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Teaching Ethics through Service Learning

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Abstract

Engaging students in the surrounding community is often the goal of nursing classes, especially those that focus on community. Although ethics may be one of the most important subjects in nursing education, teaching it is challenging. An exemplar is used to discuss how a service learning assignment was used to demonstrate and evaluate students' understanding of the ethical principle of beneficence. A properly designed service learning assignment provided students the opportunity to practice nursing as a caring art with each of Johnson's five distinctive practices. It gives them the occasion to do the right thing.

KEYWORDS: ethics; nursing; students; beneficence; service learning

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Teaching Ethics through Service Learning

Ethics, while woven throughout most nursing curricula is a very challenging subject to teach. It is also difficult to evaluate if the students have a comprehension of the concepts. The application of ethical theory in health care generally focuses on dramatic situations of critical care medicine (Campbell, 1994). Benner, Tanner, and Chesla (2009) posit that the exploration of the moral aspect of everyday judgment has been neglected. *Nursing education often evaluates ethics from a negative perspective. Ethical evaluation* should be based on pedagogy that facilitates learning to instill in them codes of ethical conduct and ethical decision making (Gropelli, 2010). *The prevailing question is, “is there a way to test judging ethical principles from a positive viewpoint?”* Service learning, which has long been a part of nursing education often gives students the opportunity to gain practical knowledge while engaging and interacting with the community. A well-designed service learning assignment also gives faculty the opportunity to assess the students’ ethical knowledge and application in real world situations, not only the negative, but the positive, to assess what students are doing right.

One of the fundamental ethical principles of nursing is the principle of beneficence. Beneficence is the ethical duty of bringing about good (Purtilo & Cassel, 1981). For nurses to do “good,” they must consider the needs and values of individuals. *The Code of ethics for nurses with interpretive statements* (Code) clearly directs nurses to provide services with respect for human dignity and the uniqueness of every individual, unrestricted by considerations of social or economic status, personal attributes, or the nature of health problems (ANA, 2001). Further support of this principle is found in the Code’s tenet that directs nurses to work together with members of the healthcare system, other professionals, and citizens in promoting community health needs. *Within the profession of nursing, beneficence includes the duty to do good, to*

protect the vulnerable and to advocate for those who cannot protect themselves. Beneficence requires nurses to act in ways that benefit patients. In nursing the question often arises if beneficent acts are obligatory or rather one's quest of moral standards? If it is an obligation, is there a place where obligation stops and acts are performed from nonobligatory moral ideals? Beneficence must be examined not as a line drawn on the ground, with one side good (beneficence) and the other side bad (stinginess). The principle of beneficence, as with many things, needs to be seen on a continuum. The continuum starts with duty and obligation and runs to the non-required and nonobligatory. Where a student nurse's action fits on the continuum should not be as important to the nurse educator as recognizing that it fits on the continuum somewhere. Beneficence includes acts of mercy, kindness, and charity, and is indicative of philanthropy, affection, humanity, and promoting the good of others (Beauchamp, 2008). The concept is broad, but it is understood to include effectively all forms of action intended to benefit or promote the good of other persons.

Exemplar

Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children from birth to age five from low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Head Start programs provide comprehensive services to enrolled children and their families, which include health, nutrition, social, and other services determined to be necessary by family needs assessments, in addition to education and cognitive development services. Head Start services respond to each child and family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Engaging students in the surrounding community is often the goal of nursing classes. This is most apparent in the community nursing classes. This engagement was accomplished by

using four distinct capacities of service. 1) Primary Prevention - Each week the nursing students teach a different health or safety related topic to the thirty Head Start classes in the area. Due to the continuous interaction the school has with Head Start, the impact of this education is seen by the students, faculty and community. 2) Nursing Process - The students, while carrying out the teaching element, also have an opportunity to gain practical knowledge in using the nursing process. The nursing process consists of five steps: assessing, analyzing, planning, implementing, and evaluating (Townsend, 2009). The nursing students involve the patient, population, community, and significant others in each step of the process to the greatest extent possible. It was through the nursing process that the beneficence aspect was introduced to this. Implicit in the nursing process is the therapeutic and personal relationship of the nurse and the patient/population/community. 3) Community Involvement - Although this project began as a school assignment it has grown to involve the university, individuals outside of the university, and businesses in the area. The expansion of the program was initiated by the students using relationships they have throughout the university and the community. 4) *Beneficence* - The last capacity of engagement is giving. Giving is the foundation for this service learning endeavor. While the students were teaching the assigned topics, they observed many children that were clearly upset and embarrassed. Nursing students asked the Head Start teachers about the problem and were told that the soiling and embarrassment was the result of toileting accidents. They also learned that most of the children had no replacement for their soiled underpants. This observation (assessment) started the nursing process among the students regarding a solution to the identified problem. The student nursing association proposed a project to solicit contributions of new underwear for the Head Start children in need. The student nurses association adopted the project and called it "Project Underpants." Annually the project collects

new underwear that is donated to the Lee-Russell Head Start Centers. The project has seen growth each year since its inception. In 2010, 1,906 new packages of boys and girls underpants were presented to the Lee-Russell Head Start Centers. In 2011, the association adopted an orphanage in Malawi as part of Project Underpants and over 2,100 new packages of underpants were collected to distribute to Head Start and to the orphanage in Malawi. Service learning has always been a part of nursing, however this project that started as a teaching project, has grown into a student led campaign that continues to engage and benefit the community. The project involves individuals, student groups, the university, and businesses in the area.

Conclusion

Johnson (1994) states that nursing as a caring art requires five distinctive practices, including the ability to: 1) gain understanding in patient meetings, 2) establish therapeutic relationships with patients, 3) use evidence-based practice to determine a proper implementation, 4) accomplish nursing actions competently, and 5) perform nursing practice ethically. Properly designed service learning provides students the opportunity to practice nursing as a caring art with each of the five distinctive practices. It gives them the occasion to do the right thing. Where does Project Underpants fit on the beneficence continuum? In our opinion the students' ethical behavior certainly goes beyond obligation. The future of nursing is safe.

Please note that the opinions expressed by the authors represent those of the authors and do not reflect the opinions of the Online Journal of Health Ethics' editorial staff, editors or reviewers.

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