Using Peer Tutoring Program in the Basic Skills Laboratory and Clinical Practice: Experience of Nursing Students

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Abstract

Background: The peer tutoring program in the clinical and basic skill laboratory enhances the student's satisfaction by reducing their individual anxieties.

Aim: The study was carried out in order to evaluate the efficiency of peer tutoring program that was applied to improve the skills of students at clinical skills laboratory and clinical practice.

Methods: In the study, descriptive phenomenological approach was used. Six third-year students were selected as tutors, and in-depth focus group interviews were conducted with 22 second-year students who participated in the peer tutoring program. The study was carried out in the skills laboratory in June 2016, within the scope of the "Nursing Fundamentals" course, in the context of basic skills and nursing care plan preparation in clinical applications. Content analysis revealed categories, themes, and sub-themes.

Results: Results of the study were presented in the following 4 themes and sub-themes: (1) "comfortable learning environment" (one of us, convenient communication), (2) "increasing social interaction" (accessible, friendly approach), (3) "increase in self-confidence" (feeling accomplished), and (4) "effects in clinical practice" (clinical environment, lack of knowledge).

Conclusion: In the study, it was determined that the use of the peer tutoring program increased the students' self-confidence and social interaction to work in a comfortable learning environment without experiencing any judgment and stress, and it also facilitated learning.

Keywords: Peer, tutoring program, basic skills laboratory, clinical practice, nursing students

Introduction

The literature reveals the many benefits of Basic skill laboratories (BSL), both enabling students to observe, practicing and learning, and providing a safe learning environment.[1-6] BSL are now in a real environment feature, in such a way that the student can develop his/her psychomotor and critical thinking skills before meeting the real patient. Because, in order to have effective learning, learning environment must be as realistic as possible.[7] BSL create a learning and teaching environment to prepare students for the clinical workplace.[2,8,9] It is a widely known fact that students never feel ready and experience great amount of stress before the initial clinical experience. Students need to gain basic skills before clinical experience for both patient safety and their professional development. BSL help students in reducing anxiety levels and improving psychomotor skills.[1,4,10-12]

BSL environment allow students to repeat an action again and again, and also it allows tolerating of some serious mistakes that are intolerable with living patients. BSL are comfortable environment for students since they feel no fear of harming a patient, thus increasing the competency levels of students.[13] It is highly important and expected that students should achieve certain objectives at laboratory environment.[14] It is known that student learns more easily where the learning potential is high and in a low-stress environment. It is important to control stressful situations as much as possible in BSL. Working with students in the BSL can increase stress. For this reason, there are some methods used to make the learning environment more positive. One of these methods

is learning with peer support.[15-19] Peer learning is a planned training method for groups whose members have equal status and similar language, attributes, and behaviors that can be applied for creating change in their knowledge, behaviors, and attributes. In peer learning, students learn from their peers or learn together with their peers in informal ways.[20] Peer tutors encourage students to explain their views by comforting them.[15,20-23] In peer learning, tutors do not award or punish the students, thus making the practice and learning environment comfortable for students. Peer tutors reduce the personal anxieties of the students and enhance their satisfaction levels. Some studies revealed that forming pairs with lower class students and higher ones gives psychological support and helps in their professional and personal development. Peer teaching methodology produces reciprocal benefits in terms of academic performance while also enhancing the learning experience of those being taught.[15,24,25] In addition, the use of peer teaching can foster the development of effective teaching skills.[26]

The literature demonstrates that peer learning programs, which are alternatives for conventional methods, might be used for different age groups, and they facilitate learning skills.[21,27,28] Peer learning is not a new concept and has been used in some schools for theorical, practical,[29,30] and skills training.[31-33] As for nursing education, on the other hand, peer learning programs are applied mostly in theoretical[21,25,34,35] and clinical education.[24,34,36] It has been stated that peer learning increases self-confidence and supports both motor and cognitive development positively.[18,23,27,37,38] It has even been emphasized that working with tutors prevents academically unsuccessful students from leaving school.[21-26,36] Use of peer learning in skills education at BSL is rather limited.[26] It has been noted that peer learning is absolutely beneficial in laboratory environment; however, it has been emphasized that it needs to be developed.[26] In Turkey, the use of BSL and CP in nursing education is gaining importance in order to increase the number of students and the limited number of educators and, most importantly, to ensure patient safety. But the number of studies on the use of this tutoring program in nursing education is insufficient in our country. Especially, no data were obtained about the use of peer learning in BSL and clinical practice. The purpose of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how students perceived their experiences using peer tutoring program in the BSL and CP.

Methods

Study Design

The descriptive phenomenological approach was used. The phenomenological approach focuses on the meaning of lived experience and obtains commonalities and shared meanings. Focus groups are ideal in capturing the interaction between participants who share experience and perspectives and in exploring beliefs and attitudes. Thus, qualitative descriptive design was considered as the most appropriate method to meet the purpose of this study.

Settings, Participants, and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used in this study. Peer tutoring program has been started at 2015-2016 season for second-grade nursing students at nursing school to enable them to work with peer tutors in BSL and CP. The total number of second-grade nursing students was 30, and 22 students wanted to participate in the peer tutoring program. Eight students who did not agree to participate in the study on a voluntary basis were not included. The number of tutors was determined by the university within a certain quota. Interviews were conducted for both students and tutors who volunteerd, and 6 tutors were selected for 22 students.

Tutor Selection

Tutor students who had a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of at least 3.0 and who had received a grade of "A" or above in the course(s) they will tutor or in comparable courses. Tutor students had good academic performance and agreed to abide by all university policies and were well qualified to communicate their knowledge in the field. After tutor have applied, we got approval from the department chair and/or proffessor for the courses they wished to tutor. Selected tutors signed a tutor contract and attended tutor orientation. In this orientation program, the list of skills to be applied by instructors and tutors to students was reviewed. The peer tutors were trained on how to communicate with their peers and how to teach skills to them by instructors. Six students from third and fourth grades, having A or A+ grades, using communication skills well, having good interpersonal relations, working actively in clinical practices were selected as tutors, and the views of instructors were granted as well. After the selection of tutor students, instructors responsible for clinical laboratory education organized a meeting with them. In these meetings, tutors were informed about their selection criteria, their roles, what sort of training they are expected to provide, and how they should communicate with students. After obtaining positive feedbacks, the second-grade students were chosen randomly. The working days and hours of teaching were organized in a weekly schedule, and also the program of the term was prepared. The students were taught hand washing, wearing sterile gloves, sterile package opening, hygiene applications, urinary catheterization, enema, vital signs, mobilization, respiratory applications, nasogastric tube placement, injection and intravenous medication administration skills, and nursing care in clinical by tutors. After the students completed the practices with their own instructors in the laboratory, they had the opportunity to repeat the skills they learned with the tutors as many times as they wanted. According to the program, each tutor worked 4 hours a week, 4 days a week, and for 4 hours in total. The support program continued for 14 weeks during the course, with the topics of skills determined by the instructor on a weekly basis. All the skill practices were carried out at BSL. In addition to practicing these skills, the students also received support for the problems they encountered in clinical practice and to prepare nursing care plans. Working hours were determined after the end of the lectures and allowed students to meet their social needs. Tutors got consultation from responsible instructors before practising each skill on the points that should be paid attention, important points that should be cared in checklists of skills, and on the points that the tutors should support and improve. Tutors checked the attendance of "tutees" and delivered feedback about the performance of the students at the laboratory to the responsible instructors. Tutors and students regularly gave short written feedback to the instructor on their study performance and the functioning of the program at BSL at the end of each week. At the end of the semester, focus group interviews were conducted with 22 volunteer students as 3 groups, each consisting of 7-8 students. After 22 students were interviewed, the data reached the saturation point, and it was decided that the data was sufficient.

Data Collection

A silent room was chosen for the focus group interviews. Semistructured interview form was utilized in the study. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were recorded with an audio recorder. The interviews were completed in June 2016.

The interviews started with the following questions:

- Could you tell us your experience with peer tutors please?
- What are the advantanges and benefits of working with peer tutors?
- Do you have any difficulty with peer tutors while you are working?

Data Analyses

First, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Once the raw data were gathered, 3 authors created their codes and themes by reading the raw data. The data have been analyzed by using the qualitative content analysis method. The data were analyzed using the content analysis proposed by Strauss and Corbin.[39] Content analysis is based on the inductive analysis of similar data and the combination and interpretation of data within certain categories and themes. The researchers independently analyzed the same data and compared their findings. One of the authors is well experienced in qualitative research methodology. First, the data were coded by 3 different researchers; the themes and sub-themes were formed after the coding process and compared. After the themes were created, the opinions of 2 experts were taken. The interviews were numbered to hide the identities of the students and the students were coded as "S" and "1" (for example, S1, S2). In the final step, the second author reviewed the overall thematic taxonomy. Then, all data were interpreted to produce the report. This study used the consolidated criteria to report qualitative data. A rigorous transcription process and classification and analysis of results were carried out according to the usual methodology.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted for the study by Koç University Ethical Board (date: 15.12.2014, no: 2014.157.IRB3.108). The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration Principles by underlining that students' personal details would remain confidential and that they might leave the study at any time they liked. None of the personal information, such as names and identifications, was disclosed anywhere. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants who participated in this study.

Results

Themes related to inductive analysis, students' peer tutoring program experiences, and tutors' thought experiences were created. The themes and sub-themes were categorized and labeled according to the nature of students' peer tutoring program vs. tutors' experiences taking into account the study aim. The experiences of the students participating in the tutoring program are presented in Table 1, supporting each main theme with sub-themes.

Theme 1: Comfortable Learning Environment

Sub-Theme 1: One of Us

Students have stated that working with peers is a great advantage for them. They have also emphasized that they express themselves comfortably since tutors are their friends who are just 2 grades higher. Hence, the students feel free to communicate with the tutors. Students have also stated that their tutors being students just like them facilitates the learning environment.

"*They are just 2 grades higher than us. There is not too much difference between us indeed however they are more experienced and show us our mistakes.*" (S1)

"*Students commonly hesitate to ask quesitons to the instructors. They think if it is a logical question or it is too simple to ask. However, we can share anything without hesitation with tutors since they are 'one of us.'*"(S2)

"*Because they are one of us, they made the same mistakes as we do now a in previous years. "That is; they understand us very well even more than our instructors. They can observe unclear points and their reason.*" (S3)

Sub-Theme 2: Convenient Communication

Students have remarked that they feel comfortable communicating with their tutors and asking them questions easily. Also, tutors ensured a friendly environment in the laboratory that reduced the stress the students experience with instructors.

"*Working with tutors are easier for us. We feel stressful with instructors. We can ask tutors anything in detailed.*" (S4)

"*Moreover; we can say and ask anything without hesitation. Since they are our peers, we do not feel the stress of an instructor. So feeling comfortable makes us more active.*" (S1)

Table 1. Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Meanings
Comfortable learning environment	- One of us - Convenient communication	"*......However, we can share anything without hesitation with tutors since they are 'one of us'*" "*Working with tutors are easier for us. We can ask tutors anything in detailed*"
Increased social interaction	- Accessible - Friendly approach	- *They help us whenever we need* - *We share anything with tutors that we can not with instructors. We ask them anything we want*
Increase of self-confidence	- Feeling accomplished	- *I feel I can do it instead of feeling pessimistically*
Effects in clinical practice	- Clinical environment - Lack of knowledge	- *The tutors are familiar with the environment of the ...* - *Sometimes, they forget or skip some parts of an implementation*

Theme 2: Increasing Social Interaction

Sub-Theme 1: Accessible
Students have pointed out that they can easily find their tutors even out of the laboratories and establish a continuous interaciton with them thanks to technology and plan their working hours as they want. According to students, tutors treat them responsibly and considerately that promotes the learning.

"*They are always helpful to us. They always have time for us whenever we want to work. When we could not work, they show us everything later. They send us photos of the work. They do something extra for us. Sometimes, we work even at midnight in the dormitory.*" *(S5)*

"*In fact, they do not have to help us apart from tutorial hours. Nevertheless, they do not think about working hours. They help us whenever we need. They treat us rather considerately.*" *(S6)*

Sub-Theme 2: Friendly Approach
The students stated that their communication skills and relationships with their friends greatly improved thanks to the tutoring program. They also stated that the tutors treat them not only as teachers but also as mentors.

"*We are not so close before. This programme made us closer to higher classes. Now we work not only with our responsible tutors but with other tutors also. So that the communication between us improved dramatically.*" *(S7)*

"*We share anything with tutors that we can not with instructors. We ask them anything we want.*" *(S8)*

"*We can get in touch with them via phone or Whatsapp. After that we determine an appropriate time. Since everyone do the same we can work in private with our tutors.*" *(S9)*

Theme 3: Increase of Self-Confidence

Sub-Theme 1: Feeling Accomplished
Students have indicated that repetitions promote their learning, and they feel comfortable in the laboratories. Moreover, it reduces the possibility of applying incorrect interventions.

"*For instance, when you enter the room of the patient to establish a vascular access, I feel I can do it instead of feeling pessimistically.*" *(S10)*

"*Additionally, working with one of our peers before working with the instructor enhance our self-confidency. We manage much more confident in the laboratory. So that it is absolutely

beneficial for us.*" *(S10)*

"*Practice. Absolutely. The most important thing is practice. For example; we went to the lab for the first time in order to establish a vascular access. The instructor did it and we just watched him. We can not keep the whole process in mind. But we can learn it easily through practice.*" *(S11)*

"*... since we have a chance to try it again and again, I established vascular access many times in my first interning.*" *(S12)*

Theme 4: Effects in Clinical Practice

Sub-Theme 1: Clinical Environment
Students have pointed out that tutors' feedback about the clinical environment, interventions, and equipment and tools used in clinics is absolutely useful for them.

"*The tutors are familiar with the environment of the ....Hospital since they serve here as interns. They explain us which drug or tool are used. They also warn us about the possible risks that we can encounter and what we should do in such situations. We are getting more and more practical day by day.*" *(S13)*

Sub-Theme 2: Lack of Knowledge
Only 1 student prefered to work with instructor instead of tutors. The reason for his preference is that knowledge and experience of the instructors are much better than that of tutors. Other students, on the other hand, admitted tutors' lack of enough knowledge, but it did not matter for them. Tutors have stated explicitly their lack of knowledge on certain issues; however, they search the topics to close the gap.

"*They do not know every aspect of a certain subject. They have some shortages of course. Sometimes, they forget or skip some parts of an implementation. For instance; we handle an intervention and we think that it has finished. But when we look at the checklist we notice that some parts of the intervention has been forgotten or skipped. So; we do it from the very beginning.*" *(S14)*

Discussion

This study has indicated that students have highly benefited from tutoring program applied at clinical skills laboratory. Students have expressed that working with tutors at the laboratory reduces their stress and promotes their communication skills. Students have also indicated that tutors' being students just like them facilitates the learning environment, and they are able to ask any questions they like without hesitation. They have defined tutors as "one of us."

It is a commonly known fact that students experience stress in their education.[23,36] Serving as an intern and working in a laboratory environment are the main factors which increase the level of stress they experience. It has been proved that reducing the stress they feel is only possible by generating a positive learning environment both in clinics and in laboratories. Before the beginning of a clinical application, students feel great amount of stress since they have to deal with real living patients. Studies show that working with tutors reduces students' stress levels and allows them acquire certain skills easily as well as increases their self-confidence.[20,23,25,26,40] Not only clinics but the laboratories also might include stress factor, because, prior to interning, students have been expected to realize all the process exactly and correctly. Hence, students should have opportunities for trial and correct their mistakes. During peer training, students can comfortably tell each other their mistakes or shortages, and they get opportuninty to try the process again and again. Studies have suggested that peer training reduces stress and generates a more effective learning environment and lets students acquire certain skills much more easily.[21,28] It has also been emphasized that students feel more comfortable working with their more experienced peers and asking any question they like that develops a cooperative learning environment.[15,16,21,27,28] As the result of interviews, it has been deduced that the most important profit for students is the increase of their self-confidence. Thanks to continuous repetition in labs, students feel themselves comfortable in clinics. Students have indicated that they can remember the steps of an implementation easily due to experience they gain in labs. Studies have emphasized the importance of peer training to enhance self-confidence.[15,27,28,31] The study conducted

by Goldsmith et al[16] pointed out that peer training increases self-confidence for practising the skills.

Students have also underlined that such a program provides them not only educational but also social contribution. They develop close relations with higher classes and they share something related with social life with higher classes. Similarly, in the study conducted by Bensfield et al.[41] it was stated that students improved their skills both professionally and individually. Students have also reported that they interact with each other permanently via ""Whats up" group. They have additionally notified that tutors should be selected appropriately, help them whenever they need, have good communication skills, and be a suitable role model to them. In other studies, on the same issue, students indicated that they have good relations with their tutors and the tutors affect their professional development in a positive way.[26,41] Students have emphasized that tutors sharing their own experiences is rather useful for students because tutors have an opportunity to work with instructors and have much more experience on clinical practice. Tutors have informed the students on possible cases and interventions occuring in clinics. In some studies, it has been implied that tutors gain different roles such as consultant or mentors.[15,25,28]

Conclusion

In the present study, it has been clearly put forth that peer tutoring program is useful and beneficial for students. It facilitates the learning process since it allows continuous repetition. Students learn in a stress-free environment without any evaluation which promotes learning process. Specifically, some clinical implementations requiring the use of certain skills need to be repeated many times which is allowed in peer education. It might be argued that a well-stuctured tutoring model should be utilized efficiently in order to promote skill development in BSL and CP and to enhance self-confidence of students.

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