Clinical experience is an essential element of undergraduate nursing programs. Clinical laboratories are a common approach to learning, aiming to assist students to develop clinical nursing skills through simulation of the clinical setting and experiences. However little research has been conducted into the effectiveness of clinical laboratory classes for student learning and whether the laboratory classes actually play a part in linking theory to practice. The focus of this study is to investigate the experiences of a cohort of first year Bachelor of Nursing students during their first clinical placement in small rural hospitals. The objective of the research is to identify if there is a correlation between what the students learnt in clinical laboratory classes before their first clinical placement and what they practiced and observed in the clinical setting. The intent was to determine if the clinical laboratory classes helped the students to integrate theory and practice in the clinical nursing setting. When students embark on their first clinical placement they may experience dissonance between the academic ideal of nursing practice and the reality of the clinical setting. There are many factors that impact on the degree of satisfaction felt by students on clinical placement. These include a feeling of acceptance into the clinical setting, friendliness of staff, feeling like part of a team, ‘hands –on’ practice to develop competence and the development of confidence. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire following their placement, write a reflective journal of their clinical experience and participate in reflective post placement focus groups. This study will inform the pedagogy of clinical nursing laboratories and examine whether the disparity between theory and practice does in fact exist in this case.
Are clinical laboratory activities preparing nursing students for the reality of the clinical practice setting?

CATHY

PP1 INTRODUCTION

Clinical laboratories are a commonly used approach to assist students to develop clinical nursing skills. However little research has been conducted into the effectiveness of clinical laboratory classes for student learning and whether the laboratory classes actually play a part in linking theory to practice (Wellard, Woolf, Gleeson, 2007). When students embark on their first clinical placement they may experience dissonance between the academic ideal of the nursing practice they expect and the reality of the clinical setting (Meyer & Yu, 2005).
CATHY

PP 2 RESEARCH STUDY

The focus of this study was to investigate the experiences of a cohort of first year Bachelor of Nursing students during their first clinical placement in small rural hospitals. The objectives of the research were to identify if there is a correlation between what the students learnt in the first session clinical laboratory classes before their first clinical placement and what they practiced in the clinical setting.

The students were asked to complete a questionnaire following their placement. This paper reports the results of the questionnaire, exploring the students’ reflections post placement on their preparedness for their clinical placement.
LYN

PP3 LITERATURE REVIEW

There has long been a general trend of support for the concept of a theory/practice gap in undergraduate nurse education programs, with assertions that students are unable to transfer their university acquired knowledge to the clinical setting or are inadequately prepared for clinical placements by the university (Maben, Lattere and Clark 2006)
They concluded that clinical laboratories are a commonly adapted strategy for teaching clinical skills to nurses in undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing programs.

Nursing laboratory sessions are generally small group based and offer a safe learning environment for students. This environment affords students the opportunity to work together in cooperation and develop communication and problem solving skills (Ham, O’Rourke & Ellen 2004).

Freeth and Fry (2005) They also found that practice in laboratory classes reduced students’ anxiety and increased proficiency as feedback was beneficial to learning.
LYN

PP5 LITERATURE REVIEW

The transition from the theoretical setting to the clinical practice site is commonly a time of apprehension for nursing students, particularly on their first placement. Benner asserts that novices have no experience with scenarios that they encounter in the clinical setting and so have a lack of understanding of how to apply what they have learnt to the real situations that arise (Benner, 2001).
LYN

PP6 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are few studies that examine nursing students’ experiences of learning skills in the clinical laboratories and the clinical setting (Alteren & Bjork, 2006). Alteren and Bjork (2006), claim that the learning that allows for the transfer of knowledge and skills from the clinical laboratory setting to the clinical practice setting is complex.

Morgan (2006) examined how student nurses experienced their first practice placement. The aim was to ascertain if clinical skills laboratory sessions prior to the first placement helped students to integrate theory into practice during their first clinical placement.
CATHY

PP7 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate if nursing students undertaking their first clinical placement for the Bachelor of Nursing Course were able to relate the theory and practice learnt in the university clinical laboratory classes to the clinical practice setting. The methodological design was a phenomenological approach using the Heideggarian model which attempts to interpret the understandings of the human experience (Dickson et al 2006). It allowed the students to reflect upon their experiences gained during their first placement. Purposeful sampling was used with the student cohort undertaking their first clinical placement.

The questionnaire was distributed to 21 students. 18 were returned (86% of the population). The student questionnaire contained 12 five-point likert scale responses as well as 6 open ended responses.
CATHY

PP8 METHODOLOGY

The questions explored the students’ perspectives of the degree to which:

- the theoretical component of the subject (lectures and tutorial classes) prepared them for the clinical placement;
- the practical laboratory classes prepared them for the clinical placement;
- the practical laboratory classes prepared them to undertake specific skills – blood pressure (BP); temperature, pulse and respiration (TPR), urinalysis (U/A), hand washing, moving patients, washing patients in bed and bed making;
- the difference/discrepancies between what was taught in lectures and practiced in clinical laboratory classes and what happens in the clinical setting;
- what could be changed in the clinical laboratory classes to increase the opportunity to learn;
- which aspects of the clinical laboratory classes were most and least useful and why; and,

As the student cohort was small the results may not be able to be replicated and this may influence the reliability and validity of the study.

CSU Research Output
http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au
LYN

PP9 RESULTS

Using the likert scale, most questions received a 95% - 100% rating of strongly agree or agree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lab classes prepared me for clinical placement</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab classes prepared me to undertake specific skills – BP, TPR, U/A, handwashing</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab classes prepared me to undertake specific skills – washing in bed, bed making</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab classes prepared me to undertake specific skills – moving patients</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LYN
PP10 RESULTS

Thematic data analysis was used to find meaning in the written responses to questions.

The themes that emerged from the analysis were that there was little difference or discrepancy between what was taught in lectures and practised in clinical laboratory classes and what happens in the clinical setting; few suggestions were made as to what could be changed in the clinical laboratory classes to increase the opportunity to learn; and, the exercises on communication and history taking in the laboratory classes did help students to relate to patients and staff in the clinical setting. Comments included, “only difference was that it was a little faster”. “Sometimes the nurses would say do what I say not what I do”, but the students who made these comments did not recognise differences in practice.
However discussion in the laboratory practice was that many RN’s are concerned around 37.5°C. Several students highlighted that what they were told in the laboratory practice was found to be the case.

The practice of making beds that occurred in the clinical laboratories had raised the existence of idiosyncrasies amongst staff and various clinical sites, for example tying a knot in the top underneath side of the bottom sheet.

One participant observed that the staff in the clinical setting did not use the equipment that the students had been taught to use and told must be used to protect themselves.
One discrepancy noted by students included the observation that doctors did not wash their hands between examining patients.

Suggestions as to how the laboratory classes could be improved to prepare students for the clinical setting were to increase the amount of simulation around the skills.

There were many comments regarding the need for both lectures and clinical laboratory classes to prepare students for the clinical placement setting.
<p>| | |</p>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“learning being enhanced by learning the</td>
<td>“learning being enhanced by learning the</td>
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<tr>
<td>“why and how’ and then practicing it.”</td>
<td>“why and how’ and then practicing it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I need to be shown first and then practice</td>
<td>“I need to be shown first and then practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with supervision a few times”.</td>
<td>with supervision a few times”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“hands on making it easier to absorb the information”</td>
<td>“hands on making it easier to absorb the information”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I tend to learn best and remember better when I have</td>
<td>“I tend to learn best and remember better when I have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participated in activities during the lab classes”.</td>
<td>participated in activities during the lab classes”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“learning how it felt to be a patient” and</td>
<td>“learning how it felt to be a patient” and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“practicing on other class mates”</td>
<td>“practicing on other class mates”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“focus on cause and effect, the holistic view of nursing”</td>
<td>“focus on cause and effect, the holistic view of nursing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“a relaxed and comfortable setting to learn and enjoyable”</td>
<td>“a relaxed and comfortable setting to learn and enjoyable”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They cited examples of when nurses in the clinical settings reinforced the
information gained from the clinical laboratories:

| “most helpful to reflect back on what my teacher had correctly informed me of” |
| “nurses agreed with teacher that need to be able to do manual BP’s” as well as electronic measurements. |

Areas where the clinical laboratories were least useful in their preparation were noted as:

| “practicing on mannequins was ineffective as they cannot respond” |
| “Shifting an older person is much harder than a younger person”. Students had practised manual handling on each other in the labs. |

Communication and documentation were recognised as being significant aspects of the nurse’s role, and comments of support
for laboratory activities that involved these nursing skills were positive.

It was encouraging to read some comments that showed the development of critical thinking. For example, “The nurses put bed rails up on a confused man and I thought he might try to climb over and fall. I remembered they can sometimes be harmful. When I told the nurse of my concerns for the man she was impressed that I thought about the risk for this man”.
CATHY

PP13 DISCUSSION

It is often expected that nursing students will have difficulty relating theory to practice during clinical placements. However a study by Morgan (2006) examining how nursing students experienced their first practice placement in a large Irish hospital, found this to be untrue. They found that students’ comments supported the role of clinical laboratory classes as playing an essential role in preparing them for practice and enabling them to link what they had learnt to the activities in the ward.
15 of the 21 students given the questionnaire had no previous nursing experience before the placement while 6 had previous Assistant in Nursing (AIN) experience in a low or high level aged care setting. However there were no notable differences in responses to indicate that this was a factor in the students’ perspectives. The students strongly supported the view that the clinical laboratory classes prepared them for practice in the clinical setting. One student describing practice in the laboratory classes as “quite realistic to the real health environment”. They were able to link of theory to practice. “The lecture tells you the basics and the reason behind what you are doing and why. The lab lesson lets you practice the skills”. The students’ responses identified very little dissonance between what taught at the university and practiced in the clinical setting. “Everything I learnt in lectures and practiced in lab classes was essentially the same in the clinical setting.” Perhaps the most noteworthy comment from one student was “No
real difference” (between lab practice and clinical setting) but the “patients are what make the difference”.

CATHY

PP15 CONCLUSION

The expectation was that there would be evidence of dissonance between what students were being taught at university and what the students saw and did in practice in the clinical setting. This was not the case. The feedback from the students in this study supports that the students were adequately prepared for their placement in the clinical setting. This result could be dependent on the fact that their first placement was in small rural hospitals rather then larger hospitals where they would be exposed to a higher acuity of patient and more complex care. It could also be that the students attend a small rural campus where small class size has been found to be a positive factor in student learning (Croxon & Maginnis, in press).

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This project has served as a pilot study to guide the examination of students’ perspectives of their CSU Research Output http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au
clinical placement in second and third levels of study in the Bachelor of Nursing Course.