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Teaching the Millennial Generation

Considerations for Nurse Educators

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A particular challenge for nurse educators has always been to discover the most relevant ways to promote student learning. Each generation of students presents with unique circumstances. The predominant characteristics of the current generation of nursing students are presented in this article. Suggestions are given regarding strategies to strengthen and maintain the characteristics that will be beneficial to students when they become RNs, while at the same time modifying or diminishing those that will not.

Nursing students of today are characteristically different than students of past generations. Sociologists embrace the notion that each generation is thought to have specific attitudes, traits, core values, and beliefs in common. Influenced by social, economic, and political factors of their time, these similar generational characteristics identify the group as a whole. Most of the students currently applying to nursing education programs are members of the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 2000). While it is important not to stereotype, it is important for both educators and students to work together to strengthen those generational characteristics that will be assets in the nursing profession and modify those that might present limitations for practicing nurses.

General Characteristics of the Millennial Generation

Many of the generational traits attributed to the Millennials were influenced by a period of prosperity. Members of this generation came from relatively affluent families and attentive parents who were constantly vigilant and very involved in their rearing.¹ As children, they probably participated in group activities such as sports, lessons, and play groups. They were raised to love and believe in themselves. They became optimistic and hopeful young adults who developed highly collaborative, creative abilities. This generation has a great propensity for multitasking and networking, and they have greater commitment to workplace organizations than other generations.² They were raised with the Internet, and members are typically quite proficient and comfortable with technology.^{3,4} They are versatile electronic communicators who enjoy Web-based social networking,

instant messaging, and texting. This familiarity has encouraged the development of an investigative nature, independence, and strong views.

The characteristics of confidence, optimism, creativity, commitment, collaboration, multitasking, and propensity for technology are very useful for RNs; however, the Millennials also possess some traits that might be detrimental when they enter into professional practice. Because they are accustomed to electronic modes of communication, this generation may have more difficulty with the more traditional modalities of communication such as writing or speaking face-to-face. They have become accustomed to quick answers via the Internet and may become impatient or easily bored in a nonvirtual environment, and in practice, boredom can lead to complacency and errors. Their attention spans are short, and they are not accustomed to the reflective, systematic thinking that is crucial for practicing professional nurses. They also may have difficulty with problem solving, conflict resolution, prioritizing, and focusing on singular tasks, all of which are needed for clinical reasoning. Millennials tend to score lower on test of self-reliance but higher on tests of stress and anxiety.⁵

Nursing is known to be a stressful profession where practitioners need to be able to assume individual responsibility at times. Finally, research indicates that students in this generation do not have the same perceptions of what constitutes dishonesty as faculty, and integrity is essential in the profession of nursing.

Considerations for Faculty and Students

There is a great need for faculty to engage in discussion about the adequacy of educational approaches to optimize teaching-learning,⁶ and much has been written about how teaching can be tailored to match the learning style preferences of Millennial learners. However, a more useful approach may be to regard the preparation of students for practice as a *shared* responsibility. How can both faculty and students work together to implement learning strategies that correct generational inclinations that will be impediments to professional practice, yet encourage those

seen as strengths? Keeping the characteristics of Millennial learners in mind when nursing courses are being conceptualized, implemented, and managed, faculty can work together with students to develop very relevant approaches.

Contracting

One strategy, as example, when conceptualizing a course is to consider contracting with the students for grades. Using this approach, the professor shares with the students the objectives of the course during the first meeting and then collaborates with them regarding ideas for achieving those objectives. Evaluation of the attainment of objectives will then be written into individual student contracts. For attainment of a certain course letter grade, the student will need to complete a list of agreed-upon assignments at an agreed-upon level of proficiency. Contracts can be renegotiated at midterm if the parties so decide. Contracting in this way reinforces the desirable characteristics of Millennial students for collaboration, creativity, and expression of individuality. Because they have collaborated with respect to how their grades will be generated, contracting has the potential for decreasing stress levels in students. At the same time, it will build a sense of responsibility and allow them to practice problem solving if they are not successfully meeting contractual obligations.

Engaging Students

Whether using contracting or not, professors will want to engage Millennial students with their instructional strategies to help them overcome weaknesses and develop strengths. For example, because these students typically struggle with conflict resolution and prioritizing, but they work well in groups, debating is a successful strategy for engagement. The issues to debate could be collaboratively selected but might present ethical issues that involve conflicts that could confront a practicing nurse. In such cases, solutions are not clearly right or wrong, so students will need to rationalize responses and potential consequences for choices and use effective oral communication skills to convey their positions. Case studies that include provocative questions such as "What would you do if?" or "What would you do first?" also have the capability to elicit critical thinking.^{7,8} Such cases encourage students to consider multiple ways of approaching a problem and various prioritization schemes and possible action outcomes.

Experiential Learning

Integration of experiential learning opportunities is another approach to promote the development of skills to help Millennial students reflect and reason. Experiential learning occurs whenever students are able to derive meaning from experiences, and there are many potential strategies to integrate this concept. One example that has gained popularity in recent years is the use of simulation.⁹

Computerized mannequins can be programmed to simulate patient care situations in which students assess, analyze, consider, react, and then reflect about their experience. The technology associated with simulation may have particular appeal for the Millennial learner, and these experiences can be designed for use in conjunction with clinical

practice to further enhance engagement.¹⁰ However, successful strategies for integrating experiential learning do not have to be this expensive or complex. Simply chronicling an actual person's experience living with a serious health problem or disability and then sharing impressions and insights with a group or in a journal provide an excellent opportunity for experiential learning.¹¹ This additionally has the potential to evoke empathy in Millennial students who were often sheltered when growing up and may not have encountered many people with serious health problems.

Critical Inquiry

Critical inquiry can be integrated with technological literacy in creative assignments that will be compelling to Millennial learners. For example, the concept of electronic journaling encourages students to share subjective reflections about their cognitive learning experiences in a way that uses the technology with which they are adept and also develops writing skills.

Another strategy for encouraging critical inquiry is the use of games with clear learning goals that require students to use decision-making skills.¹² Through encouragement of inquiry and application to practice, games will motivate and have the potential to provide a strong participatory learning environment. Students can use their own creativity to collaborate in the selection of the goals and the construction of the game. For example, in the game of "Stations" (conceptualized by this author), a scorecard is created for each group with a checklist for the numbers of the stations to be used in the activity. At each station, there will be a learning task that relates to a goal for the unit being studied. It might be an empathic activity for gerontology where each student in the group will don a pair of thick glasses and rubber gloves to open pill containers and sort medications, then write a short reflective paragraph about the experience. Another station might have students sort cards with patient scenarios prioritizing who the nurse should see first with the rationale, or involve a simulation requiring students to demonstrate modifying a skill based on a patient situation.

Groups move through the stations, checking off their scorecard as each task is accomplished. The class as a whole can vote on winners of the game based on predetermined factors such as accuracy, creativity, amount of time on tasks, and so on. These are the types of games that have potential for encouraging decision making, writing, motivation, and collaboration.

Academic Integrity and Recognition of Boundaries

Faculty may find themselves dealing with more situations involving academic dishonesty among students in the Millennial generation. Research indicates that these students may not have the same perceptions as faculty regarding what constitutes cheating. An author of a pilot study tested an instrument that explored the perceptions of cheating in undergraduate nursing students and found students had difficulty identifying academic dishonest behaviors.¹³ Access and familiarity with the Internet and electronic devices that

were unavailable to previous generations now provide unique opportunities to cheat and plagiarize.

The profession of nursing requires practitioners to possess a high degree of integrity. For example, professionals will be dealing with controlled substances and with issues involving confidentiality. If students have not learned to value honest behavior in the academic setting, those dishonest behaviors may continue in the practice setting. Also, if students have achieved their academic degrees dishonestly they may be entering the nursing profession lacking fundamental skills to practice safely.

One way to encourage students to recognize dishonest behaviors in a way that reinforces their creative, collaborative, and curious tendencies is to implement "boundaries exercises" throughout the curriculum. These exercises basically present a situation involving questionable student behavior followed by the consideration, "Is this acceptable behavior, and why or why not?" For example, when studying how to complete a literature review as a component of a nursing research course, a boundaries exercise might present an example of a student who has pieced together a literature review by copy-pasting material from 10 different Web sites. Because the endeavor has involved a lot of labor on the part of the student and has produced what appears to be a comprehensive review, some students will contend that the behavior is acceptable. Others will notice that despite the effort involved, it is still plagiarism. Using skills of inquiry, debate, and critical thinking, the students will discover the acceptable behavior.

The collaborative planning of creative assignments that are difficult to plagiarize also helps reduce the tendency to cheat while encouraging the compelling attributes of Millennials. The cases students have during clinical experiences, for example, are specific and unique. They can be used as a foundation for many types of application exercises where the myriad of clinical information is deconstructed and examined in an individualized way. Students can be asked to search for evidence-based research and project how it applies to a particular client. Cases of clients with similar diagnoses can be compared and contrasted. Students can be asked to change one variable in the client's profile (gender, race, a laboratory value) and then conceptualize how that one change would make a difference in client outcomes. These are ideas that encourage clinical reasoning and may be done in a way to strengthen communication and writing skills as well.

Students in the Millennial generation also have some difficulty in recognizing appropriate boundaries. They are used to instant messaging and quick answers using the Internet. They may voice complaints if papers are not graded immediately and try to contact professors at home during unusual hours of the day. They may post inappropriate content on Internet messaging forums not recognizing the boundary of professional presentation and ethical responsibility. The "boundaries exercises" previously mentioned are a useful strategy for helping students with these issues as well. For example, in a nursing leadership course, students could be asked to examine the social networking profiles of random people they know as if these people were being considered as candidates for a nursing position on a unit they were managing. They

can debate elements of the profiles they like and those that they would find abrasive as nurse managers. Through this assignment, students will be encouraged to consider information from a different perspective, which is a good critical-thinking exercise.¹⁴ They will also begin to discover correlations between behavior and consequences and professionalism and perhaps make decisions regarding their personal social networking profiles.

Students learn boundaries by having clear boundaries identified. Office hours are typically printed in the course syllabus; however, professors can also clearly identify the hours that they will be available to receive phone calls and e-mails from students. This can be a collaborative endeavor, assessing the times that are most convenient for both students and faculty. The creation of sharing forums in Web-supported courses also provides a way for students to easily dialogue with peers and discover answers to their queries through avenues other than the professor.

Conclusion

Members of the Millennial generation have many characteristics that will benefit them in a nursing career, including a team orientation, optimistic spirit, and ability to multitask. Their affinity for technology will be useful in a rapidly changing, high-tech healthcare environment. This generation may, however, be lacking certain skills that are crucial to professional nursing, such as reflective thinking, writing skills, dealing with stress, and focusing on a singular task. They also seem to have a somewhat different perception of academic integrity as compared with previous generations. Rather than creating a curriculum tailored to what a Millennial student might simply enjoy, there is value in considering their positive attributes and deficiencies as a group when designing academic strategies. A shared responsibility exists between educators and students to collaboratively engage in academic activities that will acknowledge and enhance the beneficial characteristics of Millennial learners, while at the same time develop those characteristics that need to be strengthened for success in the profession of nursing.

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