Supporting Transition Milestones in the Nursing Curricula

Nursing curricula is designed to be progressively more challenging each new academic term. Students are required to retain foundational knowledge and continually build upon their previous learning experiences by applying new knowledge to increasingly complex situations. In nursing education, strategies have long been examined that support new graduates transitions into practice. However, few strategies address the many other milestones and transition periods during nursing school that affect student success. For example, the critical care course provides knowledge in the care of acute and critically ill patients requiring high levels of nursing care (BSNedu.org, n.d.). The critical care course is often situated in a prime location within the nursing curriculum that requires students to make a unique transition by building upon previous knowledge and applying new knowledge in the provision of care for patients with complex health problems, resulting in a key transition period.

Schlossberg’s transition theory identifies four main factors that contribute to a person’s ability to effectively transition: (a) situation, (b) self-factors, (c) social support, and (d) strategies (Stankey, 2018). In reviewing these four factors, the strategies factor addresses interventions that can be deployed to help students be successful (Stankey, 2018). Therefore, we identified a need to explore strategies to support students’ transition into the critical care course, as students often entered with feelings of unpreparedness and the inability to retain previously learned information to build on new knowledge. We sought to identify a strategy to improve student retention of previously learned material and introduce students to the concept of critical care nursing. The overall goal of supporting a successful transition through improved preparation and planning was the target. We aimed to achieve this by providing academic support through a critical care boot camp prior to course entry to facilitate student learning and prepare students for higher level thinking.

The critical care boot camp was a 3-day workshop held at least 2 weeks prior to the start of the critical care class and focused on three major conceptual topics: (a) perfusion, (b) gas exchange, and (c) medication calculation. All students entering the critical care course were invited to participate in the boot camp, although it was not required. Each 6-hour day challenged students to think critically regarding these three topics by recalling previously learned material that would support the transition to a higher level of thinking. Students were responsible for actively engaging in the learning environment and completing assignments at home to contribute to class discussion. Day 1 focused on perfusion where electrocardiograms, electrolyte imbalances, management of dysrhythmias, myocardial infarction and its impact on cardiac output were examined. Day 2 focused on gas exchange, where artificial airways, respiratory failure, pulmonary embolus, and respiratory distress were examined. Day 3 focused on medication calculation where students reviewed calculating medication rates and safe medication administration. Students were also introduced to the concept of critical care nursing, the types of patients they would be providing care for, and the previously learned concepts and how they would be integrated into the new knowledge learned. Students were not required to attend all 3 days. However, over 90% of eligible students attended the full 3-day boot camp.

Prior to the implementation of the critical care boot camp, the pass rate for the critical care course was 89%. For the most recent semester where students had the boot camp, the pass rate modestly increased to 95%. Nonformalized verbal feedback from students was correspondingly positive. The 3-day workshop provided students an opportunity to review previously learned material and identify how these concepts would build upon new knowledge required to provide high quality care to patients in an increasingly complex environment. The modest increase in course pass rates are supportive of the workshop’s success. However, an opportunity does exist to further explore the overall effectiveness of the critical care boot camp through a systematic analysis of data and student feedback.

Transition periods and milestones for nursing students occur at various stages in the academic career. The ability to provide academic support to facilitate the transition, increase moral, and improve course pass rates can be meaningful for both students and faculty. Nursing programs should identify key transition periods for students and use these opportunities to provide academic support services, such as the critical care boot camp, to support overall student success.

References


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