Use of Parallel Charting With Senior-Level Baccalaureate Nursing Students

Undergraduate baccalaureate nursing education has traditionally focused on biological disease processes and the clinical and technical components that are required to care for patients in hospitalized settings. Historically, little attention has been given to systematically helping nursing students to develop their identities as professional nurses. Strategies are needed to help nursing students to appreciate the experiences their patients are having and to possess the skills to appropriately cope with their own emotions related to patient scenarios.

Senior-level baccalaureate nursing students (n = 144) at a large urban university were asked to write a “parallel chart,” which was first conceptualized by the internist physician Rita Charon in 1993. Students were first given the following excerpt from Charon’s (2008) book:

> Every day, you write in the hospital chart about each of your patients. You know exactly what to write there and the form in which to write it. You write about your patient’s current complaints, the results of the physical exam, laboratory findings, opinions of consultants, and the plan. If your patient dying of prostate cancer reminds you of your grandfather, who died of that disease last summer, and each time you go into the patient’s room, you weep for your grandfather, you cannot write that in the hospital chart. We will not let you. And yet it has to be written somewhere. You write it in the Parallel Chart. (pp. 155-156)

Nursing students were asked to reflect upon their care of an assigned patient during their critical care clinical rotation. As a course requirement, they submitted their parallel chart of approximately 300 to 400 words to the online course management system. Students were then asked to read their parallel chart aloud during a post-clinical conference. Clinical faculty created a safe space for students to share their parallel charts and guided the discussion afterward to help promote identification of what their patients were enduring and what the students themselves experienced in their journey to becoming nurses after caring for these patients. Students were awarded points if their parallel chart met the criteria set forth and provided evidence of understanding of the purpose of parallel charting.

Some nursing students initially viewed the assignment as too “touchy-feely.” However, after the exercise, student feedback was overwhelmingly positive. One student stated, “Parallel charting helped me realize that not only do I have an impact on my patients, but they have an even larger impact on me.” Another student spoke to the parallel chart’s emotional benefits by stating, “It helped me decompress. Nursing can be emotionally heavy, and the chart allowed me to express some feelings that I did not even know I was holding on to.”

The lessons that were learned indicate that parallel charting may be used effectively across all levels of nursing education to aid in the development of a strategy to decompress from emotionally challenging situations. Our hope is that this exercise will ultimately give our students a tool to use as professionals that will not only help them provide better care for their patients but also help them to provide better care for themselves as professional nurses.

Reference

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