Teaching Test Taking Strategies- An Option or Ethical Requirement for Undergraduate Nursing Students?

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Introduction

The advancements in the science of medicine and the emphasis on patient safety have resulted in the demand for increased competency requirements for healthcare professionals. This has lead to the significant drops in licensing examination scores for baccalaureate nursing students that have led to greater rigor in the NCLEX-RN licensure examination and higher standards for passing (White & Kenney, 2007). Nurse educators must take much effort in identifying practices that promote student success on the NCLEX-RN exam. Nevertheless, nursing students’ rates of failure continue to be a persistent problem (Dikta and Techtmann, 2008).

According to Carrick (2011), student outcomes include test scores, grade point average, attitute, standardized assessment test scores, and ultimately NCLEX-RN performance of nursing graduates. Outcomes serve as feedback loops identifying the efficiency of the nursing education system. Likewise, a minimum percentage of graduates must pass the NCLEX-RN, otherwise putting a nursing program at risk for closure by the state board of nursing. The New Jersey State Board of Nursing requires nursing programs to sustain a 75% passing rate for six consecutive years to remain in good standing. If a program is unable to meet this criterion, it is placed on conditional accreditation, and will have 18 months to meet the 70% passing rate. If the aforementioned outcome remains the same, putting the nursing program at risk at termination. In the state of New Jersey, it is estimated that about 4% nursing graduates do not pass the NCLEX-RN in their initial exam (New Jersey State Board of Nursing, 2011). Therefore, for nursing programs to remain in good standing it is essential that new educators focus on their methods of teaching and student approaches to learning to ensure successful test-taking and learning outcomes.

Background

Test-taking strategies are made up of processes which test-takers have selected and which may be conscious or not. The notion of ‘strategy’ implies an element of selection. If not, the process could not be considered strategic. These strategies may include ‘opting out of the language task at hand’ or utilizing shortcuts to arrive at answers. In these cases, test-takers may use ‘test-wiseness’ to circumvent the need to utilize their actual language or lack of it (White & Kenney, 2007). Therefore, in the greater number of cases, they are the result of the test-takers’ own cognitive style and not the result of instruction. It does not mean they do not have the ability to drive, but simply they have not been trained to drive or operate a car. Likewise, students must be taught. However, nursing education has done no training change their former approach and process during test taking. Therefore, how can it be assumed that students do not know the content, if they were not given training change their former approach and process during test taking? The cognitive processes that are not readily open or observable for evaluation. ‘Test-wiseness’ to circumvent the need to utilize their actual language or lack of it (White & Kenney, 2007). Nevertheless, in the greater number of cases, they are the result of the test-takers’ own cognitive style and not the result of instruction. It does not mean they do not have the ability to drive, but simply they have not been trained to drive or operate a car. Likewise, students must be taught. However, nursing education has done no training change their former approach and process during test taking.

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The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (2015) explains that it depends on how given test-takers – with their particular cognitive style, profile and degree of cognitive flexibility, their language knowledge, and their experience of test-taking strategies – employ these strategies at a given moment. Some students may be able to pass nursing exams with the limited number of strategies they use; others however, have a vast number of strategies, but may use few or any of them effectively. Test-taking involves the cognitive processes that are not readily open or observable for evaluation. Therefore, how can it be assumed that students do not know the content, if they are rarely exposed to how to take a test? It is like putting a person in a car without giving them driving lessons. In many ways they do not have the ability to drive, but simply they have not been trained to drive or operate a car. Likewise, students must be taught. However, nursing education has done no research on the effects of providing training on ‘test-wiseness’

Purpose

The purpose of this proposed study is to examine the perspective of baccalaureate nursing graduates who did not pass the NCLEX-RN on their initial examination to search of understanding why a graduate with a Bachelors of science degree of nursing degree does not pass through the initial test? The patterns this qualitative research study will examine include: Is the educational nursing programs do not pass the NCLEX-RN for the first time, how do they approach and solve test questions? How does a test-taking strategy course or change their former approach and process during test taking?

Methods

The qualitative design implemented was an intrinsic exploratory multiple case study. In order to examine how students approach tests and think through multiple choice questions during examination, a multiple case study method has been chosen. According to Richards and Morse (2012) this method seeks to understand a social situation or process by being in on it it is played out multiple cases. The researcher begins with a question and moves on to a location of it within a microcosm. Although a very controversial method, collections of case studies allow the researcher and reader to gain a clear picture of examples of a problem. Case studies have been used within social research traditionally as providing a voice to less prominent social groups or types. Collective case studies are designed to compare cases and identify patterns. The patterns this qualitative research study will examine include: How do nursing graduates who have not passed the NCLEX-RN the initial time approach and solve test questions? How does a test-taking strategy course or change their former approach and process during test taking? The collective case studies will show the value of test-taking strategy courses for students who have not passed the initial testing attempt and how that changed their approach cognitively and emotionally to test-taking. As a result of test-taking strategies, the students voiced they were better able to tackle tests. They also expressed improved confidence, decreased anxiety, and decreased anxiety during preparation for and during test-taking. After learning test-taking strategies, they explained practicing tests as measuring their competency as a registered nurse instead of assessing their incorrect items. They conclude that test-taking strategies should be taught “from the door” of a baccalaureate nursing program to ensure student test-taking success.

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These students describe their abilities without test-taking strategies as being set up to fail as the faculty focused more on “subjects” and “content”. Nurse faculty have an ethical responsibility to the public and their pupils, in the wake of nursing shortage, to ensure that students are taught test-taking strategies so they can successfully take formative tests throughout their nursing education and, cumulatively, by ensuring students have the ability to pass the NCLEX-RN,