It’s All About Them: Strategies to Engage Undergraduates in a Research Course

Research is not a subject that initially warms the hearts of undergraduate nursing students, and some would go so far as to suggest that research has nothing to do with “real” nursing. However, in the era of evidence-informed practice, it is important for baccalaureate students to become knowledgeable consumers of research so that they can appraise research evidence and determine the merit and applicability of research for use in practice (Cameron, 2013).

The launch of a new curriculum at the author’s university provided an opportunity to develop strategies to engage 36 students in a 39-hour “Research for Evidence-Informed Practice” course in their second year of studies. Each week, in self-assigned groups and using critiquing criteria, the students examined an article that was relevant to the class topic. The primary goal of the course was for students to develop primary critical appraisal skills so that they can critically think about the research they encounter in their daily lives, whether it be a source from the media or related to a clinical treatment effectiveness and the use of systematic reviews.

Discussion of Research in the Media

On week 4 of the course, for the first 10 minutes of the class, students used their basic knowledge of research designs to analyze and critique articles from the media regarding current research. The articles were provided by faculty members, and students were asked, “If you wanted to address this particular research issue, what might be the best method to do this?” The article that garnered the most discussion was New study pans liberation therapy, which was about a treatment for multiple sclerosis (The Canadian Press With StarPhoenix Files, 2013). Many students in the class had personal knowledge of individuals who have MS and who travelled outside of Canada at their own expense to receive the controversial treatment indicated in the article. Discussion ensued regarding how to determine treatment effectiveness and the use of systematic reviews.

Research as a Way to Answer My Questions

Another weekly research article investigated whether there was a personality type for nurses and, if there was, whether nursing schools should use an admission screening tool for this purpose. The students then used critiquing criteria to review the article. Afterward, the students were quite adamant that the school they were attending should have a screening tool other than grades from high school transcripts. They were then asked to search the literature over the next week and bring in one abstract that may or may not support their opinion. A lively discussion arose when the students found that many of their opinions were not supported by the research.

Student Results and Reactions

Fifty percent of the students completed the course evaluation. They were generally positive regarding their and the author’s engagement in the research class. They enjoyed the active learning strategies, as demonstrated by the following two comments:

- “I took away a lot more from this class than I initially expected and gained skills I will be able to use in future…”
- “I appreciate the stories she told in class as I was able to relate [research] material to real life and I appreciated that she had brought current news events to discuss and to help make things relevant.”

The goal of encouraging students to develop primary critical appraisal skills, so that they can critically think about the research evidence they come across in their daily lives, was accomplished.

References


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