



## Developing professional attributes in critical care nurses using Team-Based Learning



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### ABSTRACT

Australian nurses prepare for specialty practice by undertaking postgraduate theoretical and clinical education in partnership models between universities and hospitals. In our global healthcare system, nurses require advanced critical thinking and strong communication skills to provide safe, high quality patient care. Yet, few education programs focus on developing these skills. Team-Based Learning (TBL) is a specific educational strategy that encourages and rewards students to think critically and solve clinical problems individually and in teams.

The aim of this study was to investigate critical care nursing students' perceptions and experiences of TBL after it was introduced into the second half of their postgraduate specialty course.

Following Ethics Committee approval, thirty-two students were invited to participate in an extended response questionnaire on their perceptions of TBL as part of a larger study. Data were analyzed thematically.

Postgraduate students perceived their professional growth was accelerated due to the skills and knowledge acquired through TBL. Four themes underpinned the development and accelerated acquisition of specialty nurse attributes due to TBL: Engagement, Learning Effectiveness, Critical Thinking, and Motivation to Participate.

Team-Based Learning offered deep and satisfying learning experiences for students. The early acquisition of advanced critical thinking, teamwork and communication skills, and specialty practice knowledge empowered nurses to provide safe patient care with confidence.

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### Introduction

The delivery of quality clinical care to patients rarely depends solely on a clinician practicing in isolation. Individual skills and experience are critically important, but the best outcomes are achieved when skilled clinicians work cooperatively within an effective healthcare team. A well-functioning team marked by good communication and teamwork contributes qualitatively and empirically to better informed clinical judgments, practices and decision-making (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2010a, 2011).

Yet, it is individual skills and knowledge and not team-based skills that are principally recognized and rewarded as hallmarks of clinical expertise (Benner, 1984; McHugh and Lake, 2010). Postgraduate critical care nurse education has historically endorsed these emphases on individual student performance and knowledge acquisition, and addressed them as pedagogical priorities through heavily content-driven programs. This tendency to focus on individual performance is not necessarily surprising, given the requirement for individual registration to practice (Australian Health Professional Regulation Authority, 2014). However, individualistic learning, in fostering competition and egocentrism, tends to promote behaviours that ultimately can impede high quality team-delivered clinical care.

Although effective teamwork is essential to good patient outcomes (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), there is little explicit pedagogical emphasis on developing a collaborative orientation and sense of teamwork amongst nurses. Indeed, there is very little time devoted

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in a typical syllabus for teaching team development or skills for students to develop the confidence required to be proactive team members or leaders. As a direct result of the high costs of formal education and a chronic shortage of specialist nurses there is pressure to compact programs into minimum timeframes while there is a simultaneous burgeoning of content related to increased healthcare complexity (Horns and Turner, 2006). Little wonder that critical care nursing education has preferentially attended to adding more content in the false belief that simply providing more of the same will translate into nurses functioning safely in increasingly complex acute environments. However, given practice changes iteratively with healthcare and technological advances, teaching students life-long learning skills and providing a professional platform for high quality safe care through the development of teamwork and communication skills is far preferable to content heavy, didactic curricula (Parmelee and Michaelsen, 2010).

The collaborative orientation and behaviours essential to effective team performance and the capacity to reason critically and problem solve cooperatively that underpin it are highly desirable skills that can, be learned in a procedural way. This paper provides an overview of an educational strategy known as Team-Based Learning (TBL) (Michaelsen and Sweet, 2008) and explores its potential for transformative learning in critical care nursing programs and its intention to develop confident, work-ready graduates with sophisticated team-oriented skills. The discussion follows a successful implementation of TBL in a suite of critical care courses in Melbourne, Australia in 2009 and suggests that TBL provides real benefits for engaging students and equipping them, well before graduation, for high level functioning and effective team membership in the critical care environment.

### Background: the Team-Based Learning approach

Team-Based Learning is an innovative learner-centered educational strategy designed to develop high performance learning teams. It can dramatically improve the quality of student learning (Michaelsen et al., 2004, 2008) by engaging students in participating actively in their own and others' learning in a way particularly reflective of ideal cooperative experiential learning encountered in the clinical environment. In TBL, learners are accountable for their learning in and out of class through preparation and group discussion (Michaelsen et al., 2008; Michaelsen and Sweet, 2011). Learning teams are formed at the start and remain together in TBL classes throughout the program. Teams are formed to ensure maximum diversity and distribution of key course criteria within teams (for example, specialty practice area or duration of clinical experience) and to avoid pre-existing, cohesive sub-groups. Instead of supporting the passive reception of learning material, class time is significantly shifted toward the integration and application of newly learned material through highly interactive learning and teamwork. The teacher retains control of content, and acts as both facilitator and content expert but, rather than being responsible for 'delivering' the content, the teacher

shepherds the essentially self-managing teams through an active learning process. As facilitator, the teacher also takes advantage of opportunities for contingent teaching to fill in gaps or elaborate on principles when required.

Five key strategies underpin TBL's effectiveness in improving student learning outcomes: (1) the reduction or waiving of formal passive lecture time, (2) the promotion of team work in class, (3) TBL's inbuilt capacity to motivate students to prepare and be on time to class, (4) a central focus on the enhancement of problem-solving skills, and, (5) an emphasis on creating conditions that generate high levels of student interaction and engagement in the classroom. In addition, powerful learning incentives are built into the assessment process. The specific sequence and structure of TBL develops a high level of cohesiveness and trust as groups become lively active learning teams engaged in motivated and robust interchanges both within and between teams. As McMahon (2008) points out, the whole process provides a feedback-rich environment. The facilitation of effective team development, nurtured by these conditions, can be considered the single most important factor in the effectiveness of TBL as an instructional strategy (Michaelsen and Sweet, 2008).

The Team-Based Learning strategy consists of repeating sequences of three phases (summarized in Table 1):

Phase 1 consists of pre-class preparation. Students independently study assigned material in order to achieve teacher-defined objectives. In Phase 2, as scheduled class time commences, students individually complete a multiple-choice test to demonstrate their readiness to apply the learnings of Phase 1. Individual student scores are recorded and submitted. Before the answers are discussed, the preformed permanent teams of 5–7 students then take the same test together, after which their consensus answers are scored and submitted. The latter test strategy gives team members the opportunity to contribute to the team score by negotiating their answers with the team, providing to each other the rationales they have developed based on their prior self-directed study. These 'readiness assurance' processes provide an important incentive for students to undertake their self-directed learning. In Phase 3, the teams collaborate to complete in-class application tasks. At designated times all teams simultaneously share their team's answers with the entire class for instructive comparison and immediate feedback. Answer sharing stimulates an energetic total-class discussion with groups defending their answers and the teacher assisting to consolidate learning through facilitation and contingent teaching. These activities are based on the core principles of TBL (Haidet et al., 2012; Michaelsen and Sweet, 2011).

Periodically students must evaluate other members of the team for their contributions to the team's productivity. Student assessment based on the ascription of individual and team scores in Phase 2, along with the anonymous peer evaluation scores, ensures that students understand the value of both meaningful preparation and team participation (Letassy et al., 2008). Thus TBL provides a structured process for enhancing individual and group accountability (Parmelee et al., 2009). Incentives integral to the assessment

**Table 1**  
Phases of team-based learning.

PHASE 1 Pre-class learning	PHASE 2 Readiness assurance process	PHASE 3 Application of course concepts
Independent student learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study materials provided, including instructor-set learning objectives</li> </ul>	Individual multi-choice test <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answers submitted</li> <li>• Team multi-choice test</li> <li>• Team members reach consensus by discussion</li> <li>• Answers submitted</li> <li>• Answers discussed with Instructor feedback</li> </ul> Peer evaluation (formative and summative)	In class team assignment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative problem solving</li> <li>• Instructor-facilitated class discussion between teams</li> </ul>

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