

Eliminating cultural bias in nursing examinations



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Abstract Nursing program's enrollment reflects greater numbers of students for whom English is a second language. According to the National League for Nursing, approximately 32% of nursing students are from minority groups (National League of Nursing, 2012). The language diversity within the nursing student body provides challenges for the nursing faculty when developing nursing examinations. This article will discuss the need for nursing faculty to be mindful of the language used when creating nursing examinations that may lead to confusion for culturally diverse students. Focus should be placed on developing examinations that test discipline-specific concepts that do not rely on a student's familiarity with "colloquiums" and "expressions" to be successful. This article will provide recommendations for the development of testing committees composed of nursing faculty who are culturally sensitive and aware of cultural bias that may be present in nursing examinations. Case study exemplars and examples of culturally biased questions will be provided, and recommendations will be made to develop culturally neutral, discipline-specific examination.

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1. Introduction

Nursing students who have proficient nursing knowledge, but whose native language is not English, may score lower on examinations because of a misunderstanding of colloquial language and expressions that appear within the questions on nursing examinations. Presently, nursing programs assess student's comprehension and command of subject matter through examinations. Nursing examinations are paper and pencil or computer based. Questions are multiple choice or "alternate" style questions such as, select all that apply, sequencing, and fill in the blank. These types of questions are used on nursing examinations to prepare students for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX). According to O'Neill, Marks and Liu (2006), of the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), all NCLEX items are also evaluated for potential bias and sensitivity as part of the

NCLEX item development process (Oneill, Marks, & Liu, 2006). However, the NCSBN acknowledges that despite these efforts, all well-constructed examinations contain some items that exhibit some degree of bias (Oneill et al., 2006).

2. Cultural diversity among the student body in nursing programs

For this article, the demographic information, collected by the institution, regarding students enrolled in a large urban community college in New York City, will be used to illustrate cultural diversity of the student body (<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/IR/IR-facts/>). Race/Ethnicity revealed that the student body of the community college identifies as Asian 15%, Black 14%, Hispanic 34%, White (non-Hispanic) 9%, other 2%, and unknown 26% (<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/IR/IR-facts/>). Additional data revealed that 84% of the student body indicated that they were born outside the United States, whereas 16% indicated that they were born in the

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United States. In response to the question if English was a student's primary language, 69% of the respondents indicated "no," whereas 31% of the respondents indicated "yes."

Students enrolled in this community college are required to provide proof of their English language competency in order to gain acceptance into the college. All prospective international students are required to provide the college with scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System examination. If the student's TOEFL score is lower than 450, they are required to enroll in one of the English Language Center's intensive programs before applying to the college (<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu>) Noninternational students are required to take the school-administered ACT assessment examination. The ACT, a college admissions and placement test, is taken by more than 1.6 million high school graduates every year (<http://act.org/about-us/what-we-do>). In addition to a math examination, the ACT includes a reading test, which is designed to measure reading comprehension, and a writing test, which is a standardized writing test that measures a student's proficiency in college-level writing in English. The purpose of the ACT is to assess reading comprehension, quantitative reasoning, and writing skills. The results determine if the student's ability is consistent with the instructional goals of college-level writing courses and to assess a student's readiness for introductory college courses (<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu>). If a student has taken the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and/or ACT tests prior to their acceptance into the college, those scores may exempt them from having to take the ACT after they have been accepted as a student in the college.

Thus, it can be inferred that all students in the nursing program at this particular community college in New York City, regardless of race/ethnicity and country of birth, have basic English language skills. This, however, does not mean that any of these students come into the program with an understanding of the nuances of the American culture with regard to "colloquialisms" and "common expressions." Colloquial is defined as "characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary or familiar conversation rather than formal speech or writing; informal" (<http://dictionary.reference.com>). Therefore, it is important that nursing faculty are resolute about eliminating colloquialisms and common expressions and adhering to the English language when teaching and/or testing discipline-specific nursing knowledge. Language is "a body of words and the systems for their use common to a people who are of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition" (<http://dictionary.reference.com>). Culturally diverse students are capable of using and understanding the formal system of the English language; however, they may be unfamiliar with colloquialisms and common expressions that have been added to the language.

An informal query of students in the nursing program was conducted to gather information regarding their language background and perception of cultural bias on nursing

examinations. A SurveyMonkey was posted on the Blackboard of all the students registered in all the clinical courses in the registered nursing program. All 245 students in the clinical phase of the nursing program were asked to respond to the survey. All responses were anonymous. Responses were received from 143 students (approximately 58%). In addition to providing demographic information, students were asked to respond to several questions about their primary language, the language they speak at home, and if they had ever taken a nursing examination that had cultural references or responses that they did not understand. The results of the survey revealed that one third of the student respondents encountered cultural references and/or responses on nursing examinations that they did not understand. These results indicate that approximately 33% of the nursing student respondents have experienced a disadvantage while taking an examination. This disadvantage was not the result of lack of preparation for the examination but because they did not understand the cultural nuances, including colloquialisms and common expressions included in the stem or responses of the question.

3. Cultural bias and nursing examinations

Cultural bias in language is "content that is not readily understood by all cultural groups" (Dudas, 2011). Therefore, students who are not part of the dominant cultural group are less likely to correctly answer test items that have cultural bias. English as a second language students may be foreign born or US born; however, they not only share the characteristic that English is not their first language but also that their cultural and linguistic norms often differ in comparison with the dominant U.S. culture (Bosher, 2003). Culturally confusing language will cause certain students to have a disadvantage on examinations because of language barriers and cultural differences (Gardner, 2005). In addition, the English language has many words that share a definition and single words that have multiple meanings.

Students for whom English is not their primary language have reported difficulty learning colloquialisms, such as "that's cool" in order to explain something interesting, when their understanding is that "cool" is a term used in relation to temperature (Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008.) An incorrect solution to this problem is to allow students to use language dictionaries to translate confusing test material into their native language and then translate it back into English. It has been found that this method can cause a loss of context because some words "cannot be literally translated from one language into another, ultimately leading to misunderstanding of the material presented" (Lujan, 2008, p. 329).

The NCSBN is aware of the need to reduce bias and does so by pretesting examinations and referring to a panel review for potentially biased items (Dudas, 2011).

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