**Syllabus Selections**  Innovative Learning Activities

**Occupational Health Assessment: A Tool for Nursing Faculty**

The goals of occupational health nursing are to promote and protect the health and safety of the working population (Rogers, 2003). In May 2010, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 65% of the U.S. civilian population was active in the workforce. Maintaining the health and safety of this large group presents an ongoing challenge for employers and health care professionals. Nurse educators strive to find effective and meaningful strategies to teach occupational health and safety content to nursing students.

Although most community and public health nursing textbooks include theory on occupational health nursing and information about the multiple roles of nurses, there are limited occupational health nurses available for placement of students in a clinical learning experience. To fill this void, an innovative occupational health assessment (OHA) assignment was created, implemented, and evaluated, with the goal of exposing students to workplace health risks associated with diverse occupations.

Most people have preconceived ideas of various occupations but possess little knowledge of the health risks involved. New meanings surface when students investigate an unfamiliar work environment from the workers’ perspective. For example, most students realize that a fire fighter has a dangerous job; however, after completing the OHA, they understand that one of the greatest health risks in this occupation includes psychosocial health risks to not only the worker, but also his or her family. This type of learning closely parallels the framework of Ausubel (1978), who presented assimilation theory as a method for learners to assimilate old meanings with new meanings.

Initially, students review the course materials and participate in class discussions about the health risks associated with various occupations and how the occupational health nurse serves to minimize these risks through primary and secondary prevention strategies. Next, they choose an occupation that interests them, select someone to interview, introduce themselves, explain the purpose of the assignment, and obtain permission to visit the work site and ask questions about the work environment.

At the work site, the student uses a structured assessment guide to assess for any exposure to occupational risks that have the potential to effect the worker’s health. The student assesses for six occupational risk categories modified from those identified by Rogers (2003) in the workplace: physical, chemical, biological, ergonomic, psychosocial, and technological risks. Next, the student interviews the worker and inquires about his or her perception of health risks in the work environment.

After collecting this information, when appropriate the student suggests ways to decrease or eliminate the identified health risks. Students compare the worker’s perception of health risks with their own and analyze the findings to formulate two priority nursing diagnoses. Finally, students review the responses of the individual interviewed and write a journal entry reflecting about the learning experience. They post this entry online, which allows their classmates to learn about health risks associated with different occupations. Each journal entry is as unique as the diverse occupations the students choose to assess.

The OHA assignment resulted in positive outcomes for nursing students, nursing faculty, and individual workers. Students expanded their knowledge of the health risks associated with diverse occupations, nursing faculty created a way to fill the void of limited learning opportunities in the area of occupational health nursing, and workers obtained increased accessibility to health care information as students shared their observations about potential health risks at the work site. The structure of the assignment allowed the students to create new meanings, appreciation, and understanding of workplace health risks and nurses’ role in decreasing or eliminating these risks through primary and secondary prevention strategies.

**References**


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**Who Do You Bring to Practice? Making Plaster of Paris Masks**

This article describes a learning activity that provides students with the opportunity to explore who they are and how their own history, interests, attitudes, values, and beliefs affect who they become as an individual. The mask-making activity and accompanying written assignment are designed to help students realize how these underpinnings and differences shape them as individuals who have a particular understanding of the world, what it means to be a helper, and, ultimately, what it means for them to be a nurse. Nurse educators are aware of the importance of self-exploration and understanding personal growth; however, much of this personal work is left to students to explore on their own. Active learning activities could be more fully exploited to help students engage in this self-exploration within a nurturing and curious environment.

The mask-making activity is used with students enrolled in an Introduction to Nursing course. Some of the students are exploring whether they want to enter the field of nursing, whereas others are applying for admission into a program and still others are matriculated students within the school of nursing. This activity is scheduled late in the semester (weeks 11 and 12 of 15 weeks), so students have completed readings about the history of nursing, nursing theory, car-
ing, sustainability, balance, difference, diversity, privilege, and communication. In addition to the information provided in the syllabus, there are required course readings (Dass & Gorman, 1985; Karl, 1992). In class discussion the week prior, students are informed about the learning activity and purpose.

Pedagogy

Active learning is a teaching method whereby students are encouraged and expected to engage in their own learning (Bevis & Watson, 1989). Students are engaged in learning that is designed to help them think about, discover, process, and apply information with varying degrees of curiosity and insight. Foundational to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing’s baccalaureate essentials (2008) is the integration of liberal education and nursing science, but there is limited evidence that this connection is made consistently within nursing education (Zorn, 2009).

The interconnectedness of liberal education and nursing science fosters the opportunity for faculty members to develop meaningful learning activities that help students reflect on and explore their own perspectives of themselves within a creative environment. There is a strong emphasis within the Essentials of Baccalaureate Education (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008) for the development and awareness of personal values and attention to diversity and differences that direct faculty to take risks to move learning out of the traditional format of lecture and into the realm of the aesthetic or experiential.

Pivotal to this learning activity is the written reflection assignment. Reflection within any learning activity is seen as foundational for growth and expanded understanding of the self and others. Reflection, as a form of thinking and learning, may be cultivated through experiential learning. Learning is evident when there is a reformulation of meaning that leads to a greater understanding or change in thought, feeling, or action. As part of this learning activity, students are required to write a brief reflection of their experience.

Materials and Instructions

Materials needed for this activity are minimal and relatively inexpensive. Directions can be found at http://www.artlex.com/ed/Maskmaking.html. Instruct students to remove their contact lenses because the grit from the plaster of Paris can be irritating to eyes. Students who voice concern about putting plaster on their faces may make a mask of their hand or foot instead.

During the mask-making time, students have the opportunity to appreciate the challenge of communicating with someone who has limited communication abilities because their partner is unable to see or speak as the mask is made and dries. This communication challenge is discussed during the debriefing after everyone has finished the activity.

The following week, after the masks have dried, students are asked to decorate their masks. They may bring items in or use a craft box that is supplied for this purpose. Once the masks are decorated, each student shares with the group the meaning of the items they have placed on the mask and talk about who it is that they will bring to their practice. Following this in-class discussion, students write a reflection paper where they further discuss the meaning of their mask, the “who” they will bring to practice, and how this information relates to them becoming a nurse.

Student Responses

Students overwhelmingly gave positive evaluations to this learning activity. Their feedback validated the instructor’s perceptions of the success of the assignment. They commented that the mask-making activity gave them a broader perspective of who they are, helped them to understand how their past lived experiences matter, and enhanced their perspective of what it will mean for them to be a nurse. They shared stories and information not commonly part of the classroom experience, made connections with one another, and laughed a lot. Students expressed an increase in understanding of themselves, of one another, and of how this openness in communication will be helpful as they work with people of diverse cultures and differently lived experiences.

References


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