As nurse educators, we are acutely aware that there is too much content to cover in prelicensure nursing programs—the essentials (and realities!) for baccalaureate education form a long list (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008; Tanner, 1998). We are reminded frequently of the increasingly complex nature of nursing practice but asked to prepare more nurses, and often in less time, exemplified by second-degree programs.

Recent studies have provoked our thinking about traditional ways of covering content. An example of the overkill in which we indulge, Giddens and Eddy (2009) provided the staggering revelation that we teach prelicensure students more than three times the number of physical assessment skills than nurses in practice routinely use! Ironside (2004) challenged the notion that “if important content is ‘covered,’ thinking necessarily follows” (p. 5). Rather, Ironside continued, we need to use creative pedagogies for deeper learning. In response to the recommended four major shifts in teaching practices from the Carnegie study (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010), Tanner and Bellack (2010) worried about preparing future faculty—how can graduate education prepare enough nurse educators to meet the demand? and what will be the actual preparation?

While pondering the tension between covering the content and facilitating deep learning at a recent faculty meeting, we uncovered that some among us are having an identity crisis—that is, how we conceptualize our role as educators is an even more fundamental question! do we see ourselves as content coverers or facilitators of learning?

All of us have confronted this unavoidable quagmire of content—unavoidable because of an explosion of available information. Further, we all have content we feel truly expert in or believe is foundational for prelicensure nurses. But covering the content assumes that the educator has all the knowledge and his or her role is to somehow transfer that knowledge to the receptive brains of students. This assumption simplifies the evaluation of learning because we need only ask for it back on a test to see whether students learned it—at least for the test!

Not that facilitating deeper learning is an easy endeavor for the educator, nor does it ever end! The diverse demographics of our learners make it an even more significant challenge than simply replacing some passive teaching strategies with interactive ones. The range of today’s learners is stunning—from the very young to those in midlife, the first in a family to attend college to the student with multiple degrees, the student from a culture where autonomous thinking is not valued to an expert in another profession—all may be part of the same cohort. Facilitating deeper learning is a much more challenging role for educators of students from diverse backgrounds.

The vernacular, such as “learner-centered,” “concept-based learning,” “experiential learning,” and “student engagement,” has crept into our vocabulary; however, do we walk the talk? As facilitators of learning, our responsibility is to plan the banquet and lay the table with delicacies (learning activities) that appeal to a wide array of diners (learners) while satisfying their hunger (outcomes). This responsibility poses challenges because some of us don’t know how to re-form our identities to become facilitators of learning. Benner et al. (2010) gave us some direction, providing detailed examples of expert teachers and meaningful findings: novice nurses need more opportunities to synthesize knowledge and apply it, more clinical dilemmas in the classroom, and more integration between theory and practice.

It requires an intentional decision and ongoing commitment to shift to a new role identity and preserve it. Let me challenge us all to take three steps to make or maintain this shift:

- Reflect on your educational practices: What am I doing well in facilitating students’ deep learning? What concept needs a different approach for deeper learning that might even be transferable to understanding other concepts?
- Take risks. Make a deliberate plan to test a different learning activity and means for evaluating the learning, related to one or more course outcomes.
- Share your learning! Relate your experiences to a trusted colleague or at a course coordination meeting or as a Syllabus Selection or Educational Innovation in the
We need to build a collaborative learning community of nurse educators by sharing our successes and lessons learned from daring to do something different.

Students are challenged by their role as practice-based learners and are looking for guidance. Recently, a student at our university wrote, “I have come to realize that nursing school exists not so much to teach us the rote skills of nursing or even to fill our heads with an assortment of facts... but rather to baptize us into the profession to help us ‘think like nurses.’” If we believe that teaching students to think like nurses is what we are doing, we must rethink our teaching practices to cultivate their thinking. However, before we can radically change our teaching practices, we must first reflect upon and transform our identities as nurse educators. Our students’ future professional competence and success depends on it.

References

Kathie Lasater, EdD, RN, ANEF
Oregon Health & Science University
School of Nursing
Portland, Oregon

The author has no financial or proprietary interest in the materials presented herein.
doi:10.3928/01484834-20101117-01