, 2014). Since using this model, I have had fewer students report negative mentoring experiences during practicum check-ins or in part B.

Conclusion: Mentors play a critical role in guiding, supporting and challenging students to grow personally and professionally throughout the practicum experience, culminating in attainment of a master’s degree in nursing. This refined mentorship model that is specific to a practicum conducted in the context of an online program facilitates appropriate selection of mentors and suggests ways that mentors and mentees can work effectively together.

Title:
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Keywords:
mentorship, online education and practicum

References:


Abstract Summary:
Online students in my practicum capstone course have no face-to-face contact with their faculty. Effective mentors are critical to student success as they complete a major project in this course. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the development, testing, and outcomes of a practicum mentoring model.

Content Outline:
I. Introduction

A. Students in and online graduate practicum capstone course have no face-to-face contact with supervising faculty.

B. A mentorship model was developed, implemented and evaluated to guide mentors in their critical role working with practicum students.

II. Body
A. Model Development

1. Discussion of qualities and characteristics of effective mentors
   a) Content analysis of student narratives
   b) Development of preliminary model to organize categories.

2. Selection of Imagery to Enhance Model Understanding
   a) A branching tree with deep routes was used to organize the mentoring characteristics.
   b) A lighthouse captured the supportive relationship between the mentor and mentee and suggested how the pair can weather difficult times.

B. Model Implementation

1. Introduction of Model to Practicum Students
   a) Presented to students in first part of practicum course.
   b) Students share the model with their mentors.

2. Implementation Checks to Monitor Model Use
   a) Students questioned about use of model during regular check-ins.
   b) Quantitative and qualitative analysis of model use.

C. Model Evaluation

1. Content Analysis of Narratives about Model Use
   a) Model facilitates reciprocal communication between mentor and mentee.
   b) Students report model assists them with role clarification when establishing working relationship with their mentors.

2. Problem Reports Monitored
   a) Less problems with mentors reported during check-ins.
   b) Students also report less problems than students in past when they report on overall mentorship experience in final course.

III. Conclusion

A. The online practicum mentorship model assists with selection of appropriate mentors.

B. The model and its imagery suggest ways that mentors and mentees can work effectively together.
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