Crossing the threshold
Students’ experiences of the transition from student to staff nurse
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What are students’ experiences of the transition to qualified nurse?
What mechanisms and resources do they use to support their transition?
How can transition theory help us better understand these experiences?

Student to staff nurse
Current policy in the health services emphasises students’ fitness to practice at the point of registration. Research indicates that students find this transition stressful. Due to the massive investment in nurse education and the need to retain nurses in the workforce, we wanted to understand the factors that might better support transition.

“Some one says ‘It’s the phone, they want to speak to the nurse in charge’ and you think ‘God that’s me!’”

Using telephone interviews with former students of The Open University part-time, distance learning, pre-registration nursing programme, we explored nurses’ experiences of their first 3-6 months of qualified practice. A number of recurring themes emerged which were then exposed to theoretical analysis using Van Gennep’s theory of transition and Bridges’ work on organisational change.

Van Gennep described the process of transition in terms of three phases:
- separation
- transition
- incorporation.

We were curious as to whether this framework would illuminate students’ experiences of transition. We also drew on Bridges’ representation of transition as ‘overlapping strata’.

Research findings
Four main themes emerged from our analysis of students’ experiences:

In at the deep end  Here students talked of their feelings associated with their increased accountability.

Changing identities  As sponsored Health Care Assistants (HCA), Open University nursing students juggle the transition from HCA to student and then to staff nurse. Many talked about the impact of this on former HCA colleagues, and of the significance of the uniform as a symbol defining identity.

Coming together  Participants talked of how things started to come together, their growing confidence and their satisfaction of applying their knowledge in practice.

Scaffolding  These were the formal and informal support structures participants described as useful during their transition e.g. education, organisational support, individual support of mentors and family.

We have depicted here how, in the real and messy world of clinical practice, the whole process of transition can be overlapping.

“...through fresh eyes because you are newly trained.”

“I think I have just got to let my practice talk.”

Find out more about this project and the Practice-based Professional Learning CETL at our web site:

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