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Professional development for nursing faculty: Assessing transfer of learning into practice

Donna Ignatavicius, MS RN ANEF CNE ^{a,1}, Catherine E. Chung, PhD RN CNE ^{b,*}

^a DI Associates, Placitas, NM 87043, USA

^b Touro University Nevada, Henderson, NV 89014, USA

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ABSTRACT

Nurse educators often attend faculty development conferences to learn new strategies and information about the state of nursing education evidence and practice. Yet, very little evidence has been generated about the ability of nurse educators to transfer the new knowledge into their nursing education practice. The authors conducted a survey at a professional education conference for nurse educators to obtain baseline data ($N = 145$), then followed up with surveys at 90 and 180 days after the conference to determine if the learning that occurred at the continuing education event was transferred into practice. The learner and environmental characteristics that were seen as facilitators and barriers to the process of learning transfer were also examined. The results showed that the learning did transfer into educational practice and that the learner and environmental characteristics had marked influence in the transfer of learning process.

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Aging full-time faculty are producing a shortage of skilled and knowledgeable nurse educators and an increased use of part-time faculty in many prelicensure and RN-to-BSN programs. Experienced faculty are often replaced with clinicians who are expert in clinical practice, but lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to teach and evaluate students. As a result, the need for professional development and structured mentoring for nurse educators continues to increase (Grassley & Lambe, 2015; Rock, 2014). This article describes the effectiveness of a national conference designed to help develop new faculty and update experienced faculty in best nursing education practices.

Background

In their position paper in 1988, the National League for Nursing (NLN) called for a reform in nursing education to move away from the traditional, content-laden, lecture-and-test curricular model. Unfortunately, few nursing programs adopted or incorporated these recommendations. In 2003, the NLN again called for an overhaul of nursing education that would change the way nursing was taught

and learned. Since the beginning of this millennium, nursing education research has expanded, and best practices for curriculum development and instruction have been delineated. Whether experienced or new, nursing educators need to keep updated and follow relevant best practices in teaching and learning to ensure that graduates are prepared for current practice.

In 2003, the primary author of this article recognized the need for a unique nursing education conference that would help transition new faculty from clinician to nurse educator, especially for prelicensure and RN-to-BSN program faculty. A core curriculum for the conference was developed in collaboration with a team of nationally recognized nursing education speakers and consultants. The first conference was offered in the southwestern United States the following summer and was designed to help faculty meet six of the NLN Core Competencies of Nurse Educators (Halstead, 2007; Table 1). These competencies served as the overall learning outcomes for the conference; each plenary session's specific learning outcomes were also delineated.

To obtain nursing contact hours for continuing education (CE), attendees completed an onsite evaluation tool that assessed various aspects of the conference, including their perception of how well the learning outcomes were met. Feedback from the first group was extremely positive with a suggestion to market the conference to all nurse educators, including those who are experienced or "seasoned." The attendees also emphasized the need to keep the 3 ½-day core

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 702 777 3998.

E-mail addresses: donna@diassociates.com (D. Ignatavicius),

Catie.chung@tun.touro.edu (C.E. Chung).

¹ Tel.: +1 505 867 4133.

Table 1
Conference learning outcomes based on NLN Core Competencies of Nurse Educators

I: Facilitate learning.
III: Use assessment and evaluation strategies.
IV: Participate in curriculum design and evaluation of program outcomes.
VI: Pursue continuous quality improvement in the nurse educator role.
VII: Engage in scholarship.
VIII: Function within the education environment.

curriculum intact due to its unique practicality, currency, and application activities. These recommendations continue to be implemented, and 17 such conferences have been conducted to date.

One of the unique features of the conference is that at the end of each day, the participants form small groups to apply newly learned concepts. During these activities, the speakers act as learning facilitators and provide meaningful individual and group feedback. Learning is also gained throughout the sessions through role play, pair activities, case studies, videos, and discussion. Opportunities for additional attendee networking include an evening reception and meals served at large round tables. According to a systematic review by Medves et al. (2010), this type of multimodal approach to learning increases the likelihood of knowledge transfer and is congruent with adult learning theory.

Although the content of the conference is continually updated and refreshed to incorporate the latest best practices, the core curriculum remains intact. In addition, participants can choose to take one or more optional preconference sessions that focus on specific or more advanced topics in nursing education. Examples include preparing for nursing accreditation, preventing and managing incivility, flipping the classroom, and best practices for online teaching/learning.

Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed a paucity of studies on whether CE learners transfer learning to the workplace and the variables that influence application of that knowledge. In their classic work, Baldwin and Ford (1988) defined transfer of knowledge as “the degree to which [learners] apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained in a training context to the job” (p. 63). Knowledge transfer reflects teaching/learning effectiveness and implies successful application of that knowledge in an organization. This definition was used as a framework for the survey.

According to Rock (2014), professional nursing development does not guarantee transfer and application of knowledge into educational practice. A meta-analysis by Colquitt et al. (2000) validated two major factors that influence knowledge transfer: (a) “learner characteristics,” such as motivation, education, and experience; and (b) “situational characteristics,” such as peer support, supervisor support, and organizational culture. These findings are somewhat consistent with Stake's (1973) earlier model for evaluation of CE. According to Stake's model, *antecedents*, such as learner educational preparation; *transactions*, including the learning process or dynamic; and *outcomes*, the end products of the education process, should be part of CE or program evaluation. Situational characteristics were not considered in this model.

Situational characteristics, also known as environmental factors, can affect the ability to make changes in educational practices. For example, several studies of university general education faculty identified barriers to change in teaching practices (Knight, 2006; Stes et al., 2007). The most common environmental barriers were lack of consensus or collaboration with other faculty, large class sizes, passive students, time pressures, and lack of administrative support or guidance.

Rock (2014) examined the transfer of knowledge from four integrative technology CE programs for full-time nursing faculty working

at 16 different institutions. Three components were included in the study: trainee (learner) characteristics (knowledge, ability, and personality), program design characteristics (networking, team building, and learning methods), and work environment (situational) characteristics (support and barriers). Faculty who were strongly motivated, creative, persistent, and risk taking were best able to integrate the new technology into their nursing programs. For some study participants, however, lack of administrative and peer support, inadequate funding, and insufficient time limited the technology integration into their nursing programs.

Slusher et al. (2000) reported a 10-year retrospective study of knowledge transfer from multiple CE offerings for nurses in Kentucky. Findings indicated that the offerings were useful, provided motivation to learn more information, and resulted in acquisition of new knowledge and skills for both nurse educators and clinicians. However, less than half of the 474 nurse participants felt they were able to make changes in their workplace as a result of the CE offerings. The authors did not assess the reasons for the inability to implement these changes or posit any explanation.

Although there are a number of national and international journals that focus on nursing education and continuing nursing education, a review of the literature for the past 15 years regarding the effectiveness of professional development provided by a large academic nurse educator conference yielded no reported studies. Many regional, national, and international conferences are offered in the United States for nurse educators every year, yet their effectiveness has not been retrospectively assessed to determine transfer of learning into educational practice. To measure transfer and application of knowledge in their nursing programs, 200 new and experienced faculty from 38 states and Canada who attended the 16th (2014) southwestern nurse education conference were invited to participate in a retrospective, descriptive pilot study.

Methods

In this study, the authors sought to determine whether the participants of the nurse educator conference transferred the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned at the professional development event into their nursing programs and educational practices. The authors also wanted to examine the effects of learner and environmental characteristics on the process of transferring new learning into nursing education practice. The following four questions provided direction for the study; the first two questions examined *learner* characteristics, and the third and fourth question examined *environmental* characteristics:

1. Which educational session information did respondents most want to include in their nursing program?
2. Did respondents make changes in their nursing curricula or educational practices as intended?
3. What were the primary facilitators for making desired curricular or educational practice changes?
4. What were the primary barriers to making desired curricular or educational practice changes?

Question 1 was addressed at baseline because it examined what changes the participants desired to implement moving forward. Questions 2, 3, and 4 were assessed at the 90- and 180-day follow up time frames, as the questions addressed whether the respondents actually implemented desired changes into their coursework or curriculum.

Nature of the Conference Participants

The July 2014 conference participants were primarily nurse educators in prelicensure LPN/LVN and RN programs. The largest

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