Giving Back: Using Alumni for a Nursing Skills Day

Engaging alumni in a nursing program is an effective way to expose students to nursing professionals with specialized skills, as well as to provide alumni with an opportunity to give back to their alma mater. This article describes a creative skills day designed by faculty using alumni with talents and expertise in a variety of health care specialties to teach sessions to second-semester nursing students. The goal of the sessions was to provide second-semester students with an opportunity to practice nursing skills with assistance and guidance from alumni nurses prior to the start of a clinical rotation.

Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory was used as the theoretical framework for designing the skills day. Kolb’s theory focuses on the value of experience in learning. For this activity, a modified version of Kolb’s model using all four components (i.e., concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation) was applied in the design and implementation of the skills day (Kolb, 1984).

Planning

Planning for the skills day began approximately 2 months in advance, at which point it was decided to use alumni for both engagement and to extend teaching capacity, especially related to more advanced skills (e.g., intravenous [IV] insertion). Faculty identified and contacted recent alumni who worked in diverse areas of nursing to participate. A total of seven practicing nurses assisted with the skills day, along with two nursing faculty and one child development specialist from a local early intervention program.

Engagement Exercises

The skills day began with students participating in two exercises meant to engage them in the learning activities for the day. One exercise involved the use of postcards with a variety of images. Students were asked to select one postcard that represented how they felt at the start of the semester prior to their clinical rotation and one that represented where they saw themselves at the end of the semester. In the second exercise, students were asked to use Play-Doh™ to sculpt an object that reflected what nursing meant to them and share their sculpture and reflections with a partner and the class.

Skills Stations

Students then were divided into groups rotating through five different skills stations led by alumni nurses: (a) child development, (b) simulation with a pediatric manikin and her mother, (c) medication calculation review, (d) simulation with an adult patient with pneumonia and diabetes, and (e) skills laboratory. In the skills laboratory, students reviewed basic assessment skills, IV insertion and line care, catheter insertion, nasogastric tube placement and verification, and vital sign measurements. These types of experiences allowed the professional nurses (alumni) to create an environment for learning that fostered the students’ ability to look at the whole picture and build on their physical assessment and critical reasoning skills for the next clinical rotation.

Alumni nurses reported that the opportunity to provide practical advice and assistance to students regarding study skills and self-care was valuable. Students also reported that these informal conversations with alumni nurses were valuable for helping them to think about ways to manage their intense nursing coursework in the future.

Reflection Exercise

At the conclusion of the day, students participated in a reflection exercise using a bean seed as a visual metaphor of their potential growth throughout the semester from just a seed to a mature plant. Toward the end of the activity, students were encouraged to think deeper about the impact of the day’s experiences on their future learning and to develop a plan for active experimentation of the knowledge obtained in their upcoming clinical rotations.

Overall, the students were provided with experiential learning situations that allowed them to gain knowledge from completing the experiences with the intent of applying these skills to new situations in the next clinical rotation. The skills day (and subsequent clinical rotations) provided all of the students with concrete experiences (opportunities to do, feel, and watch), brief reflective observations (time for reflection and observations), opportunities for abstract conceptualization (time to think and plan), and future clinical experiences in the semester for active experimentation (ability to apply what they have learned; McLeod, 2010).

Feedback

Students and nurses were asked to provide feedback via survey. Results for students (n = 27) indicated that on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), 70% of students rated the value of the skills day at 8 or higher in helping to develop their assessment skills, and 85% of students rated the use of alumni to enhance the sessions at 8 or higher. When asked about the most valuable skills they learned, the students provided the following responses:

- Skills!!! I loved that we were able to ask questions and it was very open.
- To be confident in my knowledge.
- Not knowing is okay; we’ll get there.
- Made me think critically.
- Reflection—makes me ready for next semester.
- Alumni interaction.
- Talking with alumni; [it] was great reassurance about future.

Results for nurses (n = 5) indicated that on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), all of the alumni rated the day as a valuable experience for them personally (score of 8 or higher), all of the alumni felt it was a great way to “grow” the next generation of nurses (score of 10), and the day provided a meaningful way to engage alumni in the nursing program at the college (score of 10). Written
feedback from the nurses indicated their willingness to participate in future experiences with the nursing program, serve as a guest lecturer, and serve as preceptors or mentors.

Designing a skills day focused on experiential learning proved to be a successful activity for nursing students and a meaningful way for nursing alumni to give back and share their knowledge and expertise with their alma mater.

**References**


Lynnea H. Myers, MSN, RN, PHN, CPNP
lmyers@gustavus.edu
Jessica L. Stadick, MSN, RN, PHN
Jessica L. Helget, BAN, PHN
Gustavus Adolphus College

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