



Meaningful Learning in the Development of Novice Nurses

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Abstract

In the education of novice nurses, many different approaches can be taken to provide the knowledge, skills and expertise needed for patient care. This paper reviews several of these pedagogical approaches and reviews the impact of each. Relevant research and theories are then reviewed and discussed with implications for practice and orientation of nurses.

Keywords: Novice Nurses; NCLEX; VARK Questionnaire

Abbreviations

NCLEX: National Council Licensure Examination; RN: Registered Nurse.

Introduction

When a nurse passes their National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) to become a Registered Nurse (RN), they are at an all-time high. All the hard work on nursing school has finally paid off and they are now officially an RN. The title of registered nurse makes one feel proud, accomplished, and knowing that he or she can make a difference to their patients. People look up to registered nurses. They seek guidance, comfort, and know that the nurse will be there for them during their most vulnerable time if they need medical care. When a nurse starts his or her first job, they have the knowledge of what they learned in school and passing NCLEX, but they are now a novice nurse and still have a long way to go to become a competent and expert nurse. Novice nurses are like sponges; absorbing everything they can from expert nurses so they can eventually become an expert nurse themselves. It is important to support the novice nurse and give them the proper tools and education for their own development.

The expert nurse or educator for the nursing unit will need to understand what the novice nurse needs and how to help them develop critical thinking so they can provide safe and effective nursing care to their patients. Nurse educators need to utilize a variety of tools to help the novice nurse learn. This ranges from in class didactic instruction, online learning modules, to relying on the expert preceptor to teach the nurse. It is also important to make their learning meaningful to help with engagement and understanding of what they are learning on a nursing unit. Nurse educators have a higher success rate when they are engaged, motivated, and want to help the novice nurse learn. They can have an even greater chance of student learning if the educator incorporates nursing theories into their practice to assist with engagement, understanding, and overall learning. Using nursing theories would support the nursing student's development of meaningful learning.

Information-Processing Theory

The first theory an educator can use is the information-processing theory. This theory is useful to understand how each student learns and retains the information [1]. Most novice nurses, especially new graduate nurses, are enrolled

in a nurse residency program within a healthcare setting. Residency programs are there to help a new graduate nurse move from the novice nurse to an experienced nurse [2]. These programs provide support for the new graduate nurse with learning both with a preceptor as well as in a classroom setting. Since the new graduate nurses or novice nurses are involved in the didactic learning structure, it is important for the educator or instructor to understand how a student learns. They can structure their didactic portion of the course to help with the student's retention of the materials they are discussing.

According to the information-processing theory, there are 5 stages to help facilitate student learning. The first stage is the attention stage. If there is a loud environment in the classroom, this can hinder the student's learning. The next stage is the sensory memory stage. This is when the student is learning by using different senses. The VARK questionnaire can be a helpful tool for the instructor to understand how a student learns and tailor their class to the student. The VARK questionnaire is used to determine if a student learns by visual, aural, read/write, or kinesthetic learning [3]. One of the best ways a nurse educator could incorporate this tool would be to start any classroom didactic learning by having each novice nurse fill out the questionnaire to determine their learning style. This can also be shared with the nurse's preceptor and the preceptor can utilize the student learning styles during the novice nurse's orientation. If a novice nurse has more of a hands-on learning style, the preceptor can anticipate the novice nurse will learn better by performing the tasks versus watching the preceptor perform the tasks. The next stages are the short-term memory stage, long-term memory stage, and the information retrieval stage. Each of these stages will help the students retain the information that they are being educated on. A nurse educator can use this theory to support meaningful learning to the nursing students in a variety of ways. First, using the VARK questionnaire at the beginning of the novice nurse's orientation will help the nurse educator and preceptor understand how each nurse learns and make sure to incorporate different learning styles when he or she is teaching in a classroom setting or when the preceptor is teaching the nurse during orientation. The educator could also do a variety of activities to engage the novice nurse. If there are multiple nurses in a didactic class, the educator can use group activities in a way for the nurses to interact and learn different material.

The educator could assign a small group of nurses a topic and give them a choice on how they would want to present to their fellow nurses. They could all write a paper and not have to present, do a PowerPoint presentation, or an activity that can engage in every learning style. Many nurse residency programs require new graduate nurses to study and present an evidence-based project throughout the course of the

program. Doing so has shown an increase in evidence based self-efficacy with nurses who have been involved in these programs [4]. The educator or instructor could give each novice nurse an option on what type of evidence-based project they would want to work on, as well as letting them choose how they want to present their findings on that project. Using the students' senses will help with their learning and by giving them a choice on how they want to present their topic will make their learning more meaningful.

Humanistic Learning Theory

The humanistic learning theory is another theory the educator can utilize when trying to assist with meaningful learning for the nurses. The humanistic learning theory discusses that learning is a natural process that is controlled by the learner. An educated person learns how to learn, adapt, and continues to seek out additional knowledge to be a more informed individual [5]. Novice nurses start their first nursing job as an educated person wanting to learn and educate themselves on new information pertaining to their specialty nursing area.

The theory also encourages individual choice and creativity when learning [1]. Nurse educators can give the novice nurse a choice regarding their education or give them opportunities to seek out additional information that might be useful for a career ladder. Career ladders are a type of professional development nurses use that can incentivize increasing skills and knowledge. They can use this for professional development, educational advancement, and probable future leadership opportunities as they continue their nursing career. Nurses who are motivated to learn and wanting to gain more knowledge will more likely do the extra projects to help with their learning. This is also a motivation to potentially get a promotion later in their nursing career.

Operant Conditioning Theory

Operant Conditioning Theory by B. F. Skinner involves a learning ability that produces a desired behavior because it is reinforced or strengthened [1]. Positive reinforcement is any action that strengthens a certain behavior. Nurse educators could utilize this theory to make learning meaningful by providing a positive reinforcement such as providing verbal praise to the novice nurses. This approach can assist with nurse's success as when they receive recognition, they may be more likely to stay on task, focused, and be more engaged within a classroom setting on when taking care of their patients [6]. The nurse educator can also encourage the preceptor to provide positive reinforcement to the novice nurse. Many hospital settings also have a variety of ways to recognize nurses, the nurse educator can utilize those rewards and recognition to recognize the hard work a novice nurse is putting into their position as well as recognizing the work the preceptor is doing to help the novice nurse success.

Professional Identity

There are many theories a nurse educator can use to develop a novice nurse and make their learning meaningful. Assisting with the development of a nurse's professional identity is also an important factor to assist with the development of a novice nurse to an expert nurse. Professional identity has shown to increase job satisfaction which in turn will increase safe practices and safe patient care [7]. Professional identity in nursing is defined on how a nurse will internalize his or her own nursing practice and how it is influenced by other nurses and nursing practices [7]. Professional identity ultimately is how a nurse sees oneself and feels how they are as a nurse.

A novice nurse may not have a full grasp on how they are as a nurse, which is important for the nurse expert to support and guide the novice nurse. One tool a nurse educator can use for the novice nurse would be providing a nurse mentor. When a nursing unit hires a new nurse, the educator should pair the nurse with another experienced or expert nurse as a mentor. The mentor should meet with the new nurse often during orientation. An example of how often to meet would be: each week during orientation and then monthly for the first year that the novice nurse is on the unit. This can help with the novice nurse's comfort level as well as potential for increased satisfaction on the unit. To develop the mentor and preceptor programs on a nursing unit, some nurse educators will look to Banner's novice to expert model. Within Banner's model, it discusses how novice nurses will move from the observer to the doer [1]. Preceptors and mentors could have the novice nurse start out observing their tasks and what they needed to do to assist the patient. By the end of their orientation, they should be performing the tasks and having the preceptor and mentor observe them.

A novice nurse can have the feeling like they could conquer the world after graduating and passing their NCLEX state board examination. However, when a novice nurse starts their first nursing job, they can feel like they do not know anything and can doubt themselves as a nurse. However, having an experienced nurse educator and preceptor can help guide them to feel more competent and confident as a nurse. Many nurses will have their mentor for many years and be able to learn from one another as the novice nurses become more of an experienced nurse.

Professional Socialization

There are many areas of learning that can lead to the development of a nurse's professional identity and ways a nurse educator can incorporate that learning to make it meaningful for the novice nurse. Mentoring is one way that can assist in their development, and professional socialization is another. Professional socialization is where a nurse will

feel a sense of self and feel they are an active member of their profession. The expert nurse can assist the novice nurse in development of their professional socialization by supporting them as a nurse and providing educational opportunities. This can help develop problem solving skills and critical thinking [8]. Professional socialization most likely begins during orientation as a new nurse and continues throughout a nursing career. Many novice nurses start out their career without critical thinking skills and some nurses do not even feel fully confident in their critical thinking after orientation. However, having the support of the expert nurses and nurse educators can make them feel more comfortable, and can help the nurse gain more knowledge and experience to develop critical thinking skills. Novice nurses tend to start off with tasks and trying to complete the "check boxes". However, as novice nurses gain more knowledge, they will develop from "checking the box" to being able to analyse and interpret the data provided to determine the most appropriate care for a patient [8].

Goal Orientation & Reflection

Goal orientation and reflection are another two tools used to contribute to a nurse's professional identity and can make their learning meaningful when they are in a classroom didactic setting or taking care of patients. One way a preceptor can support a novice nurse to do this would be by having them write weekly goals. The nurse and preceptor could meet at the beginning of the week to write the goals and then reflect on the goals at the end of the week to see if the novice nurse had accomplished them. This can be a great tool to assist with learning as it can help a nurse focus on what specific tasks he or she wants to achieve.

Having these goals can be meaningful to the novice nurse as it can make orientation seem less daunting and help nurses stay on task. When a nurse and preceptor reflect on what was learned for the week, they could not only look at what was done did well, but also what could be improved on. A preceptor could also look at the patients they took care of and discuss different scenarios if they took a different path in their care. Doing this can help increase knowledge of patient's disease processes and could also help increase critical thinking.

Nursing Competencies

There are many different tools to contribute to a nurse's learning and professional identity. Providing support, mentoring, professional socialization, goal orientation, and reflection are all tools a nurse needs to develop his or her professional identity. When a nurse educator understands these tools and incorporates them into education for the novice nurse, it can make the learning more meaningful and can overall increase their satisfaction on the nursing unit.

Nurse competencies are another tool nurse educators can use to help with meaningful learning, professional identity and to help develop a novice nurse to an expert nurse. Some medical facilities utilize "skills fairs" as their nurse competencies. During skills fairs a nurse could sign up for a day that is offered and go through different skills stations that were used as the nurses' competencies for the year. Recently, that model shifted in many healthcare facilities from the skills fairs to the Donna Wright Model. Her model is used and developed for the staff to take ownership and accountability of the nursing competencies [9].

Using this model, nurse educators rely on staff to have a say in what they want to learn about versus being told what their competencies are for the year. This can give the nurses a voice and helped support their learning identity as well as make it meaningful about what they want to learn more about. Whether it is a novice nurse or an expert nurse, giving a nurse an opportunity to decide on what they want to learn about will overall make it more meaningful and help with staff retention and satisfaction on a nursing unit.

Diversity

A nurse educator also needs to utilize a variety of learning strategies when teaching novice nurses with diverse learning and background needs [10]. Understanding the diverse population with novice nurses will not only help the educator plan a lesson plan for their didactic portion of the nurse's orientation, but also will help with nurses' engagement. A nurse educators' goal should include where each student is coming from, their willingness to learn, how they can best help them learn, and make it meaningful learning.

A nurse educator should also attempt to build relationships with the novice nurse. Doing so will help with teamwork on the nursing unit, increase staff satisfaction, and be more approachable for the novice nurse to seek out help and assistance [11]. Technology has grown in leaps and bounds in recent years and is dramatically changing the way health care is needed to support its growth. As a result of these changes, students preparing for their careers need to learn the skills they need to grow with the times. By collaborating with other staff members, we can help each other by developing and implementing teaching curriculums that is required by the State Boards of Nursing, and we can do so in new and innovative ways to motivate students to learn [12].

Conclusion

The development of a novice nurse to an expert is a long journey. Many nurses will say that it has taken them two to three years to become an expert nurse. It is important for a nurse educator to know and understand the nursing process

and use tools to help the nurses learn and develop the skills they need to become an expert nurse. For a nurse to develop a professional identity, they need to be flexible and adapt to any changes in their environment. Utilizing different areas of learning will help the novice nurse develop his or her professional identity in nursing and will in turn create a more positive work environment, and an overall safer environment for patients. Incorporating nursing theories when teaching novice nurses can help with motivation, retention, and desire to learn.

A nurse educator must first understand how each nurse learns to help make their learning meaningful. If a novice nurse feels they are not being heard nor have any type of choice in their learning, they may be less likely to engage and understand the content. Once nurse educators understand how students learn, finding ways to give them choices throughout the course and incorporate their learning styles can help with their success. Finally, offering any type of reward or recognition can motivate nurses to increase their knowledge and work harder to fully grasp the concepts of what is being taught to them. Using nursing theories can not only help with the student's understanding of what is being taught to them, it can also help make their learning meaningful.

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