Syllabus Selections  Innovative Learning Activities

Welcome to the Clinical Nurse Leader Shark Tank

The clinical nurse leader (CNL) role was developed in 2003 by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing in response to a call for a more safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient, and equitable health care system (Institute of Medicine, 2001). CNLs are trained as advanced generalists and use evidence-based practice, their clinical expertise and systems focus, and lateral integration skills to improve the quality of health care delivery at the point of care (Harris, Roussel, & Thomas, 2018). As such, to be effective in delivering high-quality, safe, and cost-conscious care, a working knowledge of business principles and financial literacy are essentials for future CNLs (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2013).

A southeastern school of nursing program offers an innovative 32-credit clinical nurse leadership option in the Master’s degree health care systems practice area. A capstone course (300 clinical hours) is required in the last semester, where students implement and evaluate an evidence-based quality improvement (QI) project to enhance care delivery at the microsystem level. The CNL student uses skills to conduct a needs assessment, identify an intervention based on evidence and designs, and implements and evaluates a nurse-led QI intervention project. The goal of the project is to lead to measurable improvement in the healthcare delivery of services and the health status of a targeted patient or population. An integral component of the QI project is the development of a business plan for the implementation of their project, including evidence-based rationale for the proposed project, a detailed needs assessment, estimated costs of the proposed project, detailed cash flow, operational plan, budget justification, break-even analysis, and projected cost savings.

As such, we created an innovative and highly engaging in-class activity modeled after ABC’s Emmy-award winning television show Shark Tank (Spirkko, Fuchs, & Carter, 2009). In the television version, aspiring entrepreneurs make their business presentation to a five-person panel (the sharks) of tough, self-made, multimillionaire and billionaire tycoons of industry (e.g., technology, retail, real estate, marketing). In turn, the sharks inquire and grill contestants on their idea and product and exercise their option to use their own money to invest in a contestant’s business or not.

Using the Shark Tank show as our model, we developed the CNL Shark Tank, where aspiring CNLs present their QI proposals to a panel of three senior nursing faculty (health care sharks), acting as chief nursing officer, chief financial officer, and chief technology and safety officers of major health care systems. Similar to the Shark Tank television program, the panel had no prior knowledge of the QI projects and were hearing the QI pitches for the first time.

As our CNL course is a blended learning format, students have a mix of online and class activities. To prepare for the in-person activity, students review a module on business of health care and use components of the module to develop a business case for their identified project. During the class session, students deliver a 3-minute pitch to the Shark Tank panel explaining their QI project, the projected costs of implementation and projected financial return on investment in the project, and why the health care sharks should adopt and invest in the project. The goals of the learning activity were to promote scholarship and innovation in nursing education by providing CNL students with an opportunity to prepare, “sell,” and defend their ideas and receive constructive feedback and mentoring, in a fun and novel medium.

Similar to the TV show, the sharks were seated front and center in a single row. After students pitched their QI proposal and business plan, the health care sharks asked rapid-fire–style questions about their fiscal data, sought clarification about the project and student’s rationale for implementation, and gave real-time constructive feedback. The Shark Tank forum set the stage for lively engagement and verbal exchanges, collegiality, and experiential learning. The sharks not only challenged the students but embraced their role as sharks and challenged one another in terms of why their respective institutions would be a better fit for the identified QI projects.

Examples of QI projects and business proposals include:

- Incorporating weekly family rounds by nurse managers to assess and address geriatric patient and family needs.
- Improving nasogastric tube placement in pediatric population using a care bundle.
- Providing staff meetings available online for RN and staff to improve care consistency.
- Implementing a nurse’s aide bootcamp to improve care consistency and reliability in preventing falls.
- Streamlining and standardizing discharge process education for medical interns to prevent readmissions.

The CNL Shark Tank was well received by students and faculty. Faculty embraced their roles as sharks and contentiously fought over QI projects, weaving a lively spirit of competitive fun into the classroom learning. Constructive feedback and suggestions were plentiful, sparking many relevant conversations in addressing both fiscal feasibility and sustainability. Next year, we will ask more faculty to participate to provide a more robust and diverse Shark Tank panel, including representation from the patient perspective and microsystem level.

Students admitted to being nervous initially, but once they started answering questions on their QI project, they became confident in their knowledge and rationale for the project and commented that this experience was entertaining and also allowed them to practice the delivery of a pitch to administration. Students were receptive to faculty feedback and, when debriefed, suggested we continue with the Shark Tank activity. Students commented it was a great opportunity to break down
the project into its essential elements and focus on the financial bottom lines.

Most notable was when the students delivered their final presentations of their QI projects at the end of the course. Students noted that they had gained confidence in their presentation skills, based on the previous Shark Tank activity, which was evidenced by their incorporation of the feedback received from the Shark Tank activity into their final presentation.

Participating in the Shark Tank panel bred considerable confidence in the students’ presentation skills, which translated to highly effective and comprehensive final presentations.

On completion of the course, students were able to design, implement, and evaluate a clinical problem on a microsystems level, while gaining insight of the financial implications; essential skills needed to translate to professional practice to transform the health care system from within.

Like all pop culture sensations, the popularity of the Shark Tank program will probably wane. However, creating authentic contexts where active learning and student and faculty engagement can flourish is timeless.

References

Maureen J. Baker, PhD, RN, CNL
mjbaker@email.unc.edu
Meg Zomorodi, PhD, RN, CNL
University of North Carolina

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