

Creating a Learner-Centered Environment in Nursing Education: An Immersion Experience

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Abstract

A call for change in nursing education has been issued in order to prepare the nurse of the future in a changing health care delivery system with increasing complexity. The learning environment is changing, including the faculty role. Innovative research-based pedagogies are suggested as a way to challenge traditional nursing education. The foundational learning theory course in our school of nursing program, *Rethinking Nursing Education*, is one way to begin creating a new world of nursing education. How better to fully appreciate the learning theories underpinning a learner-centered environment than an immersion experience?

Introduction

A call for change in nursing education has been issued in order to prepare the nurse of the future in a changing health care delivery system with increasing complexity (NLN, 2007, AACN, 1997). Innovative research-based pedagogies are suggested as a way to challenge traditional nursing education. Critical thinking and clinical judgment continue to be top priorities while the learning environment is changing, including the faculty role. Electronic learning is on the rise with a faculty role described as a learning coach or facilitator.

To prepare nursing educators for the future, our school of nursing revised the Education option in the Master of Science program. Program outcomes include the ability to use a variety of pedagogies to create an

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adult learner-centered approach to curriculum development, teaching strategies, and evaluation. The foundational learning theory course in the program, *Rethinking Nursing Education*, is one way to begin creating a new world of nursing education. In this course, learners explore learning theories and their application to nursing education. Adult learning theory is emphasized and textbooks include *Learning in Adulthood* by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) and *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* by Weimer (2002). How better to fully appreciate the learning theories underpinning an adult learner-centered environment than an immersion experience? This is the story of the continuing evolution of this course from the perspectives of the faculty coordinators and learners who have partnered in the experience.

The underlying goal of the course is to develop faculty with a passion for learner-centered learning. Porter-O'Grady (2003) used a quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupery that explains the strategy of the course: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to gather wood and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them a passionate desire for the sea" (p. 105). At the beginning of the course, students form a community of learners to build the syllabus, including course content, structure, and evaluation. The course is designed to be the ultimate immersion experience in an adult learner-centered environment. Faculty facilitators for this course are members of the learning community and provide the course outcomes, textbooks, a list of potential topics, as well as an introduction to the need for change and characteristics of an adult learning environment. From there, the group is asked what they want to learn and how they want to learn. The community works together to choose the specific content and structure of the course and eventually write the syllabus. The initial reaction of learners is one of shock, disbelief, discomfort, fear, and/or annoyance. As the syllabus is created, however, the reaction transforms into excitement. By the end of the course, learners are true believers in the principles.

The all online course has not been "taught" the same way twice. There are, however, two constants: (1) course outcomes are met, and (2) learners are extremely satisfied with their learning, both content and process. Following analysis of a variety of learning theories, members of the learning community seek innovative teaching strategies documented in the literature and also develop strategies of their own to implement. Over the past six years, the course has evolved from a face to face online

hybrid to a fully online asynchronous course. Initially learners met together for one day to develop the syllabus and plan the course. In the most recent course, the planning and syllabus development occurred in a two hour long synchronous web conference using the Elluminate system and asynchronously using an online WIKI.

Regardless of delivery method used, learners unanimously praise the course for its excellence and express thanks for the opportunity to participate. The following representative sample of learners' comments over the past six years demonstrates the success of the course:

I have enjoyed the ability to design the syllabus. This was a little difficult given it is one of the first graduate level courses that I have taken. It was nice to have a voice in the learning process.

I love that we were able to make this class "ours"! It has been a great experience! I love the concept of learner-centered education!

Fun course – great insight to nursing education.

I initially did not think the course would be useful, but I learned a tremendous amount of information that will improve my teaching ability.

I can't believe that as students we really did pull this off! This was a fantastic way to present a theory class. Theory in general is not a fun class.

This course was a pleasure to take. Very relaxing, yet educational and learner-centered.

Enjoyed the learner-driven aspect; I learned a lot from my peers and their own research into the topics. Great discussions and valuable learning!

Great learner-centered courses never are easy. The hardest thing is that we [as future instructors] could even be accused of being lazy - making the students do all the work! It is going to take thought, time, and even relinquishing some control to make it work. But I do have hope that each course could have some part that could be left up to student participation. If emphasis is placed on the humanistic concepts, each instructor can find a way to make it every

class they teach more learner-centered, beginning with creation of the syllabus.

Faculty Perspective

As faculty facilitators, we find the experience equally rewarding, and this has become a course that other faculty ask to “teach.” Each semester we learn that it is all about learning, not teaching. We learn to trust in the principles of learner-centered learning: andragogy, humanism, and social constructivism. Yet we wonder at the start of each semester: “Will this work? Are we wrong? Are we somehow cheating the students?” And most importantly, we ask: “Will the students learn?”

We worry more about this introductory course than any other. We throw a group of learners who are brand new to a graduate program into a completely andragogical environment and provide virtually no traditional structure. However, faculty do facilitate the process to help learners visualize and construct the course. As a group, the learners decide what to learn, how to learn it, and how to evaluate their learning. As facilitators, faculty help the learners visualize ramifications of what they are constructing and whether the direction decided upon is the most appropriate path. Then, after all the decisions are made, the course moves forward as determined by the learners.

This course hones facilitation skills of involved faculty. As co-instructors, we support each other allowing and facilitating the learners to take responsibility for course development and learning. It is difficult to give up that control, but if we truly believe in learner-centered learning, this is what we must do. As the facilitating faculty, we may not always agree with how the learners choose to direct the course, but it is our responsibility to allow the learners to proceed as planned. We encourage them to tweak the course as needed during the semester, especially when that “aha moment” occurs and the learners recognize a flaw in the syllabus. Through faculty facilitation, a discovery of fresh insights leads to a mid-course correction creating a positive learning experience for the entire learning community.

Learner Perspectives

Learners in this course had to literally “rethink” their approach to education and stretch their boxes. Below Eldon, Evelyn, and Nicole

share learner perspectives from their experiences in this course and how the knowledge was applied as a nurse educator.

“Learning that it was our job within *Rethinking Nursing Education* to create the syllabus and plan the course was a brand new experience” for Nicole. She understood the customary pathway for education focused on the professor, where the professor distributes the syllabus, instructs how he or she wants to instruct, and then evaluates the performance of the students. Eldon reflected on his experiences in a traditional program, “Learner-centered education is not a new model of education, but a product of the traditional ‘sage on a stage’ approach to lecture and learning, the master’s level course ‘*Rethinking Nursing Education*’ was difficult at the outset.”

The use of learner-centered education theory within *Rethinking Nursing Education* was evident by the community of learners creating the syllabus, recalled Nicole. Initially, as the community of learners sat together in a meeting room, there were looks of shock, disbelief, and questions such as, “How do I know what I am to learn?” “I have never done this before.” “How do I create a syllabus?” Eldon remembers on “the first day of class being jolted out of my comfort zone of learning. I wanted, expected the faculty, to just outline and inform me what we were going to do in his course, with the bulk of the control from the faculty. My thoughts were: ‘What? No syllabus? Just tell me what I need to know!’” It was a complete immersion experience for the community of learners. The fear of not being told what must be learned transformed into an opportunity for success and they experienced their ability to learn and grasp more knowledge by assessing what really needed to be learned. The community of learners described an increased amount of knowledge gained due to the level of increased autonomy, control, and input into their own education. There was an increased sense of value and dedication within the learning environment.

Eldon and Evelyn have moved forward in their story of a learner-centered learning environment by applying what they learned in a nursing faculty role. Each has searched for ways to apply the principles of learner-centered learning appropriate for the nursing classes they are teaching.

Eldon describes his students as mostly non-traditional; they are older and have work and family obligations. These students do not want the exercise of “jumping through hoops for the sake of busy work.” His

students wanted to know “how will I use this in the real world of nursing?” He appraised the best practices in teaching of problem-based learning and case studies. Reflecting on all his options, Eldon decided on the use of anticipatory sets and case studies as a primary component for student learning: “Before this was started, the majority of students opted to hear the lecture (teacher-focused) and then to look at the readings later. Now, students show up to class prepared to discuss three to five different topics. They have previously opened their texts and are more engaged. Further, by utilizing a small case study in class, I can follow-up the case study during class with five to six NCLEX questions drawn from the case study.” These students have become very engaged in this learning. The students do not receive the copies of the NCLEX-type questions, but they anticipate that similar questions may appear on their next exam.

Evelyn has applied what she learned by trying to make information practical and applicable to each level of students she may be teaching. She found that clinical experiences for the beginning nursing students are traditionally very structured and task focused. She now works with the students to focus on the entire process of client care, not just completing the tasks. The focus is learning. Clinical experiences now correspond more directly with course content. Students are given the freedom to choose clients and research the diagnoses, practice basic and focused assessments, and determine appropriate care. She explains that her role as clinical instructor “is to guide or mentor the students in these tasks by helping the students to critically think about how their assessments and their care correlate with the client diagnoses and medications.” She has found that this approach creates a relaxed interactive learning environment. The students begin to appreciate a team approach to client care as well as differentiation of roles and responsibilities.

Final Thoughts

This process of “rethinking nursing education” for Nicole, Eldon, and Evelyn came as “aha’s” and, over time, as each tried to implement a learner-centered approach to education, they discovered the best learning takes place with a learner-centered, not faculty-centered approach. Although this is the most effective way for adults to learn, faculty are required to be more creative. As faculty, we realize the learner-centered approach is time intensive, yet the rewards are well worth the effort.

Faculty growth in learner-centered content, application, and facilitation skills are as important to us as the satisfaction derived from watching the learners develop and grow. Our purpose in sharing this story is to encourage faculty to stretch their boxes and explore the use of a learner-centered immersion in other courses and levels of nursing education.

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