

# Critical thinking cards: An innovative teaching strategy to bridge classroom knowledge with clinical decision making



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Active learning;  
Clinical decision-making;  
Coaching;  
Questioning;  
Think-aloud approach

## Abstract

Students and faculty in an obstetrics course were surveyed regarding the use of critical thinking cards as an active teaching strategy in the clinical setting. Critical thinking cards are the foundation for an active learning strategy that incorporates questioning, problem solving, coaching, and the think-aloud approach while using higher-order thinking to enhance clinical decision-making.

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## Introduction

In order to function as a professional nurse for the 21st century, students need to know how to think like a nurse and make clinical judgments and decisions about patient care situations as they arise. The act of linking what is taught in the classroom with direct patient care can enhance students' clinical decision-making (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010). Therefore, it is important to develop creative strategies to help students transfer classroom knowledge into the clinical setting. The purpose of this article is to discuss an active teaching strategy that is easy to implement, cost-effective, and does not require technical resources, yet clearly helps students use classroom knowledge to solve clinical problems.

A review of the literature included searching the terms: *think like a nurse*, *clinical decision-making*, *clinical judgment*, *clinical reasoning*, and *critical thinking*. Other terms searched included active strategies involved in the critical thinking pedagogy: *questioning*, *coaching*, and the *think-aloud approach*. All of the concepts searched are important effective strategies to teach the crucial skills of safe practice.

Critical thinking, clinical judgment, and clinical reasoning are essential for clinical decision-making and problem solving in the health care setting (Chamberland et al., 2015; Chang, Chang, Kuo, Yang, & Chou, 2011; Furze, Black, Hoffman, Barr, Cochran, & Jensen, 2015; Tanner, 2006; Wilson, 2012). These essential skills are imperative for nurses and other health care professionals to be successful in providing safe, quality care but can be very difficult for students to acquire (Baxter & Rideout, 2006; Furze et al., 2015; Lang, Beach, Patrician, & Martin, 2013). Effective clinical decision-making is actually learned in nursing school when students apply knowledge gained in the classroom to direct patient care in the clinical setting. However, lack of application often occurs because classroom and clinical are

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often viewed by students as two separate courses. It becomes imperative that educators find ways to connect the two components if students are to learn how to make sound clinical decisions using classroom knowledge to solve clinical problems.

The whole concept of “thinking like a nurse” involves critical thinking, clinical decision-making, and clinical judgment (Ashley & Stamp, 2014; Tanner, 2006). The goal of any nursing program is to graduate students who will be able to implement critical thinking and clinical judgment. The act of thinking like a nurse not only involves problem solving but also requires individuals to identify and evaluate patient responses, recognize patterns, and make alternate decisions based on data gathered (Ashley & Stamp, 2014; Tanner, 2006).

### Active Strategies Designed to Bridge Classroom Knowledge

Faculty may use a variety of interactive teaching strategies in the clinical area to help students learn to apply knowledge to practice. By combining numerous teaching strategies, the result may be a new and innovative way to help students learn how to make the critical clinical judgments necessary for safe patient care. Active learning strategies engage students and produces better learning outcomes (Waltz, Jenkins, & Han, 2014). Active learning, which involves student engagement rather than passive activity, is one concept consistent with teaching strategies that promotes retention of information, critical thinking, and clinical decision-making (Ulrich & Glendon, 2005). Examples of active learning strategies shown to stimulate critical thinking in students include questioning (Barnum, 2008; Jenkins, 2011), coaching (Devine, Meyers, & Houssemand, 2013; Kelton, 2014; Tee, Jowett, & Bechelet-Carter, 2009), and the “think-aloud” approach (Forsberg, Ziegert, Hult, & Fors, 2014; Gardin, 2010). Linking the strategies of questioning, coaching, and the think-aloud approach led to a new potential pedagogical strategy called *critical thinking cards*.

### Active Strategies Involved in the Critical Thinking Card Pedagogy

Questioning is a teaching strategy that is crucial for development of critical thinking in nursing students. Questioning not only stimulates the student’s development of critical thinking but can also facilitate discussion and promote learning among peers (Nicholl & Tracey, 2007). When thought-provoking questions are asked, student engagement is enhanced and higher-order cognitive processes are stimulated (Larson & Lovelace, 2013). Thus, active involvement is the key aspect that promotes continual growth and helps the student process information at a higher cognitive level.

Coaching is also an important tool to enhance clinical expertise and build confidence (Kelton, 2014). Faculty coaching is essential when teaching students how to think critically and apply knowledge to clinical problems. Coaches use their clinical expertise to provide guidance because the student is actively engaged in solving real-life nursing problems. As a result, the student is able to analyze complex clinical issues in a supportive environment to enhance professional growth.

Another promising strategy to assess clinical decision-making is the think-aloud approach, which requires students to verbalize their thoughts; thus, allowing the teacher to assess how information is processed and then coach as needed. The use of a think-aloud approach to teach critical thinking has been shown to be beneficial in correcting faulty reasoning and errors in decision-making (Banning, 2008; Forsberg et al., 2014). Early in the process, the faculty can model the think-aloud approach showing the student how an expert nurse might handle a complex clinical situation. Later, the student can also use the process to demonstrate developing competency in clinical decision-making.

### What Are Critical Thinking Cards?

Critical thinking cards were designed as a learning activity that combines the use of several different strategies linked to improving critical thinking and clinical decision-making. The cards, which include questions related to a specific clinical area, were created as an innovative active learning strategy to help students’ bridge classroom knowledge with clinical practice. As an active learning strategy, use of the cards combines the use of questioning, coaching, and the think-aloud method. It also allows for faculty to “extend” student learning as they continue to delve deeper into the student’s knowledge base and ability to “connect” knowledge and practice. Asking further questions using Socratic questioning like the “what if” scenario, and other ways to stretch students thinking also becomes a vital part of this method.

### Development of Critical Thinking Cards

The cards were created by the authors based on our 50 years of combined experience teaching and caring for patients in antepartum, intrapartum, and postpartum units in the field of obstetrics. Content for the cards was drawn from experiences in the clinical area based on our knowledge and expertise and the most current obstetric textbooks, literature, and clinical practice guidelines from the Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses.

The cards, which are the size of standard playing cards, contain various questions and scenarios related to course content and require students to use critical thinking skills to apply classroom knowledge to patient situations. Each deck consists of 116 cards, which are divided into

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