In an online pharmacology course designed for the master’s nurse educator student, small-group work is a teaching–learning strategy used to develop a case study–based assignment. The purpose of this innovative approach provides graduate nursing students with the opportunity to develop their role as nurse educators while broadening their pharmacological knowledge. This unfolding case study assignment is grounded in the theory of the comprehensive group learning model by Ulrich and Glendon (2005), which incorporates the concepts of cooperative learning within student group work, merges experiential learning through the development of an assignment, and integrates critical thinking through the use of questions, participation in the discussions, and a final reflection.

Nursing faculty creates a learning paradigm that encourages the student to assume the role of teacher or facilitator and structures the environment so students become active participants within the learning process. Students design a case study and a corresponding discussion activity throughout the duration of the 15-week course, which promotes critical thinking and problem solving for their peers who will also, in turn, assume the role of student. The course room within the learning management system is a private discussion area that is set up to enhance participation and to promote a sense of cohesiveness for the students.
Through cooperative learning, students learn how to work effectively as a team, which is an expectation in the real work world. They introduce themselves, assign responsibilities for the completion of the assignment, and make decisions about the body system and corresponding disease that is the basis of the problem situation. The pharmacology, pharmacogenetics, and cultural texts, as well as research of the current literature, serve as resources. The scaffolding method of learning is introduced as students begin to work through the course modules to develop the patient-specific case. Students incorporate the component of experiential learning as they reflect on their experiences caring for patients and their prior life resources as nurses. The transfer of that knowledge, through the connection of critical and higher level thinking, occurs as students build a case incorporating aspects of the patient’s cultural and ethnic beliefs, genetic characteristics, related ethical considerations, and appropriate pharmacological treatments to the chosen illness (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011; Ulrich & Glendon, 2005).

Each group is provided 1 week to present and facilitate the discussion of their case study with their peers. At this point, the students become facilitators and pose thoughtful, focused questions that promote discussion and analysis of the topic, resulting in a higher level of critical thinking that aligns with this key component of the theory (Ulrich & Glendon, 2005). A final reflective writing assignment asks students to assess their experiences in the case study assignment.

By discussing their personal experience of group work and evaluating their roles as nurse educators, they are able to evaluate their learning, assess whether they met the goals of the assignment, and consider opportunities for improvement (Ulrich & Glendon, 2005). Students found the case study format to be an engaging teaching activity that represented real-life situations that otherwise can be difficult to achieve in the online environment. Students felt that researching different illnesses, treatments, cultural considerations, and genetic concerns made their personal strengths and weaknesses clearer. For example, several students realized their need to have a more advanced knowledge of pharmacology related to specific disease states. Several opinions arose related to group work. It was seen as an advantage to share multiple points of view to solve problems. Several students felt that organizing group work in the online environment was difficult but found they gained a better understanding of the educator’s role in developing a teaching strategy and guiding student learning.

References

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