

Experiential Learning Influences Baccalaureate Nursing Students Research Perceptions

Teresa V. Hurley*

Mount Saint Mary College, New York

Abstract

Evidenced-based practice is contingent on having baccalaureate nursing students knowledgeable about the research process. An undergraduate nursing research course was revised based on experiential teaching/learning strategies espoused in Kolbs Theory. A purposive sample of 30 undergraduate students enrolled in fundamentals of research course at northeaster liberal arts college in USA, participated in a qualitative study. The purpose was to explore and describe their perceptions of the course using a reflective essay. Three themes emerged from the analysis: preconceived perceptions, learning by doing, and future plans. Active participation in research activities ,as becoming certified in the protection of human subjects, teamwork, and presenting a research poster were perceived as being instrumental in their leaning and applicable to their future practice and education. It is important for nurse educators to design courses that actively engage students in learning to prepare them to deliver quality safe care based on research.

Introduction

Changes in the health care system and the competitive atmosphere to deliver high standards of care is contingent on the preparation of new entry baccalaureate prepared nursing graduates to function in diverse clinical healthcare settings effectively and efficiently using the American Association of the Colleges of Nursing criteria (AACN, 2008) [1]. These criteria emphasize that “nursing practice is grounded in the translation of current evidence into practice. Scholarship for the baccalaureate graduate involves identification of practice issues; appraisal and integration of evidence; and evaluation of outcomes” [1].

With such emphasis on evidenced-based practice, nurse educators need to use effective teaching/learning strategies in research courses that promote baccalaureate nursing students' acquisition of knowledge and skills they are expected to use in practice. Experiential strategies have been advocated to promote learning [2-6].

There was a noticeable gap in the literature. Most studies were conducted in the 1980's and 1990s with a resurgence in the 2000s. Although studies reported the success of using experiential strategies such as in the development of nursing physical assessment skills and leadership development [7,8], only two studies were found pertaining to nursing research. Pugsley and Clayton (2003) reported that the experiential group had statistically higher attitudes towards research compared to those taught by lecture. Rosendale, Strauss, Kaur, Knight, and Malaspina (2016) using a qualitative descriptive design found

Corresponding Author: Teresa V. Hurley, School of Nursing, Mount Saint Mary College, 330 Powell Avenue, Newburgh, NY 12550, New York, United States. E-mail id: hurley@msmc.edu

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three themes in their content analysis of nursing students involved in a research project funded by the National Institutes of Health. These were “pleasure and personal reward, improving lives of patients, and new interest in research participation” [9].

Research is needed to uncover the reasons behind the nursing students' perceptions and their rationales for them including the effectiveness of teaching strategies to facilitate learning. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe students' perceptions prior to and after taking a nursing research course based on experiential learning.

Theoretical Framework: Kolb's Experiential Learning

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning (1984) proposes that learning is a cyclical process comprised of four stages starting with a real experience followed by reflection. Contemplation provides the learner with the ability to derive meaning from the experience including their reaction to it. This is followed by abstract conceptualizations where the learner is able to gain understanding from their actions within the context of their knowledge. The last stage is where the learner transfers what is learned to real life situations which are assimilated into future behaviors. Reflective writing is viewed as a significant strategy in professional education which connects learning from experience because it goes beyond just describing the experience [3,10].

Kolb's Theory has been used in research with nursing students, However, studies were more than five years [4,6]. There was one recent study by Fenski, Freeland, Price, and Brough (2015) where they found improvement in skill performance, knowledge, and understanding among medical/surgical nursing students.

Methodology

A descriptive qualitative approach was used to identify and summarize the student nurses experiences. Sandelowski (2000) emphasizes that this design allows for the direct description of the phenomenon using common language obtained from the questions and respondents answers [11]. This is why a purposive sampling is used to capture similarities and differences in experiences and analyzed using descriptive qualitative content analysis. Data saturation is not used because “maximum variation sampling” is needed to “explore the common and unique manifestations of a target phenomenon” [11].

A purposeful sample of 30 nursing students volunteered to participate in the study. They were taking a senior level 3-credit foundation of research course at a northeastern liberal arts college in the USA. The majority were female ($n = 28$), White ($n = 27$), with a mean age of 21-years old. Institutional Review Board approval was received. All students provided written informed consent which included the anonymous use of their essays.

Experiential teaching intervention

Previously, the course was delivered solely by lecture with objective testing. The author made changes in the course delivery and evaluation using experiential teaching/learning strategies. The students were exposed to real life learning experiences which included National Institutes of Health training in the protection of human subjects, in-class critiquing exercises of research studies; interdisciplinary collaborations with faculty, librarians, healthcare providers, and informational technologists; a reflective essay; guest nursing researchers, and an evidenced-based research project. For the project, the students were randomly assigned into five groups and were given the freedom to choose a research topic. Because the class was delivered 3-hours weekly, an hour was allocated at the end of lecture for the students to work on their projects and to receive formative feedback. The course culminated in a campus-wide professional poster presentation graded by an interdisciplinary team.

Data collection

A reflective essay was chosen to collect data because it was theory-based and consistent with the research design, recommend using this strategy [3,11]. The students were asked to think about their perceptions of nursing research prior to the course. They were also asked if their perceptions remained the same or changed after taking the course and to provide reasons in a short essay.

Data analysis

Sandelowski (2000) stresses that when using a qualitative descriptive design that content analysis is the method of choice because it is dynamic and data-derived. It is reflexive and interactive with the aim of summarizing the data according to the information provided by the participants. The result is a “straight descriptive summary” that is organized in the best way that “contains the data...and at its most relevant to the audience” [11]. Content analysis focuses on low-inferences, so as not to alter the experiences or perceptions described by participants [11].

The students’ pre and post course perceptions with rationales were placed on a spread sheet. Line-by-line analysis was done to identify common key words or phrases and to identify emerging categories. The findings of this data analysis were confirmed by a nurse educator.

Discussion of the findings

Three, major categories were identified: 1) Preconceived Perceptions; 2) Learning by Doing; and 3) Future Plans. These corresponded to the tenets in Kolb’s Theory (1987).

Preconceived perceptions: The students questioned the relevance of nursing research, why they had to take the class, and whether they would be successful based on past experiences. The following two descriptions capture the sentiments of the students.

1. “A class I dreaded throughout nursing school. I was never good at finding articles for research papers and even worse at analyzing the articles to get the necessary information out of them. Never understood why needed to be proficient in this skill”.

2. “Unnerving for me. I had an overall opinion of the course before I ever stepped into the room. I was not a good researcher and this course would make me feel insignificant and defeated because I did not think I would excel in it.”

Learning by doing: Each of the course activities were identified by students as being instrumental in changing their initial perceptions about research. Overall, the students viewed the course as “shaping” their “feelings about research.” They expressed a “firm understanding about how to apply research studies to evidenced-based practice” which “boosted” their “confidence” and “sparked interest” for using research in their “soon to be nursing career.” They noted that they felt empowered after their “project presentations” and learned that “group projects” could be “fun”.

Future plans: Students indicated they would pursue “higher degrees in nursing” because they had the “confidence to do research.” They also expressed “the importance of using research in practice” and linked research to “producing quality nursing” and being an “advocate” to patients.

These findings support the propositions in Kolb’s Experiential Theory (1987) where engagement in real life activities and reflection on those activities leads to a deeper understanding and incorporation of the learning in future actions. Also found that a mini-research project resulted in higher positive attitudes as did that of [5,9]. Research done by also found changes in knowledge acquisition and deeper understanding using Kolb’s Theory [2-4,6].

Implications/recommendations for nursing education

Experiential teaching/learning strategies have the potential to influence students’ perceptions about the significance of nursing research as part of professional practice. By planning meaningful research-oriented professional activities, deep learning can occur. Students active engagement in the research process, including the protection of human subjects and dissemination of the findings, provides the real-life experience where new insights and feelings of achievement and empowerment can emerge. The inclusion of reflective writing or focused discussions are two strategies that can provide a theoretical base where learning takes place by contemplation on the experience.

Limitations

These findings cannot be generalized. The majority of the participants were female ($n = 28$). Gender bias may have occurred. Similarly, the sample was from a private predominately liberal arts college using a traditional cohort whose mean age was 21-years-old and ethnicity was White ($n = 27$). A more diverse sample may elicit different responses. Although careful attention was made to bracket, bias may have occurred on an unconscious level. Further exploration utilizing a more in-depth approach such as semi-structured interviews, may elicit deeper meanings to the students experiences in addition to writing the essay.

Conclusions/Future Research

‘Baccalaureate student nurses were able to make the connection between nursing and research by having tangible experiences in an experientially designed course. Reflective writing is an effective

strategy that facilitates learning by connecting knowledge experience with development of professional attitudes and skills. Future research building on this strategy should be done to confirm the effectiveness of experiential strategies in research courses.

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