



An Innovative Educational Intervention to Improve Nursing Students' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills Surrounding Breastfeeding¹

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ABSTRACT

It is important for nurse educators to develop deliberate experiences within the curriculum to educate future nurses not only on the benefits of breastfeeding but also on how to advocate and support the breastfeeding woman. A breastfeeding workshop utilizing innovative teaching strategies was implemented during an obstetrical nursing course in the fall 2017 semester. After the workshop, students reported an increase in knowledge, skills, and attitudes surrounding breastfeeding. The students were able to aptly demonstrate their new breastfeeding knowledge during simulation.

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Introduction

Although rates of breastfeeding initiation have increased in the United States (current rate 81.9%), rates of exclusive breastfeeding at 6 to 12 months postpartum continue not to meet established national benchmarks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). Breastfeeding initiation, exclusivity, duration, and support are key objectives in Healthy People 2020 (CDC, 2016). Both the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2012) recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life and continued breastfeeding with complementary foods for 1 to 2 years or beyond.

Breastfeeding has a multitude of health benefits for both mother and infant. Infants who breastfeed are at decreased risk of sudden infant death and are less likely to develop otitis media, gastrointestinal infections, lower respiratory tract diseases, obesity, asthma, diabetes, and leukemia. Women who breastfeed are less likely to develop diabetes, cardiovascular disease, postpartum depression, and reproductive cancers (AAP, 2012). Although these benefits are well documented, mothers continue not to choose to breastfeed or stop earlier than planned (Dodgson, Bloomfield, & Choi, 2013).

In 2011, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a Call to Action to further encourage breastfeeding and breastfeeding education and support,

specifically recommending increasing the amount of breastfeeding content in the undergraduate and graduate training programs of health professionals (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2011). Often, limited time is spent in obstetrical nursing courses in associate degree programs on breastfeeding education (USDHHS, 2011). A breastfeeding workshop utilizing innovative teaching strategies was implemented during a senior-level obstetrical nursing course. The purpose of this article is to outline the workshop content, objectives, and innovative teaching strategies utilized and to evaluate the workshop related to its impact on student knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward breastfeeding.

Background

Gap in Nursing Education

Nurses play a significant role in educating and supporting women and families in breastfeeding. The lack of evidence-based lactation skills on the part of the nursing staff is a contributing factor to breastfeeding cessation (Dodgson et al., 2013). Ahmed, Bantz, and Richardson (2011) reported that lactation and methods to support breastfeeding are not discussed in great detail in undergraduate nursing programs. Cianelli et al. (2015) reported that most nurses and nursing students are inadequately trained to help mothers breastfeed. Subsequently, it is important for nursing faculty to review curricula to determine if gaps exist in the provision of evidence-based information and clinical skills pertaining to breastfeeding and breastfeeding support (Ahmed & El Guindy, 2011; Dodgson et al., 2013).

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Table 1
Learning Objectives

Breastfeeding workshop learning objectives
The following outlines the objectives for the workshop:
1. State the benefits of breastfeeding to babies and mothers
2. Explain how the <i>Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding</i> promotes and supports breastfeeding initiation and duration
3. Describe how nurses can promote breastfeeding in the postpartum period
4. Differentiate between normal breastfeeding patterns and breastfeeding complications
5. Demonstrate maternal education about normal milk production, infant positioning, and pumping
6. Identify attitudes and beliefs toward breastfeeding and demonstrate therapeutic communication

Attitudes

Research supports that nursing students have varying attitudes toward breastfeeding. [Dodgson et al. \(2013\)](#) found a significant difference in breastfeeding attitudes and beliefs based on a students' parenting status (parent vs. nonparent) and educational level (undergraduate vs. graduate), suggesting that life experience influence a person's beliefs and attitudes about breastfeeding. Twenty-eight percent of the students in their study reported that they were uncomfortable with women breastfeeding in public ([Dodgson et al., 2013](#)). In another study by [Vandewark \(2014\)](#), nursing students believed that the role of the nurse was to educate mothers about breastfeeding but not to provide their opinion to patients about what is the best infant-feeding method. Interestingly, clinical rotations alone did not seem to alter nursing students' attitudes and beliefs about breastfeeding and only improved knowledge related to breastfeeding ([Vandewark, 2014](#)). Subsequently, other teaching modalities may need to be employed to improve nursing students' attitudes and beliefs toward breastfeeding particularly undergraduate students with limited to no personal experience.

Knowledge

The literature reports varying degrees of breastfeeding knowledge among nursing students ([Ahmed & El Guindy, 2011](#)). [Bozzette and Posner \(2013\)](#) implemented a 1.5-hour lecture on breastfeeding in order to evaluate the effect of implementing specific breastfeeding content into nursing curricula. After the lecture, a statistically significant difference in breastfeeding knowledge was noted ($p < .005$; [Bozzette & Posner, 2013](#)). [Ahmed et al. \(2011\)](#) found that, although some students seem to have a baseline knowledge of the

benefits of breastfeeding, this does not translate into knowledge of breastfeeding management.

Educational Intervention

Undergraduate nursing students are required to participate in a one-semester course focused on maternal newborn health care, accompanied by a 7-week clinical experience on labor and delivery and postpartum units. The breastfeeding workshop was designed by a graduate-level nursing student who is an international board-certified lactation consultant (IBCLC) and registered nurse (RN). The workshop included both didactic and a hands-on component in order to actively engage students and allow for application of breastfeeding techniques learned ([Table 1](#)).

Procedures

Sixty-nine undergraduate nursing students in the first semester of their senior year participated in a 2.5-hour breastfeeding education workshop on their first maternal newborn clinical day. The workshop was held by clinical groups, and approximately, six to eight students were included in each group in order to increase opportunities for hands-on and individualized learning. In total, 10 separate clinical groups attended the seminar during the fall semester, all taught by the same IBCLC/RN. The collection of students' reflection and workshop evaluation data was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at Towson University. Although all students enrolled in the course participated in the breastfeeding workshop ($n = 69$), students were made aware that submitting their reflections for review by the IBCLC/RN and the coordinator was both voluntary and anonymous.

Prior to the workshop, students were asked to outline their previous experiences with breastfeeding and to complete two open-ended reflective questions, created by the researchers, related to their current beliefs and attitudes toward breastfeeding and the nurse's role in relation to breastfeeding. After the workshop, students were asked to complete three open-ended questions related to knowledge acquisition during the workshop, application of workshop content to clinical practice, and change in their attitudes and beliefs specific to breastfeeding ([Table 2](#)). The answers to these questions were reviewed by the IBCLC/RN and the coordinator of the obstetric course to determine themes. Last, students were asked to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the workshop, by answering two questions: one that asked about the perceived applicability of the workshop to their clinical practice and one that asked if they

Table 2
Prereflection and Postreflection Questions

<p>Preworkshop reflection</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Please check which best describes your past experience(s) with breastfeeding or breastfeeding education/support. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> I have no experience with breastfeeding. <input type="radio"/> I have breastfed my children or my partner has breastfed our children. <input type="radio"/> I have a close family member(s)/friend who has breastfed. <input type="radio"/> I have experience with breastfeeding through my current or previous workplace. Based on your past experiences with breastfeeding and/or what you currently know about breastfeeding, in a few sentences, please describe your current beliefs and attitudes toward breastfeeding. Describe the nurse's role in relation to breastfeeding when working with childbearing families. <p>Postworkshop reflection</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Name at least one thing you know now about breastfeeding that you did not know prior to the workshop. How do you believe that what you learned in this workshop will help you in caring for women who have recently given birth? Do you believe your attitudes and/or beliefs about breastfeeding have changed after taking part in this workshop? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Please circle your response to the items. Rate aspects of the workshop on a 1-to-5 scale: 1 = *strongly disagree* or the lowest, most negative impression; 3 = *neither agree nor disagree* or an adequate impression; 5 = *strongly agree* or the highest, most positive impression.

I will be able to use what I learned in this workshop in clinical 1 2 3 4 5

The workshop was a good way for me to learn this content 1 2 3 4 5

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