Appraising Evidence for Everyday Research Questions

Evidence Appraisal With Undergraduate Nursing Students

Evidence-informed decision making, an increasingly established concept in nursing settings (Haynes, 2007), is a skill that undergraduate nursing students learn to appreciate and apply in their practice. However, critical evidence appraisal has been identified as a teaching and learning challenge with nursing students for many institutional and practical reasons (Janke, Pesut, & Erbacker, 2011). Enhancing relevant, meaningful, and student-centered learning through contextualized learning activities is one approach to overcoming such challenges (Gonzalez & Fenske, 2012).

A final integration learning activity within a Research for Health and Community Practice course takes an innovative, contextualized approach to understanding critical research appraisal. In this course, students gain knowledge and skills to search, read, interpret, appraise, and apply research findings for nursing practice. A variety of teaching strategies are incorporated, including lectures, films, online media, classroom discussions, and in-class group activities. Assignments include evidence appraisal and critique of research in policies and clinical guidelines. In the final in-class learning activity, students appraise evidence to respond to health-related questions they may encounter in their everyday lives.

Learning Activity: Evidence Appraisal to Answer “Everyday Questions”

This activity transfers evidence-appraisal knowledge and skills beyond the curriculum to everyday applications. In the final classes of a semester-long course, groups of three to four students collaboratively search and critically appraise evidence relating to selected health questions. Students select one of several case studies from a collection of examples of everyday health dilemmas or questions. For example, three of several everyday questions in the list of choices are:

- At a family reunion, your 75-year-old great aunt mentions, “I’ve heard aluminum cans and pots and pans are bad for your health. You’re in nursing school. What do think?” What do you tell her based on the latest evidence?
- Your cousin is getting married in June. She has been paying for vitamin B12 injections to accelerate her weight loss efforts before the big day. Is she wasting her money, or could it help her waistline?
- Your friend is training with a university sports team and uses energy drinks following rigorous exercise and competitions. Your other friend thinks it is bogus and that energy drinks are “just sugar.” One friend comments, “You’re almost a nurse. Who wins this argument anyway?” What do you tell them?

In this activity, students (a) search the latest evidence, (b) appraise the evidence found, and (c) synthesize the evidence, producing a short presentation of their findings to share with classmates. Students access online databases and library resources within the classroom setting to complete the activity. In the subsequent class, students present their critical appraisal, providing an evidence-informed decision to the case study, after which students rank and vote on the best evidence-based argument.

Faculty Reflections and Student Feedback

This activity accomplished the objectives of review, summary, and knowledge application in a manner relevant to students’ everyday contexts. Students found they could apply the course concepts they had previously found perplexing, and feedback about the learning activity was overwhelmingly positive. For example, one student commented: “I never imagined I could search and respond to questions so quickly and actually understand what I am reading.”

Faculty found that the activity facilitated student integration of course concepts in preparation for their final examination and emphasized students’ understanding of the practicality of critical appraisal skills for everyday contexts.

This learning activity demonstrated the applicability of critical evidence appraisal across multiple contexts.

References


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