Faculty development in nursing education: a teaching consultation service

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Faculty Development in Nursing Education: 
A Teaching Consultation Service

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For nearly 3,000 years, the dictum “Know Thyself” has been a precept in academia. Faculty members have indeed long sought means for looking at their teaching selves — for avoiding the “unexamined life” which Socrates would have judged, by implication, as unlived. On the university campus, seeking illumination on one’s teaching can be a less than easily satisfied endeavor. College instructors often have neither the time, training, nor the resources to assess their own classroom performance.

An attempt to assist faculty members in taking a comprehensive and in-depth look at their classroom instruction at Indiana University Northwest, an urban, commuter campus in Gary, led to the offering of a service entitled the “teaching consultation process.” This approach to instructional improvement was adapted from a program developed at the Clinic to Improve
University Teaching, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The voluntary, individualized and confidential service allows instructors to work with a trained teaching consultant to collect a variety of information on their classroom performance. The intent is that review and discussion of such information can provide the kinds of insights into teaching which can assist faculty members in identifying and improving instructional strengths and problems.

Among the first campus groups to request consultation services was the Division of Nursing, which offers a two year Associate of Science degree. Their concern with the quality of instruction is reflected in the entire field of nursing education. With the transition of nursing education from hospitals to colleges and universities, an older and academically more diverse student population has increased dramatically. In addition, although highly competent and trained in subject matter and clinical skills, many nurse educators have had little specific preparation for college teaching or exposure to learning theories.

This paper will describe the teaching consultation process from the combined perspectives of the teaching consultant who directed the service and that of a nurse educator who participated in it. Our hope was that this unique process would allow us to identify some of the key problems and issues facing the teacher of this new breed of nursing students. Having gained valuable insights, we now share them with other nurse educators concerned with personal and professional growth.

As background information we will describe the course itself and the student sample. Then we will describe our personal experience with the teaching consultation process, demonstrating the impact of this process on improving teaching skills, increasing sensitivity to the needs of today's nursing students, and promoting awareness of one's teaching self.

The Course

Maternal Child Nursing is offered each semester during the second year of the associate degree program and integrates concepts of obstetrical and pediatric nursing. The teaching method was primarily lecture, supplemented with audio-visual aids, required and outside readings, and time for student questions and comments.

The Student Sample

The sample consisted of 38 students. The subjects included 37 females and one male. Approximately one third of the students were members of minority groups. More than half combined school with family and work obligations. Ages ranged from 19 to 48 years, with more than 95% beyond traditional college age. In addition, one fifth had varying degrees of prior experience as licensed practical nurses or nurse aides, while the remaining four fifths had no previous experience in nursing. This latter group included housewives, mothers and grandmothers as well as students with college backgrounds in arts and sciences, nutrition, and respiratory therapy. This diverse group was representative of most nursing classes on the Gary campus.
The Teaching Consultation Process

The semester-long teaching consultation process included four major phases: an assessment of teaching, analysis of data, improvement efforts, and a final review.

Assessment of Teaching: We began our work together with a personal interview. The interview allowed the instructor to talk in depth about her teaching and allowed the consultant to learn as much as possible about the course and the teaching of it. Our discussion touched on what the instructor hoped students would learn, what particular methods she used; how she assessed student learning; what she perceived to be her teaching strengths and problems; and what her values, attitudes, and assumptions were about teaching and learning.

The instructor then invited the consultant to her class to observe classroom instruction and review it with her. Following the observation, we chose a class to videotape. The video allowed both of us to observe and analyze class activities in detail later.

During the fourth week of classes, we asked for student opinions through a Teaching Analysis By Students (TABS) questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed from research on effective college teaching and includes statements describing teaching behaviors considered important across disciplines and instructional modes. The results provided us with information about the extent to which students thought the instructor's performance in a variety of teaching skills was satisfactory or in need of improvement. In addition, a second section of the questionnaire responses provided us with valuable information about the students' learning styles, attitudes toward the subject, and time and effort put into the course.

Finally, while students filled out the TABS questionnaire, the instructor assessed her own teaching by completing the same questionnaire. The form asked her to indicate areas where she felt were teaching strengths as well as areas with which she was concerned. Comparisons of this self-assessment and students' responses enabled her to determine areas in which she and the students agreed or disagreed in appraising classroom instruction.

After the questionnaire results were processed, we met to review and discuss the information collected from the varied sources, to identify teaching strengths and areas for improvement, and to decide where to focus our efforts during the remainder of the semester.

Data Analysis: From the information gathered, it was clear that the instructor's teaching strengths could be grouped into the following skills areas: course organization, clarity of presentation, openness and rapport, and enthusiasm. The consultant's favorable observations, evidence derived from videotaping, and the instructor's self-assessment were reinforced by equally favorable student responses in these areas. For example, more than 90% of the students responding to TABS felt the instructor needed little or no improvement in skills related to clarifying course and class objectives and structuring content from simple to complex. Students also indicated that as well as logically organizing course content, the instructor presented it in a way which aroused interest and encouraged learning.

In addition, the instructor's interpersonal skills helped to foster a positive classroom atmosphere. All of the students (100%) thought that she related to people in a way which promoted mutual respect; an almost equal number felt she was available for personal consultation when students desired it. More than 90% of the class reported their attitude toward the instructor and subject matter had become more positive as a result of this course.

Research on adult learners has supported the importance of the above teaching skills. Adult learners expect and value a well-organized course and an enthusiastic instructor who treats students with respect and as peers in the learning process.

Although the above responses were most encouraging, we did identify specific areas for improvement. Both in the initial
interview and self-assessment, the instructor indicated that her ability to encourage student participation was an area with which she was particularly concerned. Her previous attempts to increase the amount and quality of student discussion were frustrated by class size and diversity, the amount of material to be covered, and her own lack of comfort with — and skill in using — discussion techniques. The videotape and observation notes, both of which showed limited student participation, confirmed this concern.

Our perception of the need of adult learners to be more involved in the learning process was shared by the class. When asked to indicate their learning style, more than three fourths of the class preferred to share their ideas with others and get involved in class activities. In addition, 28% of the students recommended improvement in the instructor’s ability to ask thought-provoking questions, facilitate discussion among students, and use a wider variety of teaching techniques.

Improvement Efforts: It is clear from the literature on adult learners and our experiences in working with them, that they profit a great deal from and enjoy having their talent, information, and wealth of life experiences made use of in teaching situations. Experiments in learning have shown that discussion techniques are particularly appropriate when the instructor wants to use the resources of the group, develop motivation for future learning, and teach students how to problem solve by integrating and applying knowledge. At the review conference, then, we determined our improvement goal would be to find effective ways to engage the instructor’s diverse students as active learners rather than just passive receptacles for her knowledge.

We worked collaboratively to devise, try out, and evaluate a variety of activities designed to improve class discussion and provide alternatives to the lecture format. These strategies, although designed to fit this instructor’s teaching situation and individual teaching style, are transferable among disciplines and from one teaching mode to another. Our activities included:

1. SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE:
   a) Since the room was large, making it difficult for voices to carry from the back, we rearranged the seats into a large horseshoe shape with the instructor at the head. Discussion was facilitated when students were able to hear and see one another.

   b) The instructor made a more conscious effort to call each student by name. She also focused on maintaining eye contact with students and rewarding them verbally (e.g., “that’s an interesting point”) or nonverbally (e.g., nodding, smiling) for appropriate participation.

   c) The instructor carefully listened to the complete student question or response, making sure not to prematurely interrupt, which might suggest the input was not being listened to or valued.

2. ASKING QUESTIONS:
   a) We worked on encouraging divergent rather than convergent thinking, thus on formulating open-ended rather than closed questions that call for a limited or correct response (e.g., “How many ways…” or “What are some ways…” rather than “What is the best way…”). Open-ended questions require a higher level of thinking; they foster imaginative and more expansive thought that requires the application of information rather than simply its storage and factual recall. By encouraging responses of greater depth, they permit students to reveal their unique sensibilities and insights.

   b) We explored the use of pauses and silences as motivators. For example, when posing a question the instructor allowed the class to pause for reflection before asking for a response. The consultant encouraged her to practice silently “counting to ten” or trying to restate the question before discarding it or answering it herself. We dealt with the instructor’s discomfort with silence and her need to fill the void with
her own words. With the consultant’s support she was reminded that a thoughtful response takes more than a few seconds to formulate and that students need time to think.

3. RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS:
   a) The instructor either repeated or paraphrased student questions. This insured that the entire class heard and understood each question. It also gave other students time to consider the question and possible answers to it.
   b) We worked on increasing the instructor’s selective use of probing questions. This entailed responding to a student’s question with another which asked that student or the class to further clarify or expand upon particular aspects of the issue raised.
   c) The instructor also redirected certain student questions back to the class in general or to another student she felt could respond instead of consistently answering it herself. This technique made use of students’ interests and backgrounds and also suggested that peers were an important resource for learning.

4. PROMOTING DISCUSSION AMONG STUDENTS:
   Although the format of this class was primarily lecture, many of the students’ learning styles suggested that they enjoyed and profited from sharing their ideas and experiences. We experimented with two classroom structures which further encouraged student participation:
   a) Buzz Groups: The class was divided into groups of four to six. The instructor gave each group one or two prepared questions on value issues inherent in the topics under consideration. Each group had 20 minutes to discuss the issue. A leader was chosen to record and report group conclusions back to the class. The instructor then continued the lecture, discussing the merits of alternative solutions and incorporating appropriate or provocative student responses. Besides allowing every individual to participate and providing a break in the lecture format, this technique gave the class a chance to explore some of the critical affective issues in nursing.
   b) Learning Pairs: Students were divided into pairs and given a common chapter or assignment to read on their own. Each student prepared ten questions relating to the assignment before the next class. Questions dealt with the comprehension and application of the content or new ideas suggested by the material. In class, pairs took turns answering each others’ questions, correcting and elaborating on responses as necessary. The instructor reviewed the questions, evaluating and commenting on their relevance to major points in the assignment. Used before an hourly exam, this exercise proved helpful in preparing students for the test. It also gave them practice in formulating higher level rather than recall questions.

Altogether we spent approximately 15 hours on data collection and devising improvement efforts. In this comparatively brief time we were able to gather information on the instructor’s teaching through classroom observation, videotape, self-assessment, student opinions and the view of an outside observer, the consultant. Not only was the instructor provided with a multiplicity of data sources, but she also was given assistance on particular ways in which she could improve her teaching.

Final Review: During the final two weeks of the semester, we collected new information about the instructor’s teaching in order to assess her progress and determine whether additional improvement efforts were needed. The consultant observed a class session, and videotaped another sample of instruction. This afforded us an opportunity to study recent classroom interaction and compare it with what was recorded earlier in the semester. Students completed a more focused version of the TABS which contained only those statements that reflected areas on which the
instructor had worked. Students indicated both the extent to which they had seen improvement in teaching and the extent to which they felt improvement was still needed. Finally, the instructor reappraised her own teaching by completing the focused version of TABS. The self-assessment allowed her to express her perceptions of change, indicate where she thought she needed further improvement and compare her perceptions with those of her students. After all the information was collected, the instructor and consultant scheduled a final review to discuss the findings, reassess teaching strengths and concerns, and determine areas in which the instructor would like to continue work.

**Results**

Final data led to three interrelated conclusions:

First, an improvement in teaching skills related to student involvement was confirmed by the instructor, students and consultant. Changes in the instructor's questioning and response patterns were highlighted in the final videotape. As she observed in her final interview:

I have dramatically increased my ability to involve students in their learning. I'm better able to formulate the kinds of questions to stimulate involvement. I've begun to appreciate the time needed for students to formulate a response and am beginning to lose my fear of silence. I'm much more comfortable with throwing out a provocative question and just waiting for a lightbulb to go off. It worked so beautifully to say, "there are more of you than there are of me. Let's pool what we know to come up with answers." And they came up with experiences better than my notes. It stunned me. It really did.

The instructor's use of questioning skills and techniques for increasing participation was evident to students as well. Every student responding to TABS (100%) saw some or much improvement in the instructor's ability to facilitate discussion among students. In addition, 94% saw some or much improvement in her ability to ask thought-provoking questions. The consultant's observations further reinforced student responses. Attentiveness was sustained longer, quantity and quality of student questions and responses increased, notebooks were not closed at the end of the period and students began to linger after class, interacting with the instructor and each other. The following quotation illustrates the tone of a number of student comments:

It is difficult to see big changes in a course that is already taught so well, but I did notice something happening. The instructor wanted to ask more questions that really made us think, questions with no one answer. I enjoyed discussing the value issues that she brought out. Somehow, she was able to get more students participating and involved in the class without letting go of important material. If anything, the course became more exciting and interesting.

The instructor's skill as a discussion leader not only increased the amount of student input but also allowed her to add an important dimension of value clarification to the learning process. She was able to act on her belief that nursing students do not construct a value system by being told what to believe. Instead, through classroom interaction, they can begin to compare, defend and articulate the values which will be cherished and direct professional behavior.

Second, the instructor increased her awareness of the needs and learning styles of the students she taught. In her final interview she noted:

I'm more knowledgeable of adult learners and the strengths and problems they bring to the classroom. The change that has had the most impact on me is my ability to trust the capacity of these students and respect their need to actively learn. I'm beginning to allow them more freedom to explore, think through and arrive at the same knowledge that I had previously transmitted to them. I find myself asking more questions and giving fewer answers. I've learned that my students are not only able but eager to discover for themselves.

Our perceptions of change were reinforced by 94% of the students who saw some or much improvement in her ability to allow them to challenge and discuss points of view in the course. As one student remarked:

I noticed she took more time to involve us in the
lecture by asking questions we had to think about. Students were allowed ample time to express themselves freely and honestly. This is my kind of teaching!

Third, the instructor sensed she had achieved an increased awareness of herself as teacher and was able to move toward an even deeper richness and growth in her teaching life. Reflection on her teaching style had allowed her to further understand and change that style to one more compatible with her evolving feelings and beliefs about teaching and learning. The degree of personal change is reflected in this excerpt from her final interview:

Through introspection, your support and the self-confrontation of the process, I changed my whole perception of myself as teacher. I see myself more as facilitator rather than instiller of fact. One person cannot teach another person. He can only help that person to learn, and that's where I am with that right now.

In general, a heightened self-regard, a clearer perception of teaching strengths as well as an increased awareness of areas for improvement resulted from the instructor's participation in the process. The following interview excerpt clearly illustrates the growth she underwent:

I find I'm more accepting of my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. I'm more comfortable and pleased with most patterns but need to try to work on others. The difference now is that there is no longer a feeling of being locked into a teaching style. I can change — I have changed — that feeling is foremost.

Conclusion

Drawing sweeping generalizations from these findings is not our intent. It certainly must be recognized that a teaching improvement service such as this is not a panacea for all the problems that beset faculty in their teaching lives, nor can it appeal to all. We believe these results show, however, that this process is one way faculty members can begin to achieve greater awareness of their attitudes, values and style as teacher. It aids them in reflecting on and exploring aspects of their teaching selves that they did not know before, and in making decisions about their teaching that will be helpful to them and, ultimately, to their students. As Thomas Carlyle wisely observed:

The impossibility of that precept "Know Thyself":
till it be translated into this partially possible one,
"Know what thou canst work at."

References