

Peer Tutoring and Clinical Stage: analysis of experience and potential applications in the First Level Degree Course in Nursing, section of Desenzano Del Garda

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Abstract. Among the various methods of learning and experience in the literature, the methodology of Peer Tutoring is particularly important for the formation of the student nurses. The Peer Tutoring identifies a model of cooperative learning, aiming to activate a spontaneous process to transfer knowledge, emotions and experiences from some members of a group to other members of equal status but with a difference in the knowledge and cognitive skills or relational. The First level degree course in Nursing, section of Desenzano del Garda (Brescia, Italy) has been applying a methodology that can be defined as Peer Tutoring for the last four years. The applicability of the method is based on the coupling of an expert student of the 3rd year of the course to a group of students from the 1st or 2nd year. The study has the main objective to analyze the experience in the branch of Desenzano del Garda and see if the learning method of the Peer Tutoring is valid within the context of clinical internship. The study, of descriptive-observational type, was conducted in the academic year 2013-2014. The samples in the research are two: the first sample consisted of 53 students in their first year of studies, 46 students of the 2nd year of the course and 30 students of the 3rd year of the course who attended the experience as tutoring students (students tutors), for a total of 129 students; the second sample consisted of 15 students of the 3rd year of the course who attended the experience of the Peer Tutoring applied to the Stage clinical students as tutors (students Tutor). The research allowed important information to be gathered regarding the utility and interventions to improve the quality of the project of Peer tutoring. Peer Tutoring is a learning methodology that works and that can be applied in learning pathways for nursing students. The training of students Tutor is a matter of considerable importance: in fact the students ask to be trained to respect the structure and functions of the organizations in which they are inserted, in the management of the groups, the educational skills and techniques and teaching strategies.

Key words: peer tutoring, students partnership, cooperative learning, nursing students learning, peer learning

Introduction

As with all professions, especially those that deal with health, education plays a fundamental role. Training that can not only come from the lectures in the classroom but that, in the specific field of nursing, must actualize, realize, implement the theoretical

knowledge in educational skills, relational practices, etc. within the experiences of clinical internships provided by the study plan.

Among the various methods of learning experience and literature proposals (1), the methodology of Peer Tutoring is particularly important for the formation of the student nurses. The Peer Tutoring identifies a model

of cooperative learning, aiming to activate a spontaneous process to transfer knowledge, emotions and experiences from some members of a group to other members of equal status but with a difference in the knowledge and cognitive skills or relational. We talk about Peer Tutoring when switching between students with more knowledge (Tutor) and students with less knowledge (Tutee) where a plan occurs that includes goals, timing, ways, roles and structured materials. Peer Tutoring is linked to the theory of the “zone of proximal development” (2), enunciated by LS Vigotsky, according to which contact with peers within a group, allows the achievement of results more advanced than those achievable through individual activities. Similar approaches were described for the first time in 1806 by the English Lancasterian System (3), and introduced later in the United States in the field of primary and secondary education (4). The interaction between teacher and learner shows the learner has significantly higher anxiety than that found in the interaction with that of their own age: this is the basis that prompted the application of the method of the Peer Tutoring in primary and secondary schools.

Since the ‘70s the peer teaching methodology began to show how it produced better effects than conventional methods (5, 6) and the merit of this was attributed to individualized instruction and the feedback received by the educator. Similarly, years later another Study (7) showed how the strategy was going to improve the students’ motivation, participation, communication, and empowerment in learning and self-confidence. Davidson and McArdle (8) highlighted the interpersonal growth and the development of learning to apply affective relations within the group. Other aspects were highlighted by Erikson, who showed that the experience of learning with a peer made the learning easier for the students tutoring, gave a responsibility to the student tutors, and for both a better evaluation in performance (9). Also, tutoring provides a strong model in the learning of solidarity, mutual support and the acceptance of others (10).

Objective of the study

Starting from the experience of the First Level Degree Course in Nursing, section of Desenzano del

Garda, the main objective was to evaluate the learning methodology of Peer Tutoring in clinical internship. Secondary objectives were to detect any potential problems, strengths and to find out the general opinions of the usefulness and acceptance of the project by the students who took part in the experience.

The experience of the First Level Degree Course in Nursing, section of Desenzano del Garda

The First Level Degree Course in Nursing in the section of Desenzano del Garda, together with the University of Brescia, has applied a methodology for the past four years, that can be defined as Peer Tutoring for the students in apprenticeship. The applicability of the method is in fact based on the coupling of an experienced student of the 3rd year of the course to a group of students from the 1st or 2nd year. The idea of using this method to facilitate the learning of students came about after some considerations: the first aspect regarded the path of the study of the students, or the lack/absence of a specific area in which the student could put to use their abilities in the management of groups of colleagues, or support staff or other support workers. The second aspect regarded the possibility of offering the tutor students the chance of putting their knowledge to use, elaborating them to make them usable by someone else. The third and last aspect could be defined as “tutorial:” the first training in the 1st year and the 2nd year, respectively represent the first approach of the students in a hospital and to the testing of activity and complex procedures. The time of crisis experienced by hospitals and the consequent shortage of nursing staff available to devote to specific activities such as managing groups of beginner students, therefore represented an opportunity for the inclusion of the experienced students of the third year, who would be able to “protect” and help the group of students from the 1st and 2nd years.

The project of internship of 40 hours a week, lasts for approximately two months. The first shift is preferred for the duration of the internship, so as to ensure a continuity in the take over by the assistant internship who, for most of the time and within the limits of organizational possibilities, is dedicated. Participants in the pro-

ject, students of 1st and 2nd year (Tutee) and students of the 3rd year (Tutor), have different tasks, still aim to achieve a common goal, thus making them participants in a cooperative learning model. The former have the opportunity in assisting people taken into care through interventions provided by a schedule for goals, the latter experience in taking charge of a group of people assisted, and the ability to assign and evaluate nursing interventions to other operators. On average, to each student tutor and Ward, a group of 6-8 students are assigned, managed and supervised, above all in the initial stages, by students training. The taking over by the students of the 1st and 2nd year occurs gradually, in parallel with the planning and agreement of the Student Tutor and Assistant Internship. Therefore, even structurally, a division in the Ward leading to the formation of a “zone of action” is created, where teams composed of Tutee and Tutor programme, manage, put into act and verify the various nursing activities; thus ensuring a total continuity of caring and assistance. This step allows an organization that is most orientated to obtaining results, and that remains the final idea for the entire group.

In preparation to the internship, a meeting is held in which the project is presented to all of the students involved. They are presented with the main characteristics of the project and the role of student tutors, valuing the business of micro-team work and work in collaboration. After this meeting, the group of students of the 1st or 2nd year have the chance of meeting the “expert” students of the 3rd year in order to meet, exchange ideas and shed doubts.

Materials and methods

The study was conducted in the academic year 2013-2014 and involved all three years of the course.

Sampling

Through a non-probability sampling of convenience, the participants were:

- 53 students of the 1st year of the course, 46 Students of the 2nd year of the course and 30 Students of the 3rd year; for a total of 129 students, all participants of the Peer Tutoring experience

applied clinically to the internship as student tutors (as from now referred to as “Tutee”);

- 15 Students of the 3rd year participated in an experience of Peer Tutoring, and then applied to the internship as clinical tutor students (from now on referred to as “Tutor”).

Survey instruments

The survey instruments have been two self-reports of which one was administered to the student Tutor and one to the student Tutee. The period administered was from 8th September 2014 to 8th October 2014.

The questionnaire for student Tutees is divided into five parts:

- 1) generic profile: 3 multiple choice questions (gender, age and academic year of membership);
- 2) value of experience: 3 multiple choice questions to assess the pleasure and usefulness of the experience;
- 3) role of the student tutors: 5 multiple choice items, designed to investigate the characteristics of the student tutors who have or should have the project Peer tutoring and its contribution to the path of learning;
- 4) skills of the student tutors: one open question that is asked to the Tutee students: Which skills should tutor student have;
- 5) elaboration of each personal experience: 4 open questions, in which students are asked to explain positive and negative aspects of the experience, problems and any suggestions.

Similarly, the questionnaire that is addressed to the Tutor is also divided into five parts:

- 1) generic profile: 3 multiple choice questions (gender, age and academic year of membership);
- 2) value of experience: 4 multiple choice questions where the tutor is asked how clear their role is, and how useful the experience in terms of growth and learning has been;
- 3) skills learned: 2 items to be valued by the skills of the student regarding what they have learned during the Tutor Peer course and how they applied it to clinical internship;

- 4) the role of the student tutors: 2 items of which a multiple-choice and open-ended one, investigating the characteristics and skills of the "good Tutor" according to the student involved;
- 5) Re-elaboration of each personal experience: 5 items; a multiple choice and four open questions, where students describe positive and negative aspects of their experiences and gave any suggestions to improve it.

The questions for both questionnaires were structured in a simple, clear language. Questionnaires were also pre-tested by three people who didn't find any critical problems in the completing of the test. The results from the pre-tests show that the estimated time for the completion of both questionnaires is 7/8 minutes.

Procedure

The questionnaires were created by software which have allowed us to send them to students via email. The questionnaires were addressed to students on an Excel file, that was received while maintaining the anonymity of the respondent.

Search results

Personal characteristics of the participants

The students who responded to the "Tutee Questionnaire" were 89/129 with a compliance of 69%. 78% were female, 22% male. The sample aged between 18-25 years was 85%, from 26-35 years 14% and 1% were 36-45 years. Of which 39% belonged to the 1st year of the course, 37% to the 2nd year of study and 24% to the 3rd year of the course (in the last ones only those who had not participated in the project as "student Tutors").

The "Tutor Questionnaire" demonstrated 15 students out of 15 who responded, for a total rate of 100%, all female. 93% of the sample were aged between 18-25 years, 7% between 26-35 years. As shown by the project, 100% of the students belonged to the 3rd year of the course.

Data "Tutee questionnaire"

In the aspect of utility, the experience was overall judged very positively by the students tutoring (47% answered "very much", 24% "a lot", 21% "fairly", 7%

"little", no one answered "very little"). In fact '85% of the sample declared "agreement" or "total agreement" in stating that the purpose of their learning experience was significant.

87% of respondents claimed to have experienced critical reflection, comparisons, personal growth and professional characteristics during the experience. According to 72% of the sample, the presence of the student tutors helped to make the clinical context of the Operating Units less intense regarding anxiety and more appropriate to their learning needs.

When in doubt, most of the students Tutee (70%) in the first instance turned to the student tutors, while 27% turned to the training assistant, and the remaining 13% turned to both or the nurses who were present.

In relation to "facilitating role" that the experienced students of the 3rd year will do for learning and skills development, 43 (48%) students answered that they "agreed" and 25 (28%) "fully agree"; the remainder (24%) were "uncertain" or "disagreed".

The experience of the peer internship has contributed positively in the technical, relational and educational development.

Finally, in relation to their personal experiences, 91% of students said that the presence of the student tutors represented an added value that should always be present for 'new' students; 9% of the sample said they were "uncertain" regarding this statement.

Students who had lived the Tutee experience were asked to indicate which skills were required to play the role of "Tutor student". Having the option in the questionnaire to indicate a maximum of 3 answers, showed that soft skills, technical, organizational, management groups, education and adequate training in peer tutoring are among the most important, together with good personal characteristics as humility, passion for the role and the profession, sincerity and transparency in relationships and good predisposition to listening and peer relationship tutorial.

Compared to the difficulties faced by students in the tutoring project of Peer Tutoring, 29 students (33%) have not found any, but 26 students (30%) claim to have found difficulties in the relationship with the student tutors; 16 students (18%) mentioned difficulties of organizational type (for example, and especially in the too high number of students assigned to an in-

dividual student Tutor); 7 (8%) instead indicated “personal” difficulties (for example, the initial fear, the difficulties of performing procedures never experienced previously or skepticism towards the project); 11 students did not answer the question.

Among the positive aspects mainly the figure of the student tutors are mentioned (71%): their availability, collaboration, patience, kindness, listening and their point of reference. Other aspects relate to the facilitation of learning, the organization of the experience and the development of personal characteristics.

Finally the Tutee students were asked to make suggestions in order to improve the quality of “peer training” in the future experience: 46 students (48%) have made proposals relating to the organization, such as fewer students for each tutor or an environment with optimal characteristics for the implementation of the project; 24 students (25%) have put forward proposals for the Tutor (such as training, selection criteria clearly defined); 6 students (6%) have asked to extend the experience even for internships which have not yet been scheduled, 3 (3%) people have not made any statement, and 1 (1%) student asked to eliminate the experience, 16 students did not respond.

Data “Questionnaire Tutor”

Even the majority of the Tutor students considered the experience particularly significant (53% said “very” significant; 40% “very much”), above all in terms of learning (93%).

These also declared with “agree” or “strongly agree” in saying that the experience of the internship peer is cause for critical reflection, comparison and personal/professional growth.

The internship peer allowed tutor students the development of skills, especially interpersonal and educational; to a lesser extent those technical and organizational. Students themselves have stated, however, in being aware that there are also necessary organizational skills and techniques, in fact among the areas where training would be useful, (28%) indicated organizational, (23%) group management, teaching and critical development (17%) both teaching and critical development, (9%) education and (6%) relational.

Among the difficulties faced, above all organizational aspects emerged (76%); to a lesser extent the

relational aspects with assistant training (12%), minor opportunities for personal learning in respect to procedures and clinical activities (because we are committed to managing the group of students) (6%) and difficulties “in developing critical thinking colleagues (students)” (6%).

On the plus side it was found that the experience was a source of satisfaction and personal growth (44%), it enabled the development of soft skills (28%), it had a positive effect on learning (24%) and it allowed students to grasp new organisational aspects (4%).

To whoever is going to live the experience as a Tutor, students have suggested they do not show anxiety, fear or worry (28%), to have a spirit of sacrifice (10%), patience (10%), to be organized (7%) and ready to listen (7%), team up and work with assistant training (7%), to be available (7%), proactive, enthusiastic, empathetic, authoritative and non-intrusive, willing to listen and understand if you are suited to the role (respectively 3%).

In comparison, however, with the guidelines to improve the quality of peer training, the students suggested improving their organization (45%), the training of assistants training (27%), and student Tutors (9%), of giving students the freedom to join or not to join the project, so no specific criteria for inclusion (9%), to improve relations between the degree program and operating units (5%) and provide a final detail of the experience (5%).

Discussion

Compared with the results collected and analyzed, it is totally possible to judge a positive experience of Peer Tutoring applied to the internship from the proposed clinical degree program in the section of Desenzano del Garda: as already mentioned, in fact, 91% of the Tutee students said that the presence of the student Tutor represented an added value that should always be present in the experience of internship. The student Tutors represented a true point of reference to turn to more, especially if well trained and prepared for the role. As already mentioned in literature (11), this is probably due to the fact that the student is more comfortable in the company of a peer, rather than with

a more experienced nurse who has, (according to the student), a much higher level of expectations. Moreover, the presence of the student Tutors allows both the student Tutor and the Student Tutee, the development of soft skills and education, as well as technical (the latter to a lesser extent to the student Tutors, probably because they are involved in the management of a group).

Other positive aspects regarded on one hand (student Tutor), is a strong personal gratification, the development of soft skills and the opportunity to seize new organizational realities experienced; on the other (student Tutee) the presence of the student Tutor (in terms of availability, patience, kindness, listening), facilitating learning and the development of personal characteristics that arise from the comparison between peers (which are probably inhibited in the student in comparison to training assistants and nurses experienced).

However, despite this, difficulties have emerged in the implementation of the methodology and the proposals made by students to improve the quality of this experience:

- Among the proposals for improvement, the possibility of reducing the number of Tutee students assigned to each student Tutor, 6-8 (as provided in the project) to 3-4 students. Since the organizational requirements of the degree course are many and complex, the number of students undoubtedly could not be reduced; also learning how to organise and work with a larger group, represents an opportunity for the student to prepare for the management of even the largest groups that the professional future may offer.
- The proposal to adjust the characteristics of the Operating Units were put forward, functionally regarding the performance of the internship: the adequate number of nurses, enough space and suitable environment, exchange of information and direct involvement with the Coordinators. Being aware of the real difficulties that the Italian public health faces throughout the years in respect to the first three features given, much more could be done in the exchange of information and the involvement of the coordinators, as

emerged and was suggested by another study conducted in the same Public Health Hospital (11), in the role of coordinator in the process of student learning.

- Among the various proposals put forward, the training of students Tutor has been a matter of considerable importance: the students ask for this to be formed with respect regarding the structure and functions of the organizations in which they are inserted, in the management of the groups, the educational skills and the techniques and teaching strategies. The training, along with specific objectives designated for the role of student Tutors, could increase the quality of the experience of Peer Tutoring by both participants involved (Tutor and Tutee). Regarding this, the identification of (mini) specific training courses organized within the hours of training (therefore without affecting the programs and study plans) could be further development of research with respect to this study. Along with the training of students, including the training of assistants training, it would bring added value that would help to improve the quality of experience (3).

Compared to the answers provided by a student Tutor, the definition of specific criteria for inclusion in the project would also be useful, as the apparently unjustified choice by the Tutor of teaching and involvement in the project was complained about. In contrast, however, other students initially skeptical, would be prepared to recommend the experience to anyone who has the desire to experience new skills and aspects of the profession.

The training and the identification of inclusion criteria for students Tutor therefore represent, the critical aspects of the experience: compared to the specific training of the student Tutor, since it is not provided in the curriculum, few moments are dedicated together with tutor teaching that guides the student to the group management; in contrast with the criteria of identification of the student in the role of tutor, the tutor of the course is the one who agrees to the plan and the personal and professional characteristics of the student and chooses and agrees with the latter the opportunity to insert them into the project.

Conclusions

Research conducted within the First Level Degree Course in nursing in the branch of Desenzano del Garda, belonging to the University of Brescia, has allowed us to collect important information about the usefulness and interventions to improve the quality of the project of Peer Tutoring. Summarily, the experience was considered very positively by the students involved, although several aspects deserve improvements.

Peer Tutoring is therefore a learning methodology that works and that can be applied in learning pathways for nursing students. The comparison among peers is a means through which the student learns in a friendly environment, with minor anxieties and apprehensions: learning experienced in this way, has a positive connotation in the mind of the student, because it is supported by positive emotions.

If properly supported by specific training and specification of the inclusion criteria for the student Tutors, the quality of the experience could further improve.

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