

The roles of the mentor and of the preceptor in nursing

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The nursing profession has found itself under siege in recent decades, facing an insufficient number of students entering the field to replace those individuals who are leaving it. For this reason it is incumbent on those individuals already employed as nurses to assist the newly graduated nurses entering the field, easing their transition and assisting with retention.

Both mentors and preceptors are practicing nurses who have put themselves into these supportive roles, ensuring that the conditions in the clinical environment create a safe and efficient workplace amenable to appropriate nursing care. As a result of this great and continued need for the retention of new and newly advanced nurses, both mentors and preceptors are of overwhelming value to the profession. The roles that these individuals play, however, are quite different, despite their equal value in nursing education.

Mentors in Nursing Practice

Mentors have long been part of professional development in other fields, dating back to ancient Greece and ancient Rome and, perhaps, beyond. Morton-Cooper and Palmer (2000), citing Hamilton, state that “it was fully expected that the youths would learn from and emulate the values of their assigned ‘mentor.’ The term mentor became synonymous with wise, faithful guardian and teacher” (37).

Some of the assumptions associated with a mentor and mentee relationship are that the mentee will eventually become self-directed through guidance, rather than other-directed and that the mentee will eventually become more

performance oriented through the development of critical thinking skills developed over time in practice, rather than relying on the knowledge obtained in school (Morton-Cooper & Palmer, 2000). It is up to the mentor to help the mentee develop these skills through a collaborative effort, acting as a guide to assist the mentee with achieving his or her potential.

Preceptors in Nursing Practice

Like mentors, preceptors are skilled clinicians who possess a broad body of knowledge. Many nurses who excel at their nursing practice can be preceptors, even if they do not possess the teaching skills to be mentors. Unlike mentors who work closely with their mentees, preceptors are individuals that model behavior for the learners on the clinical floor. In addition, preceptors observe the learners and analyze and evaluate the behaviors and activities that they observe. Preceptors have what might be termed a “quasi-mentoring” role in terms of students, providing support when the student needs it, rather than the day to day guidance provided by the mentor. According to Morton-Cooper and Palmer (2000) the lack of understanding of the preceptor’s role allowed it to be confused with that of the mentor (p. 47).

Learning Contract

A learning contract is a formal tool used in mentoring situations. This contract makes provisions for resource allocations, establishes the relationship between mentor and mentee, and provides sufficient and useful assessment of the learner’s progress (Morton-Cooper & Palmer, 2000). In

addition, preceptor learning contracts that set the learning objectives held by both the learner and the preceptor are useful documents, particularly in the case of rotating schedules and other difficulties that might prevent the preceptor and learner from being on the floor at the same time.

The learning contract can also be used as a learning “diary,” in which the learner records the emotions connected with the clinical experience (Morton-Cooper & Palmer, 2000). Because clinical nursing experience is an experiential form of learning, having records of the learning process and the emotions associated with it can provide valuable insight in connection with the environment in which the nurse is learning and working. In addition, this contract can be used to provide a roadmap that might be used to measure the learner’s commitment to the program.

Conclusion

The preceptor and the mentor are both valuable members of the teaching team, who act in conjunction with the nurse educator’s classroom instruction. The learning contract is also a valuable learning and teaching tool that can be used to direct both the teaching process and the learning process, as well.

Reference

Morton-Cooper, A., & Palmer, A. (2000). *Mentoring, preceptorship and clinical supervision: A guide to professional roles in clinical practice*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Inc.