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Teaching Excellence: What Great Teachers Teach Us

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Given the shortage of nurse educators, we sought to better understand teaching excellence because it is crucial for developing the next generation of nurses. A grounded theory approach was used. The sample included 17 respondents, thought to be excellent teachers, from universities across the United States. Consenting respondents were asked, "What do you do to bring nursing to life with your students?" Using line-by-line coding and the constant comparative method, five major themes emerged: (a) engagement, (b) relevance, (c) student centeredness, (d) facilitation of learning, and (e) dynamic process of becoming an excellent nursing educator. We found that the core category, engagement, included the faculty being (a) current and knowledgeable, (b) being clear in communication of objectives/outcomes, (c) being student centered, (d) being able to draw all students into active questioning and learning so that the process of discovery is enjoyable, and (e) using multiple strategies in teaching the content. The process of becoming an excellent teacher involved "change from 'instiller' to 'facilitator' and laid the foundation for continued development of my teaching self." Those beginning to teach or seeking to improve their teaching may find the results enlightening.

Keywords: Teaching excellence, Doctoral education, Qualitative methods, Engagement, Faculty

The growing shortage of nursing faculty has been well documented (Allen & McClellan, 2007). Retaining and fostering success of diverse nursing students are of particular importance in view of population needs (Gardner, 2005, Nugent et al., 2004, Otto and Gurney, 2006 and Wells, 2003). Students expect and deserve to find warm and enthusiastic faculty who will teach, guide, and support them on their journey into and throughout nursing. Faculty will have an undeniable influence on the student's experience and provide a (strong or weak) foundation for and shape (positive or negative) views on the profession. However, many faculty have had no formal preparation for teaching (Bartels, 2007 and Herrmann, 2006).

According to Diekelmann and Ironside (2002), new pedagogies provide teachers with substantive alternatives for responding to the persistent challenges emerging from today's systems of health care and higher education such as increasing diversity; economic disparity in student populations; the shortage of teachers, clinicians, and students; as well as the concern for the quality and nature of student experiences. The purpose of this article was to describe the perspectives excellent teachers provided as to how they "bring nursing to life" for their students.

Review of the Literature

Research exists to assess student learning (Morrison, 2004 and Washington and Perkel, 2001); however, a paucity of research exists regarding teaching excellence in the nursing literature. Weimer (2000) purported that there are few scholars who contribute to the body of knowledge on teaching and learning in higher education. A literature search in the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) for the key words *teaching excellence* yielded 18 publications, although only 4 were evidence based in the discipline of nursing. The key words *nursing education outcomes* yielded more than 1,000 publications, although the articles were focused on a plethora of topics in nursing education. Articles that seemed pertinent to teaching excellence in nursing were reviewed and references were examined to find additional pertinent publications.

Drevdahl, Stackman, Purdy, and Louie (2002) initiated a focused and systematic inquiry of their own teaching using reflective self-study. Their aim was to guide nursing faculty to enhance their scholarship of teaching by improving teaching practice and creating pedagogical content knowledge.

Although reflective self-study often is conducted solely to improve teaching, it is important that the larger academic community be cognizant of the knowledge created through such endeavors. For reflective self-study to further the legitimacy and importance of the scholarship of teaching, faculty need to publish their findings and make all the steps of the research process visible and available for public critique. Although the knowledge created from reflective self-study projects may transform the assumptions and practices of teacher researchers and their collaborators, faculty in all disciplines should also benefit. As results are disseminated, new directions for inquiry will emerge, motivating others to pursue their own reflective self-study, as well as urging teacher researchers to begin reflective self-study anew (Drevdahl et al., 2002).

Ironside (2003) conducted a study with 18 students and 15 teachers that explored how teachers and students from all levels and types of nursing schools experienced enacting a new pedagogy, known as *narrative pedagogy*. "What did that mean to you?" was utilized as a probe if clarification was needed. Two themes emerged from this analysis, thinking as questioning: preserving perspectival openness, and practicing thinking: preserving fallibility and uncertainty. "Practicing thinking in this way preserves the uncertainty in clinical nursing practice and the fallibility of current nursing knowledge within nursing schools" (p. 514). Students described narrative pedagogy as mind opening, freeing, and thought provoking.

Chow, Tang, Teng, and Yen (2003) investigated 10 faculty's and administrator's perceptions of humanistic teaching in nursing baccalaureate programs. They found five essential elements to humanistic teaching: availability, caring, authenticity, empowerment, and a transformative curriculum.

Although it was not described as research, Smith and Fitzpatrick (2006) collected best practices from 21 renowned nurse educators.

They also summarized recommendations of faculty and students in different types of courses, such as clinical, research, and online formats.

A doctoral dissertation elucidated baccalaureate-prepared nurses' perceptions of faculty teaching (Moisiewicz, 2002). The seven nurses were recent alumna of one nursing program with a study aim to improve teaching at that school. Using a phenomenological method, the following were found to be part of teaching excellence in nursing: teaching skill, faculty–student interactions, nursing knowledge, and critical thinking.

Another dissertation explored faculty experiences of compassion so as to include this in nursing curricula (Peters, 2003). Eleven nurse faculty participated in interviews analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The experience of compassion led faculty to go beyond the expectation and give a gift of self, time, or actions. They formed connections bounded by their roles as nurses and faculty.

Older publications were also reviewed. However, it was thought that some characteristics of teaching excellence in nursing might now differ because of changes in health care, the nursing shortage, and newer pedagogies. Knox and Morgan (1985) conducted a survey to explore important teacher behaviors perceived by university nursing faculty, students, and graduates in Canada. The sample included 500 students across each year of a baccalaureate program, the 64 faculty, and a random sample of 100 graduates. The 47-item survey included categories of teaching ability, evaluation, interpersonal relationship, personality, and nursing competence. Evaluation was generally the category rated most important (although rated the least important by faculty). Graduates rated nursing competence the highest, whereas second-year students rated it lowest. Faculty rated nursing competence second highest and teaching ability second lowest. Great variability in perceptions was found among students in each year of the program.

Outside of nursing, Bain (2004) conducted a 15-year study of nearly 100 college teachers in a wide variety of fields and universities and described what the best teachers did. The educators were chosen because they had “achieved remarkable success in helping their

students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel" (p. 5). Collegiate educators were observed and interviewed to arrive at indicators of excellence; however, no mention was made of the inclusion of any nurse educators. Highly effective teachers were described as designing better learning experiences because everything they did stemmed from a strong understanding and concern for the development of their students. The study to be described was undertaken to further understand teaching excellence in nursing.

Methods

Design, Sample, and Setting

The design for this study, grounded theory (Glaser, 1978 and Glaser and Strauss, 1967), was selected because of the scarcity of research in this area. A grounded theory approach is appropriate because it offers a systematic method to study human experiences and generate theory to understand the contextual reality of behavior (Hutchinson, 1986).

A purposive sample of 17 nurse educators was recruited to participate in this study. The nurse educators (1 was a Caucasian man, 2 were African American women, and the remainder were Caucasian women) taught at a variety of universities across the United States. Earned degrees included doctor of philosophy (PhD), doctor of education, doctor of nursing science (DNS or DNSc), doctor of public health (DrPH), and master of science in nursing. The range of teaching experience was 6 to 31 years, with a mean of 22.3 years. A qualitative methodology was used to answer the question, "How do you bring nursing to life with your students?"

Data Collection and Analysis

Students pursuing a PhD in nursing as part of a course on nursing education invited potential participants via e-mail to participate in the study. Seven doctoral students selected those deemed to be excellent teachers. Doctoral students had experienced nursing education in more than one program and also had

opportunities to examine how nursing education prepared them for nursing practice. Those invited to participate in this study included those educators doctoral students had as teachers in college courses or workshops. Initial invitations and analysis of interviews received took place within the nursing education course. The study was reviewed for protection of human subjects. Students were offered an alternative learning experience if they did not wish to participate in forming the research question or in the data collection and analysis. One of the doctoral students elected to complete the study with the faculty member on conclusion of the course. Using theoretical sampling, data collection and analyses were closely linked at every step.

Data were analyzed as soon as possible after each interview. The generation of grounded theory was based on a comparative analysis between each interview. This method allowed analysis throughout whereby data were compared continuously. Analysis occurred inductively by comparing incident for incident in the data and establishing categories that emerged from the data. Memos were written to provide an immediate illustration of an idea.

Coding was the initial phase of the analytic method whereby categorizing and sorting of data occurred. Codes were written in the margins of the transcripts and served as a shorthand device to label, separate, compile, and organize data. As data were received, the researchers applied a system of open or substantive coding. Open coding permitted the data to be examined line by line to identify processes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding of each sentence and each incident into as many codes as possible ensured full theoretical coverage. Additional participants were sought because saturation of the data had not occurred. Open coding allowed the researchers to invite additional participants through theoretical sampling until saturation occurred.

The second step in coding was to categorize, recategorize, and condense or reduce all first-level codes. This led to discovery of the core category and provided the basis for the generation of the grounded theory. Open coding ended when the core category dynamic engagement emerged.

Hutchinson (1986) stated that the discovery of a core variable is an essential requirement for a quality grounded theory. Without a core category, grounded theory will drift in relevancy and workability (Glaser, 1978). A core category accounts for much of the variation in a pattern of behavior. This functions to generate theory that is relevant and workable. The relation between categories and their properties has the primary function of integrating the theory and rendering the theory dense and saturated as relationships increase (Glaser, 1978). The core category answers the research question.

The final step in the analysis process was writing the theory in a narrative format. The resulting grounded theory provided a description of teaching excellence from the nurse educator's perspective. During the analysis, the researchers compared the emerging theory with extant theory and research.

Rigor in research is required to prevent error of an intermittent or constant nature (Morse & Field, 1995). The criteria of credibility (trust value), dependability (audibility or consistency), transferability (applicability), and conformability (neutrality) were used to evaluate the rigor of this qualitative study.

Findings

Teaching excellence was found to be a dynamic process, which includes active engagement of both the student and faculty. The process includes (a) the faculty being vested in lifelong learning, thereby staying current and knowledgeable; (b) using multiple strategies in teaching the content (i.e., storytelling, videos, humor, sadness, pictures, reflection, role playing, role modeling, guest speakers, group interaction, rehearse, etc.), (c) being clear in communication of objectives/outcomes, (d) student centered, (e) creating an environment in which active learning can occur, and (f) being able to draw all students into active questioning and learning so that the process of discovery is enjoyable. The faculty is committed to partnering with students.

Using line-by-line coding and the constant comparative method, dynamic engagement emerged as the core category. The five major themes of dynamic engagement shown in Figure 1 were (a) strategies,

(b) relevance, (c) student centered, (d) facilitate learning, and (e) tapping the affect domain.



Figure 1. Engagement.

All participants spoke to dynamic engagement of the student in the learning process. For instance, one participant stated,

In my experience, teaching is a dynamic process that is at its best when students are actively engaged in the learning process and receive feedback on their strengths and areas to develop. To bring nursing alive for students, I try to engage them in dialogue, active questioning, and activities that build on their current and past experiences to—and are always rooted in clear objectives for learning.

One participant stated, “I believe in John Dewey’s principle of education that students learn by doing so that active engagement in the content and learning strategies that promote active engagement are vital.” Another participant stated,

I get them involved directly with nursing practice in as many ways as possible. I typically use learning activities for each course that include the typical kinds of things like writing papers but always some

activity that involves getting out and interacting with nurses. Sometimes this involves interviewing nurses or nurse researchers. It can involve observing something about nursing practice.

Respondents indicated that they used multiple strategies to bring nursing to life. The strategies identified in this study included case studies, guest speakers, pictures, role playing, structured debates, dialogue, getting students directly involved, socialization into the profession, collecting articles of interest to use in class, group work, creating opportunities for service, coaching, guiding, online learning, and reflection.

The second theme, relevance, included linking the theoretical to the practical; bringing forth meaning to students coming from different backgrounds and experiences; and providing linkages to life, practice, and the classroom. One respondent stated,

Teaching a beginning critical care course and recognizing that only a handful will pursue a career in critical care, it becomes a challenge to draw the students in and help them understand some of the more complex situations. I draw on my own experience as a critical care nurse to give them real scenarios. I tell them about transporting via ambulance an 18-month-old with acute epiglottitis 45 miles to a tertiary care center and having her ET tube clog up halfway there. When I lecture on sepsis, I tell them about caring for a 19-year-old dying from DIC. When I lecture on increased intracranial pressure, I tell them about the 22-year-old who decided to ski "off-trail" and skied into a tree.

Another respondent stated, "I use guest speakers currently practicing to provide real-world content and apply theory to the work environment." The third major theme, student centered, was revealed by one participant's response, "I pair lower functioning students with higher functioning students to take care of a patient together so the higher functioning student can role model for other student what students are capable of doing." Another participant's response,

I use interactive group work in class to help students be more involved with learning, role playing possible patient situations with the support of fellow students, and pick up information they might have

missed from other students' contributions to the discussion. Also, I give them practice presenting information for patient/family teaching by converting information to lay terms.

The fourth theme, facilitate learning, was apparent in the response, "I monitor the discussion, reinforce, redirect, correct, and guide but try to never take over. I have become the guide on the side instead of the sage on the stage." Another participant stated,

I believe that the process of teaching exists to facilitate learning, causing it to be more effectively achieved than would be the case in the absence of instruction. Although learning certainly can and often does occur in the absence of teachers (and, at times, even in spite of teachers), I personally define teaching as a process that assists students to learn better than they would by themselves, making it less frustrating to grasp the understandings desired.

Another thought, perhaps not really a "strategy" but indeed consistent with my philosophy that teaching exists to facilitate learning, relates to the ritual of teacher evaluations. Too many educators discount student evaluations, placing their emphasis on peer evaluation instead. While students may not be as able as peers to evaluate a teacher's knowledge of the subject matter, they have other evaluative input that needs to be considered. I regard my students as one important source of feedback about my teaching and place a high value on their perceptions, particularly those concerned with my efforts to create a climate conducive to successful learning.

The final theme of dynamic engagement, tapping into the affective domain, was highlighted in the nurse educators' sharing of humor, sadness, mistakes; not being afraid to say that they did not know; and using interviews with patients and family members. Students and faculty shared stories. One participant shared,

I prefer storytelling to case studies because it gives students a sense of the affective portion that case studies are designed to remove. For instance, case studies are usually clinical representations of a person with HIV, but a story includes the fact that this person with HIV is homeless and surviving by eating out of restaurant dumpsters,

cannot afford medications to address the illness, and is caring for two young children.

The process of becoming an excellent nurse educator is at its best when students are actively engaged in the learning process and receive feedback on their strengths and areas to develop.

As a beginning teacher, assessment of my strategies, both by my peers and myself, indicated strengths of interpersonal skills and lecture dissemination of factual information. I was fortunate to participate in a teaching effectiveness project that offered the assistance of a teaching consultant along with peer group sharing and interaction. This yearlong involvement provided the beginning of my change from "instiller" to "facilitator" and laid the foundation for continued development of my teaching self.

Finally, the process of faculty development toward teaching excellence results in a dynamic process of engagement whereby a partnership between students and faculty is developed.

Discussion

The findings of this study can be used to build knowledge through comparison with extant literature. Although many of the themes identified in this study were not directly addressed in Ironside's (2003) study, it was apparent that dynamic engagement was implied. For example, in Ironside's study, participating teachers described classroom encounters in terms of creating thought-provoking experiences for practicing thinking with students. Teachers asked questions that "hook" students. Finally, as in our study, teachers in Ironside's study identified specific strategies: construction of clear, concise test items, and case studies through which students can be differentiated by their analytic thinking skills.

Mann (2004) on the other hand outlined specific strategies that aid the new faculty member. Research is needed to determine if Mann's strategies enhance teaching excellence. The only strategies that could be inferred to be student centered were "teach to their level and feed the masses." The other nine strategies identified were more

focused on traditional pedagogy versus a new pedagogy of teaching-learning.

The reflective self-study of Drevdahl et al. (2002) was used in developing a three-level process. In the assessment phase, their findings were congruent with our findings. We found that the environment must be conducive for teaching and learning to occur. In addition, Drevdahl et al. found that assessment is performed to determine whether the environment and other circumstances are favorable for reflective self-study. They found that group interactions enhance the assessment process as in our study; however, their group interactions were more focused on the teacher researcher and on confirming the techniques used to recognize contradictions in their teaching practice and corroborate the interpretations made with other colleagues. Similar data collection methods that were found in the reflective self-study inquiry and our study were tapping the affective domain such as using portfolios and videotapes.

Strategies that engage learners are of particular importance in the success of diverse students (Sitzman, 2007). Disparities in learning outcomes (Otto & Gurney, 2006) may be improved by the approaches shared by excellent teachers.

Limitations

The current study findings were limited by those submitted using e-mail. Varnhagen et al. (2005) found that e-mail consent increased the amount participants remembered but was otherwise no different from paper-and-pencil consent. E-mailed surveys are increasingly being used for data collection in studies reported in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Calder et al., 2004 and Ellett et al., 2005). E-mailed responses were thought to add to the accuracy of data included; however, vocal inflections and body language that might have been obtained in face-to-face interviews were not available for analysis. Participant's observation of respondents actually teaching also was not a part of this study. However, the use of the e-mail-response format made a national sample feasible and would seem to make best use of respondents' time spent. Being the excellent nurse educators the participants were, their e-mail responses were rich.

Conclusions

The findings of this study may be useful to new and experienced nurse educators seeking to improve teaching. Results portrayed approaches to engage students and a process of moving to a facilitative role of evolving teaching excellence. Ultimately, this substantive theory contributes to the scientific body of knowledge about teaching excellence. This study provides a foundation for disseminating what excellent nurse educators do to bring nursing to life for their students from an emic perspective.

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