Constructivism, Caring, and Feedback: Application to Course Development in Online and Clinical Settings

Jill McLaughlin

State University of New York Institute of Technology
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Search Strategy

The terms course development and curriculum development were used in a search of the CINAHL, Education Complete, and ERIC databases. The words nursing, case study, and caring were added to further narrow the search. The search was limited to peer-reviewed, English language, and the years 2008-2013. However, in order to capture an article offering an opposing view, one article from 2006 has been included.


This article discusses evidence based strategies specific to instructor feedback as it relates to online courses. Student satisfaction and learning benefit from feedback that acknowledges their work and provides relevant information. Students look for feedback and guidance from their instructors and peers. Suggestions for optimizing feedback include incorporating it into the course design, personalizing it to communicate caring, and encouraging students to reflect on their learning and seek feedback. The authors acknowledge feedback can also come from peers, and that more research is needed on this topic. The information is relevant to online learning but can be translated for use to the clinical instructional setting.

Healthcare is changing and nursing curriculum content is not keeping pace. Constructivism theory posits that learning occurs as “…learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current or past knowledge…” (p. 89). The article provides specific examples of how activities consistent with this theory can be applied to nursing curriculum. With the teacher acting as facilitator in learner-centered, concept based, interactive classes, the focus shifts from the teacher to the learner. Through the use of innovative teaching methods focused on concepts, rather than the standard lecture focused on content, faculty can assist learners to take responsibility for their learning. The use of case studies in the clinical setting, faculty role modeling, and group learning can improve critical thinking skills. Evaluation by the learner is ever present and allows for greater self-awareness and improved communication skills as they provide feedback to one another. Integration of case studies into courses can be accomplished in both the online course and clinical setting. Students derive more meaning from material when they can relate the concepts to actual patient problems.

This retrospective, qualitative study sought to examine the efficacy of a constructivist learning approach utilizing a problem based case study. Participants were enrolled in an accelerated pre-licensure program and the ten week case study supplemented their 30 clinical hours. The case study involved a person with a mental illness known to the participant and through journaling and other active learning activities, participants were able to successfully meet the learning outcomes of theclinical course. Findings of the study support constructivist based learning as useful in the clinical area, as participants knowledge and ability to solve problems were increased. The authors call for more research “to establish best clinical teaching practices” (p.61) in the wake of ever decreasing clinical sites.


Evidence-based practice has relevance in many professional arenas. In education, it refers to the “integration of best available research on teaching technique and expertise” (p.8). The authors contend that current higher education teaching strategies may not be based on any evidence, but rather “…tradition and common sense…”(p.10) and that there is a need for reform. Research presented indicates a turn away from the traditional lecture method by 8.8 % from 2005 to 2008. Group learning increased by 11.3% over the same
time frame. Using real-life problems was not measured in 2005, but 55.7% of faculty surveyed used it as an approach in 2008, indicating that student-centered teaching methods were being instituted. Student centered learning and other evidence-based teaching methods can be integrated into individual courses by faculty members.


The authors defend their argument that, based on what is known about human cognition, a minimal guidance approach to learning is likely to be ineffective. Among the learning theories named as such are constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based. All have in common the approach of inquiry-based learning where the learner is an active participant, and comes to increased awareness through the application of what is being learned to what they already know. The authors cite a lack of evidence to support minimal guidance, particularly in novice to intermediate learners who lack sufficient knowledge from which to draw on. However, there does exist evidence to support full guidance in learning. The authors state that minimal guidance learning is not effective and perhaps even detrimental to the novice learner. Based on the literature presented in the article, it might be best to use case studies with students entering their final semester of nursing school, rather than their first or second one.

The use of constructivist teaching strategies in the online learning environment is compared to face-to-face learning. Through the use of literature reviews, the authors discuss constructivism and how it is applicable to online learning. Online learners view themselves as more active participants than those in face-to-face classes and subsequently have better critical thinking skills. In order to break the cycle of “students teaching the way they were taught” (p.67), the authors discuss how constructivist strategies can guide learners to constructing their own meaning and approach to nursing education. This may be accomplished through instructor facilitation and guidance, providing feedback as a means of role modeling, providing case studies as a real world approach, and having discussions building upon the previous weeks’ work (p.68). It is in this way that learners and educators “are colleagues, at different levels, sharing and exploring the field of nursing together” (p.68).

In reviewing teaching strategies utilized by nurse educators, this descriptive study sought to find out whether evidence-based teaching practices are being used, what guided the decision to integrate evidence-based teaching, and how it is being integrated into practice. The 295 nurse educator respondents were culled from a stratified random sampling of accredited nursing programs throughout the United States, and 89 programs were represented in the study. Ninety-seven percent reported using evidence in their teaching but in addition to actual research evidence, included students’ comments or course evaluations as a basis of evidence. Responses indicated a lack of familiarity with educational databases, institutional barriers, a lack of time needed to implement evidence based teaching practices, as well as a lack of research regarding teaching practice. Further research is needed to support the use of evidence-based teaching in nursing education and establish what is best practice.


The authors discuss why critical thinking is an imperative skill nurses must have. They also recognize that for educators, it is not an easy task to teach how to think critically. Case studies are an example of an active learning teaching strategy which can
advance critical thinking in nursing students. A literature review supports the author’s call for the incorporation of case studies in nursing education, and identifies few limitations. While active learning through case studies does engage both the educator and learner, and encourages the “development of critical thinking skills” (p.206) case study development is time intensive, requires the educator to be skilled at questioning and is best used once the learner has a basic foundation of knowledge. The case study approach is utilized with much success in many other disciplines as well.

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A case study design approach was utilized to gather data in order to examine how a constructivist-based online approach can assist adult learning, as well as establish what will improve future courses of this type (p.709). Facilitated learning and a “well-designed” course were identified as key elements in promoting learning. The facilitation would occur with a mentoring role through the instructor, a monitoring role through a teaching assistant and a moderating role through the students. In this way there is an absence of a hierarchy and the students become active participants in the learning process, thereby attaining the objective of a constructivist-based approach to learning.

This study utilized an online Likert-type survey and one open-ended question, and asked a convenience sampling of baccalaureate nursing students about caring behaviors important to them in the context of online instruction. Responses in the survey were grouped as extremely, moderately, somewhat, or not important instructor behaviors. Narrative responses to the question revealed trust as a common theme among the five attributes identified. “Twelve student preferred caring behaviors for online instructors” (p. 176) was then developed by the authors as a potential resource tool. Clarity/expertise, timeliness, empathetic presence, and full engagement/accessibility are the behavioral attributes identified through this survey (p.176). Examples of behaviors preferred by students are “clear and detailed instructions”, “response to emails and postings within 48 to 72 hours”, email and telephone availability, enthusiasm for students success and online learning, and weekly feedback (p.176). Caring behavior can be conveyed through online instruction and this study provides a useful resource. Much of the information would also work well for educators in a face-to-face program.