From In-Service Education to Continuing Education in Nursing: A Brief Historical Journey

Much attention was focused on organizing and standardizing nursing education to improve the development of new nurses in the 1960s. Baccalaureate programs in nursing were on the upswing across the nation and accreditation, as well as approval standards were being raised for nursing education programs. The National League for Nursing lent its support to the American Nurses Association’s (ANA) 1965 position statement on professional nursing education, which called for nurses of the future to be prepared at the bachelor’s level. Diploma schools of nursing had begun their decline in numbers in many places, meanwhile nurses in practice were organizing their own efforts to focus on the education of those in practice to keep up with new knowledge and new ideas.

In 1973, the Vietnam War was still raging in southeast Asia and the first waves of Veterans were returning home with new nursing care challenges. The need and demand for additional education for nurses in practice were growing and the lack of structures to support consistency and quality of the education were increasingly evident. The ANA was providing organizing support to both nurses in practice and degree and diploma granting nursing education programs. Since the earliest days, nurses have embraced education as crucial for primary preparation and equally embraced it for continued practice.

In-service education was the name for education developed and provided for nurses working in hospitals, the primary employment site for almost all nurses at that time. In 1970, the ANA was awarded a 1-year $42,000 grant for a project titled “Identification of Need for Continuing Education for Nurses by the National Professional Organization.” In-service education was being reframed to the more comprehensive term of continuing education to cover all education taking place outside of degree-granting nursing programs. Soon thereafter, the ANA issued its landmark statement on continuing education. In 1974, the ANA published the Standards for Continuing Education in Nursing and ANA Continuing Education Guidelines for State Nurses Associations.

In 1996, I arrived at the national offices as a newly elected member of the ANA Board. Since 1992, I served as the Executive Director of the Utah Nurses Association, where I led accreditation of the Association as a continuing education approver. The process was complex and detailed, involving a comprehensive record-keeping system and formation of structural requirements for who could lead, plan, and deliver nursing continuing education. It was deeply immersive for me because my only knowledge of continuing education up until then had been in the form of in-service education as Director of Nursing of a hospital. In those days, the dissemination of changes from national organizations was much slower. The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) had just been established in 1991, and the ANA was moving its headquarters from Kansas City to Washington, DC. The main forms of communication were newsletters, journals, letters, and the occasional fax. Our records were typed and filed in folders, and our correspondence was delivered by snail mail. It is remarkable to consider how advanced the development of standards and leadership from the ANA was at that time and how important it was to use multiple modes of communication before the internet became the standard form of communication.

Today, we tend to think of technology as part and parcel of innovation because it is so ubiquitous in our work.

From 1970 to 1995, the ANA and educators from around the nation were leading a movement to develop continuing education as a recognized nursing practice specialty. While nurses were busy creating the future of this specialty, The Journal for Continuing Education in Nursing...
(JCEN) was the go-to resource for making the work visible and accessible. Journals like JCEN were essential in spreading the word about changes in nursing. For continuing education knowledge, JCEN is, and has been for 50 years, the primary resource for sharing the evolving thinking about nursing in-service education and in continuing education. The definition of in-service education and the associated nursing staff development has described education and training delivered in the practice setting as facilitation of an individual’s ability to function within a given agency. It is difficult to imagine how high-quality nursing practice could have evolved and been shared without the efforts of nurses and the organizational support of the ANA. For those leading in staff development roles, JCEN became the authoritative resource for contemporizing their practice. When states began to adopt continuing education requirements for relicensing, JCEN became the publisher of the national overview of those requirements. When new standards for continuing education were formulated, JCEN disseminated those, not only in its publication but also through its role as the standard bearer for knowledge and information about this particular educational form. It ensured a historical record of the evolution of continuing education.

By 1997, when I served as Vice President (and ultimately President) of the ANCC, JCEN was the resource where changes in continuing education standards and practices were most consistently disseminated and found. New standards for the continuing education unit at the ANCC were published in JCEN, and staff development and continuing education planners relied on this resource to plan their work. The continuing education accreditation unit at the ANCC evolved in its sophistication and interaction with stakeholders, and staff developers came to rely on JCEN as a vehicle for focused continuing education updates, research, and projects. As we reconstruct the history of the evolution of key nursing practice specialties, the richness of this history is often not well-documented by the doers and creators. Those who have taken it upon themselves to commit to dissemination of knowledge know that journals serve not only to advance knowledge but also to document the path of history. For 50 years, JCEN has been a trusted disseminator of knowledge, professional forum, and historian for the important work of nursing continuing education. Whether you define it as continuing education, professional development, or some yet-to-be-discovered description, JCEN has miles to go before this work is complete.

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