

## Analysis of the Concept Continuing Education in Nursing Education

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### Abstract

*The term continuing education is extensively used throughout nursing education literature. This paper sought to re-examine the concept 'continuing education' for its meaning, relevance and appropriateness of application. The authors examined the definitions of continuing education from dictionaries, thesauruses, and current nursing education literature for meanings, usages, attributes, antecedents and consequences in line with Walker and Avant (2005) method of concept analysis. Model, borderline, and contrary cases were also presented. The paper concludes that the development of a theory of continuing education is usually preceded by a logical analysis of the concept which includes distinguishing properties, antecedents and outcomes of further education. The subsequent step in the development of the theory of lifelong education requires establishing theoretical relationships between perceptions, motivation and barriers to continuing education. It recommends that empirical studies of further education, whether qualitative or quantitative can be carried out to find out the effects of lifelong education on the nursing profession to enhance research in nursing and advance professionalism in nursing.*

**Keywords:** continuing education, lifelong learning, nursing education, professionalism, registered nurse

### Introduction

Continuing education are courses that are designed to help an individual develop his or her potentials in a specific area. Universities, colleges and local

school boards offer these courses to adults in the community. It can cover everything from art appreciation to philosophy to web design. Although some schools may run certificate programs, the rationale behind further education is to mount non-credit courses that enable one to develop interest in a specific field. Holders of a college diploma or university degree may pursue continuing education courses to update their skills (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2015). Continuing education for nurses provides an educated and informed workforce that offers the best health services to the population (World health Organization, 2015).

Aiga and Kuroiwa (2006) argue that nurses especially those in the rural areas will encounter a decline in knowledge, skills, professional dissatisfaction, low morale, disillusion, lack of commitment and reduced interest in their work without any learning chances to periodically learn and apply new skills and knowledge. Most countries including China, mandate their nurses to participate in continuing education because it has a profound effect on health care delivery (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2009). In most advanced countries, for example in Australia each nurse must obtain a specific number of credits within a certain period of time in order to remain credentialed and to continue working (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2009).

### **Purpose**

A considerable number of concepts within nursing theory, practice and research have been developed using concepts employed from other discipline. The purpose of this analysis is to re-examine continuing education for its meaning, relevance and appropriateness of application.

### **Definition and uses of the concept**

English Oxford Living dictionaries (2017) define continuing education as consisting typically of short or part-time courses and usually run for adults after they have left the formal education system. Cambridge dictionary (2017) defines continuing education as college classes for adults who have finished their school education in a range of different subjects. Merriam Webster's dictionary (2017) explains continuing education as formal courses of study provided for adult part time students. Thesaurus defines continuing education as being synonymous with adult education and is defined as a program of non-credit courses offered

by a university extension or institute for adults regardless of previous education. Macmillan dictionary (2017) defines further education as lessons for adults often held in the evening that gives them the opportunity to study a variety of subjects.

Continuing education provides knowledge and skills that keep the engineer productive in his or her field. It may include advanced degree programs in which one may enroll after finishing formal education and entering industry. It may also be intended strictly to complete a formal process of education (Groen & Kwalilak, 2014). Landers, Mcwhorter, Krum and Glovinsky (2005) define continuing education among physical therapist as a formal critical element of professional development which is a practical way of staying abreast with current changes in health care environment. Additionally, continuing education offers the practitioners opportunities in emerging science, applying innovations in clinical settings and expanding care for patients. The authors opined that further education prevents skills and knowledge deterioration and prevents professional obsolescence by staying current with new developments in theory and practice. Also, Landers et al. (2005) argued that further education should be part and parcel of a professional's life in a fast paced world where knowledge is expanding rapidly. Richards (2007) in the same vein explains continuing education as a program of study undertaken after registration as a general nurse, leading to the registration of an additional qualification or a higher degree in a health related field. The above definitions suggest that continuing education is a womb-to-tomb professional development process which occurs upon the completion of the pre-registration nurse education program. It constitutes planned learning experiences which are aimed at enhancing the knowledge, skills and attitudes of registered nurses for the development of nursing practice, patient care, education, administration and research (An Bord Altranais, 1994).

### **Defining attributes**

Defining attributes similar to signs and symptoms are critical features that help to differentiate one concept from related concept and clarify its meaning (Walker & Avant, 2005). Four fundamental properties that define the concept of continuing education are as follows:

- Adult participants who are registered with a professional body and are practicing.

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- Formal education which is offered by universities, institutions and certificates awarded.
  - The course should provide knowledge and skills and build on the competence of the participant.
  - Keeping the participant abreast with ongoing changes in the health care environment.

These categories of cases are offered to expand further the concept of lifelong education. The model cases demonstrate all of the distinguishing properties of the concept while the borderline cases contain most of the attributes. The related case is related to the concept, but does not contain the critical properties and finally the contrary case is a clear example of what the concept is not. These cases help more to fully articulate the meaning of the concept.

### **Model case**

Taking an imaginary scenario: the pediatric unit of Akwasikrom Government Hospital in the Eastern Region of Ghana records higher neonatal deaths yearly and little has been done to solve the problem which has made the entire community very worried and sad, because they are losing their potential future leaders. Eunice, who is a nursing officer and had worked for 6 years at the Akwasikrom Government Hospital decided to upgrade her skills and knowledge in pediatric nursing at the University of Ghana, Legon. She was granted study leave to pursue the program. After two years, she graduated with a degree in pediatric nursing, went back to her hospital and was made in charge of the pediatric ward. Upon resuming duty, she made recommendations to the hospital management team. For the pediatric ward to live up to expectation, a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and other equipment, medications and some policies needed to be provided. The NICU was established, with new incubators, oxygen cylinders, pediatric dextrose and many others. Eunice, her colleagues, the hospital and the entire community were happy with these new developments. Eunice then developed a protocol on the management of neonates, preterm and asphyxiated babies and educated all her colleagues on the protocol. Improvements were seen in the care of the neonates; they got well and were discharged home after few days of admission without complications.

### **Analysis of the model case**

- Eunice is a registered nurse who has worked for six years.
- She studied pediatric nursing at the University of Ghana and was awarded a degree in pediatric nursing.
- The program is built on the competence of the nurse, as she identified the problems within the pediatric ward and made recommendations to resolve them.
- Through the knowledge she acquired, Eunice ensured that the NICU and the available equipment met the standards for caring for neonates.

### **Border line case**

An imaginary scenario: the quality assurance team of the Mangoase hospital in the Ashanti region conducted performance assessment for all nurses within the facility. They found that Sylvia who was a theatre nurse and had worked for seven years on the surgical ward performed below standard. A needs assessment was done to find out what could be done to assist her improve on the quality of care she rendered to her surgical patients. An agreement was made between Sylvia and the hospital management to enroll her in the post -operative nursing program at the school of nursing at Legon. She completed the program after a year with a certificate and returned to the surgical ward. Sylvia stood by her old ways of practicing and no new changes were observed. She still used non sterile gloves in dressing surgical wounds, did not wearing face mask and dressing wounds from the outside of the wound to the inner portions. As a result, her patients' wounds got infected and they had to spend longer days on admission.

### **Analysis of the border case.**

- Nurse Sylvia was a registered nurse who had worked for seven years.
- She needed to improve the quality of health care offered to her surgical patients.
- She graduated from the post –operative nursing program at the school of nursing, Legon with a certificate.
- Sylvia adhered to her old ways of practicing; she did not demonstrate that she knew the current trends in surgical wound management.

**Related case**

An imaginary scenario: Kofi Manu, 20 years of age, graduated with BSc in psychology from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi in 2011. After staying in the house for two good years without being employed by any organization, he furthered his education by pursuing MPhil in clinical psychology at the same university hoping that after school he would secure a better job.

**Analysis of the related case**

Kofi Manu who graduated with a Bachelor of Science in psychology and worked for three years in a district hospital pursued further studies in Master of Philosophy in psychology in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a clinical psychologist. The additional knowledge he acquired enabled him to manage patients and staff members of the hospital who had emotional and psychological problems.

**Contrary case**

An imaginary scenario: Abigail is a staff midwife and has worked for three years within her hospital, because she wants to upgrade and update her knowledge in the quality of care she provides for her patients. She ensures that she attends all in-service trainings, workshops, seminars and conferences organized in and outside her hospital. As a result of her rich knowledge in the profession, she is regarded as one of the competent nurses within her facility. She provides quality care to her clients and is abreast with the current trends in midwifery. She in turns organizes in- service training for her colleagues on the ward.

**Analysis of contrary case**

This is a contrary case because continuing education is a formal education organized by training institutions and is not limited to in-service training programs such as seminars, workshops and conferences. Although in-service education and training programs are organized to augment the professional knowledge of nurses, they are restricted in terms of duration and resources which offers nurses minimal time to learn. Contrastingly, continuing education may last for a year or two and offers the nurse ample time to learn and grasp whatever is being taught in school.

### **Antecedent**

Walker and Avant (2005) define antecedents as the events or attributes that must arise prior to the occurrence of the concept. Antecedents may be likened to factors that motivate nurses to pursue further education. These factors may be intrinsic or extrinsic, which compel nurses to go back to school. The following antecedents have been identified.

### **Self-development**

Most nurses pursue continuing education because of an inner desire to do so. Landers et al. (2005) in their study found that physical therapists who engaged in continuing education were intrinsically motivated to pursue continuing education, as they wanted an expansion in their clinical competence as well as for certification purposes, and these motivated them to learn. This is similar to Gorczyca's (2013) findings. She argued that participants' motivation to partake in continuing education was created from a desire to be challenged academically and professionally. This motivated them to take up a challenge that fulfills their personal need for learning and provide them with new professional developments. Kovner, Brewer, Katigbak, Djukic and Fatehi (2012) also found that diploma nurses who lived in rural areas were inclined to obtain a bachelor's degree or a one more advanced than those from urban areas. This they pursued three to five years after completion of their diploma program, since these nurses wanted to achieve personal and job satisfaction.

### **Availability of funds**

The high cost of tuition fees for continuing education programs has deterred many nurses from pursuing continuing education. Kovner et al. (2012) identified cost as a major resource to pursue additional education. The authors indicated that one could pursue continuing education if he or she was prepared to keep another job or work overtime voluntarily, in order to earn a higher income. According to Gorczyca (2013), participants in her study laid emphasis on the financial struggles they were anticipating for pursuing graduate education. Aiga and Kuroiwa (2006) also assert that although a majority of nurses may be interested in returning to school for further studies, non-availability of financial resources, study leave with pay may undermine their willingness to engage in continuing formal education. Groen and Kwailak (2014) in their study recommended that there should be a collaboration between the stakeholders of continuing education; such as the government,

professional bodies, continuing education researchers and practitioners from universities and private industries to develop support activities such as financial aid to help nurses who want to pursue continuing education. Kovner et al. (2012) also maintain that institutions should establish funding incentives for improving the education of nurses. They suggest that nurses who are interested in pursuing continuing education should be identified and supported to enroll and complete continuing education programs with tuition reimbursement and scholarship funds.

### **Awareness of accessible educational programs**

Glass and Todd –Atkinson (1999) undertook a study of licensed practicing nurses and registered nurses across randomly selected facilities in North Carolina in the USA, to determine their self-perceived learning needs. Their findings proposed the creation of awareness among existing nurse education programs. Another finding was the need for educational programs to be relevant to the current nursing practice. The nurses also underscored that for them to engage in continuing education, the courses designed should be exciting in order to make the learning enjoyable and more attractive. Instructors cannot only help maintain the zeal in nurses who are willing to learn, but they can also help those less stimulated by employing more student –centered approaches when designing lifelong education programs (Grisetti & Jacono, 2006). Late advertising of educational programs, higher entry requirements to nursing education programs and lack of knowledge about learning opportunities become a hindrance to pursuing continuing education (Leading Learning and Skills, 2005).

### **Consequences**

Consequences are those events or incidents that can occur as a result of the occurrence of continuing education, and which can often generate new ideas or avenues for research (Walker & Avant, 2005). Consequences could also mean benefits that are derived from pursuing further studies. Some of the advantages nurses may derive from engaging in lifelong learning include improvement in the quality of care offered to patients, empowerment of nurses, acquisition of credentials to expand one’s role and growth and advancement of the nursing profession.

### **Improvement in the quality of care offered to patients**

When nurses pursue continuing education there is an improvement in the



quality of care rendered to their patients. Osterman, Asselin and Cullen (2009) in their qualitative study of how Bachelor of Science degree influences the professional nurse, highlighted that for most of their participants, pursuing continuing education had extended their scope of nursing care. Furthermore, the participants underscored that the patient be viewed as a whole and when caring for the patient, it was important to consider the patient as a sum of its parts. This stresses the need for one to focus on the physiological, spiritual, psychological, social aspect of the client in order to give an efficient care. Similarly, Aiken, Clarke, Cheung, Sloane and Silber (2003) also found out that health facilities with highly educated nurses have their surgical patients experiencing lower mortality rate. Their findings revealed that if the percentage of nurses with a bachelor's degree in all hospitals was 60% rather than 20%, fewer deaths per 1000 patients would be expected. Upson (n.d.) as cited earlier, also emphasized the aspect regarding adequate number of skilled staff who had undergone continuing education, specifically stating that there is a massive reduction in quality indicators such as nosocomial infections, patient falls, medication errors and pressure sores.

### **Growth and development of the nursing profession**

Nurses who pursue continuing education contribute to the growth and development of the profession (Megginson, 2008). Institute of Medicine (2010) report on the future of nursing emphasizes that as health care becomes multifaceted, nurses must be given an advanced training that will enable them to be able to meet the needs of people who seek health care. The report contends that further education will assist nurses to build their capabilities in leadership and enhance their clinical skills. Gorczyca (2013) clarifying on the objective of Institute of Medicine, stated that nurses at all levels of education develop experiences which can shape nursing practices; however, only those who pursue graduate studies can gain research skills and advanced critical thinking. These abilities are required to take on higher level positions in the nursing domains of advanced clinical practice, research, leadership, administration and education. Houston (2013) concedes that there are emerging technologies such as genetics and genomics, biometric, electronic health record, and highly sophisticated equipment for diagnosis and medical care that will change the practice of nursing. As such, nurses will have to acquire skills to develop, acquire and integrate these emerging technologies. Without continuing education, this will pose a great challenge to nursing leaders.

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## Empirical referents

Empirical referents are measurable ways to establish the occurrence of the concept (Walker & Avant, 2005). Several researchers have developed research tools to measure the concept of continuing education. For instance, in 1985 Darkenwald and Valentine developed Deterrents to Participation Scale General (DPS-G) to discover perceived factors that deter adults from participating in educational programme. Subsequently, in 1988 the Adult Attitudes Towards Continuing Education Scale (AACES) was developed to determine the attitudes of adults regarding continuing education by Hayes and Darkenwald. To note, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century other sophisticated tools such as National Survey of Student Engagement measures (NSSE), Learner Participation in Educational Programme by (Kuh, 2001, 2003) and Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) which measures adult preparedness to engage in self-directed learning by (Hoban, Lawson, Mazmanaian, Best & Seibel, 2005) have been developed to measure continuing education.

## Conclusion

The development of a theory of continuing education is usually preceded by a logical analysis of the concept. This concept analysis has established the distinguishing properties, antecedents and outcomes of further education. The subsequent step in the development of the theory of lifelong education requires establishing theoretical relationships between perceptions, motivation and barriers to continuing education. Empirical studies of further education, whether qualitative or quantitative can be undertaken to find out the effects of lifelong education on the nursing profession to enhance research in nursing and advance professionalism in nursing.

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