Applying Leadership Theory to Practice Using a Structured Clinical Journal

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2008) wants students in bachelor of science in nursing programs to be provided with clinical learning opportunities that ensure they meet the bachelor of science in nursing Essentials. To meet these requirements, successful integration of knowledge-from-theory courses into clinical practice requires an active learning strategy that engages students differently. One way of achieving this outcome is through the use of a structured journal (Rubenfeld & Sheffer, 2010). A clinical leadership journal is a writing assignment that enhances students’ ability to critically think through analysis and synthesis of leadership concepts as they apply to clinical practice (Raterink, 2016). In our college of nursing, the assignment is part of a leadership internship course that focuses on the integration and application of leadership knowledge and skills to demonstrate the ability to design, provide, manage, and coordinate evidence-based, culturally competent, and cost-effective nursing care.

The assignment guides students in connecting leadership theory with research and practice by analyzing the gaps between the evidence (e.g., best practices, policies, or protocols) and actual clinical practice (Raterink, 2016). This is accomplished through the documentation of observations at the internship site, discussions with the leadership preceptor, charge nurse, and manager, and review of the leadership literature. In the clinical setting, students apply key topics, such as:

- Leadership.
- Change theory.
- Budgeting.
- Staffing.
- Scheduling.
- Assignments.
- Models of care delivery.
- Problem solving.
- Teams.
- Delegation and supervision.
- Conflict management.
- Patient safety.
- Quality improvement.
- Risk management.

In the clinical leadership journal, students answer open-ended questions in each topic area by defining the key leadership concept from the literature, providing specific examples of its application or its lack thereof in the clinical setting, and analyzing the gap between the literature and observed clinical practice. Students also reflect on personal learning and indicate how they would change practice based on what they have learned. For example, the assignment for week 2 requires that the term leadership be defined. Structured application questions include: (a) describe a situation on the unit in which leadership was practiced, (b) describe the leadership style and type of power observed, (c) evaluate whether the leadership style and type of power was effective for the situation, and (d) after reflection, describe what you would have done differently. Each week’s assignment is submitted online by students and reviewed and graded by faculty using a rubric designed to evaluate achievement of the assignment objectives. Faculty give feedback to students on clarity of concept definition, leadership content understanding, literature used that supports ideas, and gap analysis strength.

Evaluation of the journals indicated that students effectively applied theory to practice when questions guided their understanding of the leadership content. Students’ experiences in the clinical setting offer them the opportunities to use the leadership lens to more thoroughly understand the value of the content and its application to the real world of clinical practice, and the journal helps them in transitioning to professional practice. Insights gained from reflection demonstrate students’ understanding of clinical situations and their personal learning through the reflective process. Faculty have also found the journal helpful in identifying the students’ strengths and learning needs. Weekly feedback given by faculty validates learning, poses questions to help students think critically, and redirects thinking when issues related to conceptual analysis are recognized.

The guided clinical leadership journal with personal reflection is thus a creative activity that can facilitate students meeting the baccalaureate essentials. It actively engages students in applying leadership theory to clinical practice and provides valuable insights for student learning.

References


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