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Conceptualising nursing through simulation

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Background

Simulation has become an established pedagogy for teaching the fundamental skills of nursing, providing the learner with opportunity to acquire essential skills in an environment closely representing reality.

Whilst the concept of simulation is not new, there has been an increase in its use in nurse education both nationally and internationally (Jeffries, 2007; Kaakinen and Arwood, 2009; Warland, 2011; Lasater, 2012).

The Nursing and Midwifery Council have identified standards for the safe use of simulation and its inclusion as a contributory part to practice learning (NMC, 2007).

There is still a need for robust evidence in relation to the role of simulation as a teaching and learning approach.

Aims

This aim of this study was to explore the impact of simulation on learning for first year undergraduate nursing students and focus upon:

- The evolution of simulation in nurse education.
- The student experience of participating in simulation.
- Mentor and educator views of simulation.
- Theoretical underpinning of simulation learning.



Methods and Conceptual Approach

Conducted as a small-scale narrative case study, this study explores experiences of learning through simulation of a small number of undergraduate nursing students (n=9), nurse mentors (n=4) and nurse educators (n=4).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews supported by student reflections and observation of student OSCEs. Data analysis was achieved through thematic analysis and progressive focusing (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972).

The conceptual frameworks used for this study draw upon the work of Benner and Sutphen (2007) and Engeström (1994). Benner and Sutphen's work highlights the complex nature of situated knowledge in practice disciplines such as nursing. They suggest that knowledge is integrated within the curriculum through pedagogies of formation, interpretation, contextualisation and performance.

Engeström's work on activity theory and expansive learning, recognises the links between learning and the environment of work and highlights the possibilities for learning to inspire change, innovation and the creation of new ideas. His notion of expansive learning offers nurse education a way of reconceptualising the learning that occurs during simulation.

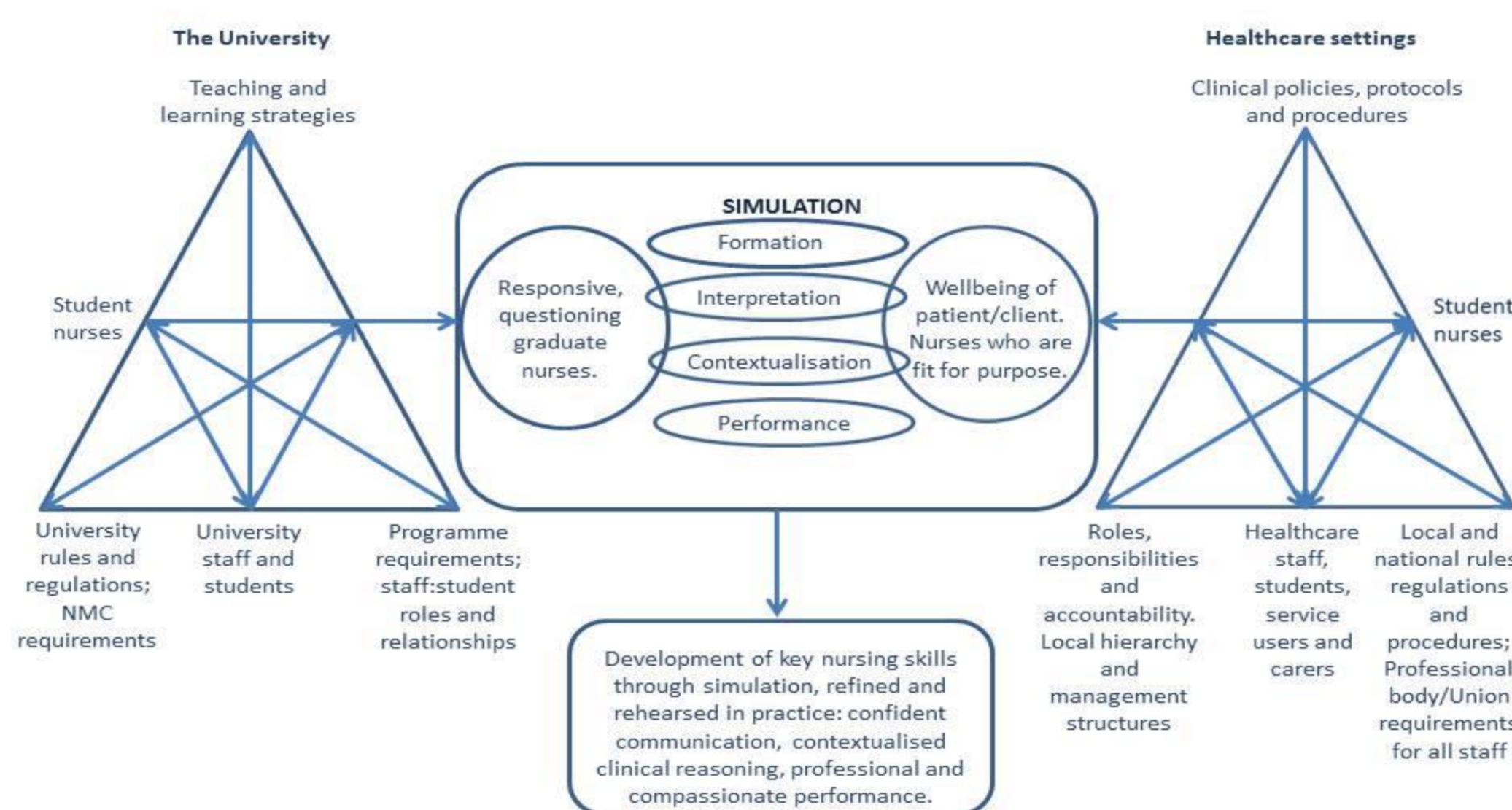
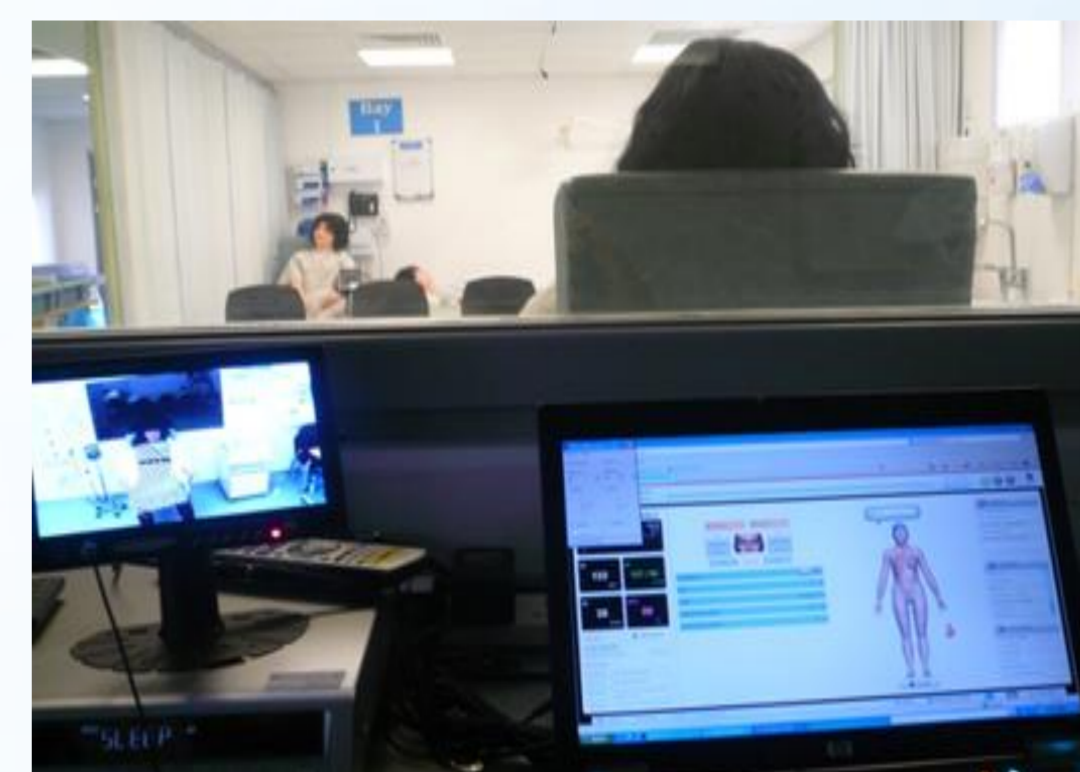


Figure 1: The interdependent activity systems of the university and healthcare settings



Results

Participants suggested that simulation had the potential to offer an environment in which the students could begin to practise the performance of nursing and bear witness to human events (performance) and acquire the skills of 'practical reasoning'.

They suggested that it offered the opportunity to consider the context of care (contextualisation), interpret nursing information (interpretation) and learn to develop their identities as nurses (formation). Students who demonstrated development in each of these pedagogies were successfully learning to become nurses.

Mentors and educators suggested that simulation may also offer an opportunity to support 'reflective transfer' and enable students to explore the contradictions between the activity systems of the university and healthcare settings as they learned and developed their nursing practice.

Discussion

Results from the study support the contribution of this pedagogical model towards elucidation of an effective and expansive approach to learning in nurse education. They also help to illustrate the different activity systems to which student nurses are exposed, and the expansive learning process that can occur between these systems, and is experienced by students as they learn to be nurses. (See Figure 1).

An expansive approach to learning through simulation may offer an environment where students can be supported to explore and examine the role of the student nurse and the responsibilities incumbent upon them in that role to deliver safe, evidence-based nursing care.

Clearly, if the aim of simulation is to enable students to learn and begin to develop their identities as nurses in an environment that authentically mimics the clinical nursing environment, then learning must be adequately theorised, supported and evaluated.

Conclusion

Simulation offers potential for learning nursing. In order to be effective, however, such activity needs to have a solid theoretical foundation. Taking a root and branch approach, the pedagogies of formation, interpretation, contextualisation and performance, could helpfully revise and refresh present approaches to simulation learning.

The opportunity to use simulation to explore patient care supported by these pedagogies offers an expansive approach to learning and a contrast to the linear task orientated approaches of the past. This might offer a more liberating experience for nurse educators and an integrative experience for nurse mentors and students.

Having a greater understanding of the learning that occurs through simulation experiences may enable educators and practitioners to harness the potential of simulation for the development of a competent, confident and caring nursing workforce.

Simulation: a learning pedagogy for nursing

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Background

Analysis of the literature shows that simulation is considered more in relation to teaching than learning.

Many studies focus upon the acquisition of skills and view simulation as an opportunity to teach clinical nursing skills (Alinier et al., 2004; Schoening et al., 2006). Research studies by Lasater (2007) and Wong and Chung (2002) have begun to consider the cognitive perspective of learning through simulation. This is a positive step.

However, there is also a need for research that studies the learning that occurs through simulation in terms of what students learn and how that learning occurs and how students, practitioners, and patients perceive that learning

Aim

My doctoral research explores the impact of simulation upon learning for undergraduate adult nursing students. Simulation provides a variety of opportunities for students as they learn and develop their nursing skills (Berragan 2011). Literature reviews by Kaakinen and Arwood (2009), Cant and Cooper (2010) and my own literature searches demonstrate that, although nascent, there is a developing body of literature, which has as its focus simulation and learning for nurse education.

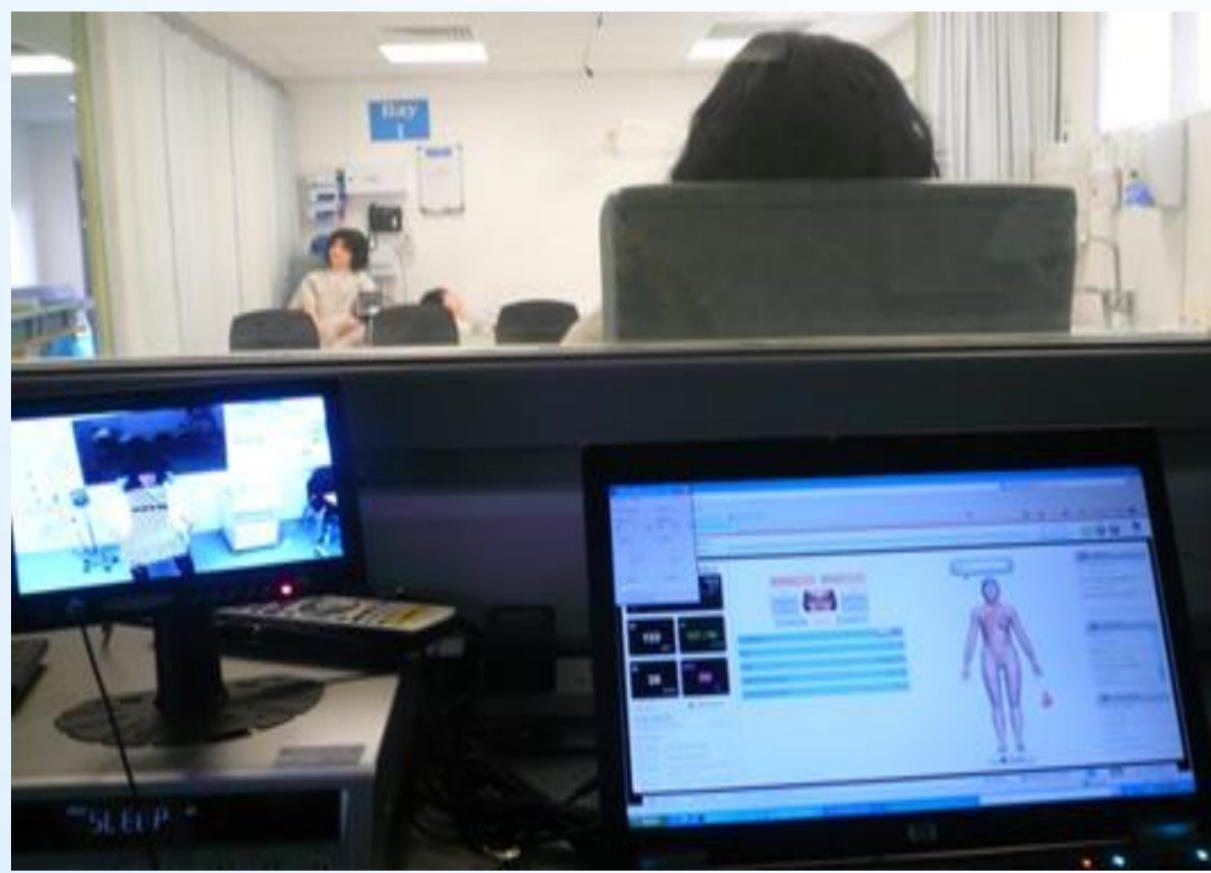
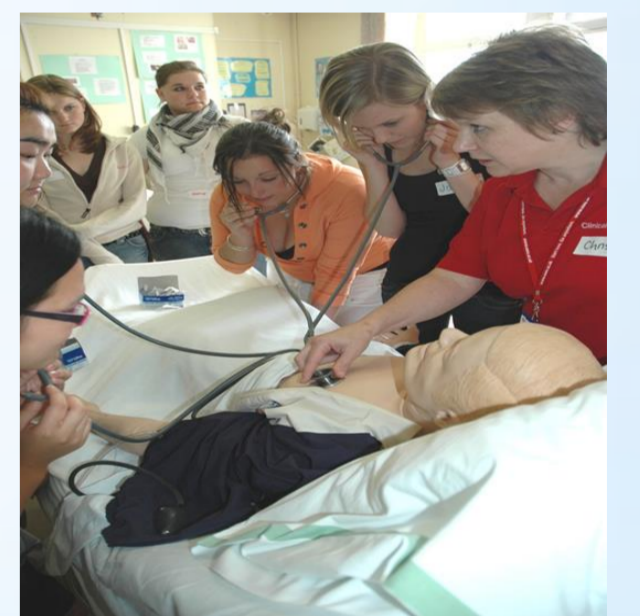


Simulation: towards an expansive model of learning

Learning for student nurses requires engagement with the activity systems (unit of analysis) of the university and the clinical practice environment. This may often provide a source of tension when the academic ideal of nursing taught in university conflicts with the reality of clinical practice.

This illustrates another of Engstrom's (2001) principles contradictions as sources of change and development through which an opportunity for expansive learning is created. Similarly, constant change within health care provision which requires students to adapt and think flexibly about their professional work are representative of the principle of historicity of activity. The inter-professional nature of health care and the relationship between the student and their nurse mentor typifies the principle of multi-voicedness.

Simulation experiences provide an opportunity for expansive learning, where students can be supported to consider the contradictions between the two systems leading potentially to change and development in both (Haigh 2007).



Pedagogies for Professional Practice Learning

The work of Patricia Benner and Molly Sutphen (2007) highlights the complex nature of situated knowledge in practice disciplines such as nursing.

They emphasize that such knowledge cannot be simply divided into categories of cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills (Bloom 1968), but must be constantly integrated within the curriculum through pedagogies of interpretation, formation, contextualization and performance.

These pedagogies offer a framework, which may enhance our understanding of the impact of simulation upon students who are learning to be nurses.

Results

Results from the study support the contribution of two conceptual models towards the elucidation of an effective and expansive approach to learning in nurse education.

Benner and Sutphen's professional practice learning model offers clarity in terms of four pedagogies that provide articulation of learning for nursing students as they engage in simulation activities.

Activity theory and an expansive approach to learning through simulation may offer an environment where students can be supported to explore and examine the role of the student nurse and the responsibilities incumbent upon them in that role to deliver safe, evidence-based nursing care.

Discussion

My analysis of the literature has shown that simulation offers different ways of conceptualizing learning.

Explicit examination of theories of learning may therefore be useful for informing the development of simulation for nurse education and the focus of future research on simulation.

My attention has been drawn particularly to professional practice learning and expansive learning models. These approaches highlight possibilities and raise questions, encouraging engagement with the conceptualization of learning through simulation.

In order to capture this learning and communicate the potential of this learning environment, simulation must be adequately theorised, supported and evaluated for nursing curricula.