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# Learning to deliver compassionate care: the role of peer support for practice learning



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## Project aims:

- To develop the concept of peer learning as an effective vehicle whereby sharing experiences creates an inclusive learning environment enhancing academic and practice focused learning.
- To be less about teaching and more about learning and whilst this model is an experimental learning vehicle, it is flexible and can be adapted to respond to learner's needs.
- To address some features of the academic debate of how or if compassion could be taught and ultimately learned.

## Approach:

- Using the six core values of the Compassionate Caring Vision (DH, 2012), students worked in groups sharing their views and determining their definitions and beliefs, to create a template for compassionate care in their nursing careers.
- The format included whole and sub-groups, the latter facilitated by third year student nurses and the overall event by colleagues from practice (practice education leads) and senior lecturers from the adult and mental health nursing programmes.



"Delivering care compassionately and competently requires clear, safe practical and psychological boundaries; the ability to deliver [care compassionately] is enhanced further by seeking feedback, engaging in reflection, evaluating and action planning and underpinned by effective communication skills and professional conduct".  
(First year student).

## Context and background:

- Within the university, first year students currently undertake a shared module called Communication in a Diverse World. This module introduces students to caring and compassionate communication through skills such as listening, responding, being kind and sensitive.
- It offers an opportunity to be able to effectively communicate across disciplines providing occasions to value other's expertise and knowledge, establish necessary relationships, ask important questions, integrate shared learning, and grow in self-confidence while successfully working with others.
- There is an assumption that this will be maintained and developed and assessed in practice during practice placements.
- The authors believed that peer learning with adult and mental health students might provide a vehicle through which students could revisit these themes, exploring compassion and caring, and learning and developing their understanding with their peers and facilitators from practice and the university.



"Understanding the care you deliver is important; compassion demonstrates the positive delivery of care which is person centred, whilst recognising the extended demands on the role of the nurse, in the current, ever changing climate".  
(Third year student).

"The development of effective verbal and non verbal communication skills enhances self awareness and knowledge and understanding in relation to compassionate care, leading to expert communicators".  
(Third year student).

"The expression and demonstration of courage requires professionalism; it empowers us as student nurses to question practice and challenge roles and behaviours; this ensures service users receive safe, effective and compassionately delivered care".  
(First year student).

## Discussion

- Whilst it cannot be claimed that this is a new approach to support, many staff peer support mechanisms have died out in the past due to lack of structure, ideas, facilitation, group skills, leadership or motivation (Bond & Holland 1998). The need to learn from mistakes of the past building up stronger structures for such support mechanisms is perhaps more important than ever given the findings of the Francis report (2010, 2013).
- The introduction of peer support at the beginning of a nurse's career embeds this approach as an instinctive and accepted learning activity. As students begin to recognise the contradictions between learning in university and healthcare settings, peer learning and support offers a means of establishing personal and professional approaches for the delivery of person centred compassionate care (Figure 1).
- The delivery of compassionate care requires recognition, consideration and a sense of feeling valued (Cornwell et al., 2013). Students highlighted that it was the dynamic interaction between themselves and service users (Watson, 1989) which ultimately demonstrated that they had successfully learned to deliver compassionate care.

## Evaluation and Recommendations

- Participant evaluation established that the event format created a positive learning environment where (student) nurse disciplines co-worked to share ideas and experiences and provide multifaceted perspectives around their vision and the culture of compassionate care.
- In addition, participants offered an insightful 'measure' of differing and collective understanding around the concept and practice of compassionate care, its value and the importance of effective implementation in meeting individual service user needs.
- We are now in the process of embedding this approach into our university wide "Peer Assisted Learning (PAL)" strategy. We are exploring the opportunity for healthcare students to support each other across different professional disciplines.

