

Changing Practice Through Meaningful Assignments: Ideas for Supporting RN-BSN Students

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Abstract:

Although nurses entering RN-BSN programs often perceive that earning the BSN will be of little benefit, upon completion, they do believe they have made professional gains, demonstrating that they have experienced a change in perspective. Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation can guide educators to develop learning activities that allow RN-BSN students to find meaning in the BSN degree while enrolled in a program, rather than after the program has been completed. Examples of learning activities and student reflections are provided.

Keywords: Curriculum Design | Mezirow's Theory of Perspective Transformation | RN-BSN Education | Teaching Activities

Article:

Nurses who enter RN-BSN programs often do so with the belief that earning the BSN will be of little benefit to them. Rather, they perceive it is something they must do in order to advance in their careers (Delaney & Piscopo, 2004; Duffy et al., 2014). However, upon completion of the program, RN-BSN students believe that they have made professional gains (Rush, Waldrop, Mitchell, & Dyches, 2005), demonstrating that, somewhere along the way, they experienced a change in perspective. Although it is a desired outcome for graduates to find meaning in their degrees, is there a way that this change in perspective could occur during an RN-BSN program? Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation can be useful in guiding nurse educators to develop learning activities that allow RN-BSN students to find meaning in the BSN degree while enrolled in a program, rather than after the program has been completed.

Mezirow's Theory

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation is based on the belief that, for learning to occur, adults must transform their perspectives, or meanings, through experience and critical reflection. The 10 phases of perspective transformation, which begin with a "disorienting

dilemma” (p. 68) and conclude with a new perspective, can be applied to nursing students who engage in the process of nursing education and become transformed into professional nurses (Mezirow, 1991). The theory has particular applicability for RN-BSN students, who must critically reflect upon their prior educational and work experiences in order to reshape meanings and acquire new knowledge.

Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, and Casey (2001) utilized Mezirow’s theory when studying RN-BSN students who were enrolled in distance education programs. They believed that RN-BSN students go through the transformation process described by Mezirow, starting with the disorienting dilemma of returning to school, followed by self-examination and a critical assessment of their own practice as a result from going through the program. This process, in turn, develops their professional attitudes. The findings of this research demonstrate that baccalaureate education, including RN-BSN programs offered in a variety of modalities, can lead to a changed perspective in nurses.

According to Mezirow (1991), in order for learning to occur, the learner must first experience a disorienting dilemma. RNs returning to school go through this dilemma as they often question the value of the BSN and wonder why they must pursue additional education when they are already nurses (Delaney & Piscopo, 2004; Duffy et al. 2014; Megginson, 2008). These students are unsure if earning the BSN will indeed change their nursing practice. According to Mezirow, transformation can occur when new ways of acting are explored and acted upon, especially if there is an opportunity for critical reflection.

Often it is after completion of an RN-BSN program that a nurse reflects and begins to fully realize that earning the degree did make a difference in nursing practice (Rush et al., 2005). But what if nurse educators could help students see changes in their practice while they are in the program? How can nurse educators design learning activities that allow students to reflect upon their own practice and critically examine it for needed changes? Furthermore, what role do colleagues and managers of nurses returning to school play in the transformation that occurs that ultimately changes practice?

Meaningful Learning Activities

RN-BSN students benefit from learning activities that allow application to their own nursing practice, as well as an opportunity for reflection. In addition, when learning activities are designed to allow students to collaborate with other nurses such as classmates, colleagues, and nurse managers, they are given an opportunity to further evaluate old ideas and consider new ones. The following describes learning activities, as well as retrospective student reflections, that have been utilized for many years in an RN-BSN program. They have led to practice changes at the individual level, as well as the unit level, and reflect the principles of Mezirow’s theory.

Facts on Aging Quiz

In a required gerontology course, students are asked to take the online Palmore’s Facts on Aging Quiz, which reveals biases toward older adults. After they take the quiz and study the correct answers, the students are asked to give the quiz to a colleague or another nurse. They then write a reflection about their results as well as the reactions of their coworkers. In one student’s reflection, she shared that she gave the quiz to her manager, who believed it was so valuable that all nurses on the unit should take the quiz. This led to an in-service on ageism and how it affects patient care.

Try This Assessment Instrument

The Try This Series provides numerous assessment instruments that can be utilized with older adults. Students are asked to choose an assessment instrument and administer it to an older adult. Their reflection involves documentation of their findings as well as their thoughts about how likely they would utilize the tool again. One student found a falls assessment tool she implemented with an older patient to be more thorough, yet easier to use, than the tool currently used on her unit. When she shared the new tool with her nurse manager, they piloted it on the unit and eventually chose to adopt it.

Identify Community Resources

Students are asked to investigate community resources that could be used by an older adult living in the community. After visiting the resource, the students are asked to evaluate the resource for accessibility, acceptability, availability, and affordability. One student reported that she found this assignment very helpful and used the information she learned with her own family, as well as with her patients. The student stated she had not known there were so many resources available to her patients. Another student stated that, because of this assignment, she did not refer the spouse of a patient to a social worker but researched resources for caregiver respite programs that could be utilized by that family.

Community Resource Intervention Project

Students in a community health course are asked to plan, implement, and evaluate a helpful intervention for their chosen community resource. The students are to work in collaboration with the staff to determine what the resource might need. One student described with great enthusiasm how he identified a gap within the education of a particular patient population and worked to close this gap by providing needed educational materials. The student stated that this was the most meaningful assignment he had done while in the program. It was something he was passionate about and something that allowed him to make real changes in a person's life.

Support From Colleagues and Managers

One key element that these assignments include is some type of interaction with other nurses. Duffy et al. (2014) and Megginson (2008) found that support from colleagues and managers is important to the success of working RN-BSN students. Colleagues, particularly nurse managers, can show support in several ways. In addition to the obvious support of allowing time off in the schedule to attend classes, it is helpful to show an interest in the student's coursework. Asking about school and being a willing participant when asked to be interviewed, assessed, or taught are ways of showing support. It is particularly important to take seriously requests to change the way things are done.

Using Mezirow's theory as a guide, nurse educators can design learning activities in such a way that allows nurses to reflect upon their own current practice and perhaps challenge their assumptions or their own status quo, leading to a change in their nursing practice that they can see immediately. Being intentional in these efforts can lead to desired outcomes, as demonstrated by Langendyk, Mason, and Wang (2016), who utilized Mezirow's theory to revise a medical school curriculum to create more opportunities for student reflection, thereby leading to the development of their professional identity. Power (2016) also used Mezirow's theory to create a framework students could use to guide their reflections and make them more meaningful.

Nurse managers and staff nurses can show support by being a sounding board for nurses who are in RN-BSN programs. With the creation of meaningful assignments, students will be able to see ways that their practice is changing as a result of their BSN education and will therefore be more engaged as learners and ultimately better practitioners.

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