

# Practical tips for novice nurse educators

By Ahtisham Younas, MN, BSN, RN

I chose to leave the bedside as a critical care nurse and become a nurse educator for many reasons: to engage in a continuous learning process, share recent and advanced nursing knowledge with colleagues and students, develop meaningful connections within the nursing community, inspire and motivate future nurses toward a teaching career, and learn from students. A teaching career has many benefits for nurses. For example, it can provide a sense of personal satisfaction, a flexible schedule, autonomous decision making, opportunities for research and scholarly work, and connections with like-minded scholars and colleagues. I encourage nurses with an interest in and passion for teaching to consider becoming nurse educators.

In this article, I critically analyze my teaching perspectives, experiences, and approaches through the lenses of various teaching and learning theories, and through comparison with the World

Health Organization's Nurse Educator Core Competencies. This analysis results in three practical tips for nurses who intend to pursue a teaching career.

## Tip 1: Identify your personal teaching philosophy

To become an effective educator, nurses need many skills, but I consider personal reflection to be the most important. Reflection is a thinking process that explores and examines personal thoughts and actions, and their underlying philosophies. Educators, particularly novice educators, should reflect on their teaching philosophies, preconceived ideas, and preferences that may influence their teaching skills and students' abilities to learn. Educators should also share their teaching philosophies with students to build rapport and encourage constructive student feedback.

My own teaching philosophy stems from a paraphrase of a statement made by Albert Einstein: Education isn't the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think. I believe that my greatest responsibility as an educator is to develop a trusting and friendly relationship with students, facilitate their learning, and give them opportunities to expand their thinking and improve their nursing skills. It's also my responsibility to give timely feedback to students and allow them to constructively criticize my teaching approaches and abilities. With this philosophy, I can teach students to think critically and apply their knowledge to real-life nursing practice.

My teaching philosophy also stems from my experience as a critical care



nurse. We use the nursing process to help our patients in a caring and compassionate manner. Likewise, as an educator, I believe that I must assess the learning needs, capabilities, and preferences of students. Identifying your teaching philosophy isn't accomplished all at once; rather, it's an ongoing process.

### Tip 2: Identify influencing factors

Next, reflect on the various factors that influence your teaching philosophy, such as personal teaching style, subject matter knowledge, student learning style, educational environment, and institutional policies. For instance, I've identified some personal and situational factors that affect my teaching in both positive and negative ways. First, my experience in the nursing profession positively affects my teaching approach. Because nursing is both a theoretical and practical science, I envision teaching students in a way that helps them acquire theoretical knowledge and apply it to practice. I also realize that teaching abstract theoretical subjects, such as nursing theories and models, isn't effective if taught in a traditional lecture format. It's beneficial to come up with creative teaching and learning approaches to engage students. Think-pair-share, crossword puzzles, role playing, case studies, and audiovisual aids are some of the creative teaching strategies that I use.

My age has influenced my teaching philosophy. When I started teaching, I was the youngest teacher at the college, and many students were close to my age. This allowed me to understand the students and their problems, and develop a trusting and friendly relationship with them.

As a young teacher, I was also aware of my lack of experience. My inexperience made me anxious, and I didn't perform well in my first month of teaching. For example, I finished my very first lecture 1 hour before the allotted time. When I

### Selected teaching and learning theories

- **Cognitive continuum theory:** Illustrates that decision making relies on cognition and judgment tasks, where cognition ranges from the use of intuition to analysis and judgment ranges from ill-structured to well-structured. Put simply, a well-structured task requires the use of more analytical decision making.
- **Social learning theory:** Considers learning as a social process during which people learn by observing each other's behaviors and attitudes. Those who believe that they can complete difficult tasks take on challenging tasks.
- **Adult learning theory:** Posits that learners are self-directed, self-motivated, and experiential.
- **Novice to expert model:** Explains that learning takes place in different stages through continuous education, personal experiences, and guidance from others.

listened to the audiotape of the lecture, I realized that I'd spoken too quickly and students may not have understood me. In the next lecture, I asked for students' feedback, which confirmed my observations. I then improved by slowing down.

### Tip 3: Analyze your teaching style

In order to analyze their teaching and learning approaches, educators should be knowledgeable about various teaching and learning theories, and know how to apply them as appropriate. My approach incorporates the principles of cognitive continuum theory, social learning theory, adult learning theory, and Patricia Benner's novice to expert model (see *Selected teaching and learning theories*).

I integrate cognitive continuum theory into my teaching by encouraging active student involvement during lectures. For example, I teach Faye Abdellah's Twenty-One Nursing Problems by using 21 real clinical cases, which address the physiologic, psychological, social, and emotional needs of patients. I convert these cases into brief scenarios and instruct pairs of students to evaluate the scenarios, develop a priority nursing diagnosis, and relate it to the theory. In this way, I provide them with an active learning environment and engage them in self-directed learning.

Social learning theory emphasizes using strategies such as role playing, simulations, and clinical experiences that inspire students to learn by observing and developing self-efficacy. For example, I teach several nursing theories through role playing and audiovisual aids. Two days before the lecture, I guide and assist the students in preparing a role play on the concepts of the theory under discussion. They present the role play before and after the discussion of the theory. During this session, the students and I engage in an open discussion about the role play and its relevance to the nursing theory. We explicitly address each concept of the theory and then reanalyze the same role play. This strategy allows the students to learn by observation and develop self-efficacy.

### Final thoughts

Novice nurse educators, or nurses who intend to become educators, need to continuously reflect on their teaching philosophy, evaluate their teaching and learning approaches, and identify their teaching style. Through critical self-analysis, they can identify their strengths and limitations, and reflect on them periodically. In addition, novice nurse educators should use creative, practically grounded, and student-directed teaching and learning strategies. Early in my teaching career, I wouldn't have thought of performing a critical self-analysis of my teaching strategy. Now, as I reflect on my experiences, I have a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses as an educator. ■

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