

Defining and Assessing Abilities-based Outcomes for Nursing Education: Lessons from the Faculty of Nursing at the University of New Brunswick (Fredericton)

Monique Mallet-Boucher, Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton/Moncton

Claudia McCloskey, Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton/Moncton

Karen Tamlyn, Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton

Janice Thompson, Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton

Kathy Wilson, Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton

Abstract

This session presented the process and results from a history of defining and assessing core abilities for graduates of nursing degree program(s) at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. The process has included integrating the Maritimes Provinces Higher Education Commission Degree Level Qualifications Framework (2006) and the competencies for entry-level nurses, as defined by the Nurses Association of New Brunswick (NANB, 2013). Our approach was to use these categorizations of abilities for nursing practice, integrating knowledge, values, skills, attributes and predispositions into broadly defined core domains of ability. In our professional degree program, these domains of practice ability are nested within philosophical commitments to: dialogic relations with students; preparation for nursing practice as a democratic professional; human caring, social justice; and primary health care. These philosophical influences were discussed, noting their relevance in other disciplines. Our session presented specific information about the process of defining the domains of ability that structure the curriculum in our degree programs and the process of defining formative and summative assessment strategies for our learning outcomes. Lessons learned were shared by panel members from serendipitous experiences.

Keywords: Abilities-based learning; Assessing student learning outcomes; Maritimes Provinces Higher Education Commission Degree Level Qualifications Framework; Entry-level competencies for registered nurses; Practice philosophy; Democratic professionalism

Report

During the period 2007-2012, Faculty members at UNB Fredericton Faculty of Nursing engaged in a process of defining the framework of abilities and learning outcomes contained in the UNB nursing graduate and undergraduate degree programs. This process responded to political, professional, and philosophical influences in nursing education (Villeneuve & MacDonald, 2006). For the undergraduate degree program, the process included a robust examination of entry-level competencies for Registered Nurses in New Brunswick (NANB, 2013). Previous mapping of entry-level competencies in the curriculum was updated based on current revisions of those competencies. The process also included a careful analysis and comparison of standards for post-secondary degree programs, based on the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) Degree Level Qualifications Framework (2006). Finally,

competencies and standards were analyzed using practice philosophy (Benner et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1977; Scollon, 2001; Mentkowski et al., 2000; Watson, 2006) to identify domains of practice ability addressed in our program. These were conceptualized as domains of ability-preparing students for entry-level competency and practice as Registered Nurses. During the process of explicating/defining these domains of ability, faculty members also considered the serendipitous publication and relevance of Gardner's (2008) work on cultivating five minds for the future.

Based on the use of componential, semantic and taxonomic analysis (Spradley, 1979), careful mapping of Entry Level Competencies for RNs (NANB, 2013), the Faculty identified five domains of practice ability that are developmentally cultivated in the undergraduate degree program. These include: 1.) Knowledge and its application; 2.) Critical thinking/Skills of analysis; 3.) Communication; 4.) Professional Identity and Ethics; and 5.) Social Justice/Effective Citizenship.

Having defined the domains of competency and ability we believe are cultivated in our degree program, the Faculty turned to explicate learning outcomes that define each domain of ability in our program. This process took some time. Making a cognitive shift from a teaching focus-emphasizing learning objectives—to a learning focus emphasizing demonstrated outcomes brought the Faculty to a point of considering how educators accurately assess student learning (Irons, 2008). With considerable facilitation, the Faculty identified a framework of 25 learning outcomes that define successful achievement of learning in our program. These outcomes were sequentially and cumulatively leveled over four years- making explicit the level of learning that students will achieve in each ability domain, at the end of each year of study. Within each year of study, learning outcomes were further leveled in each course in our curriculum. This process resulted in a blueprint for each course in the degree program, containing agreed upon learning outcomes.

Following these steps, the Faculty spent time and effort considering the importance of formative and summative assessment strategies as interventions that support student learning and success. Through faculty development activities, faculty members determined the formative and summative assessment strategies that assess learning outcomes, for each course. These decisions in choosing assessment strategies were and are influenced by academic freedom, with emphasis placed on considering the effectiveness of how specific assessment strategies contribute to the development of competency and ability in relation to learning outcomes. A program wide rubric for the assessment of student learning contains the cumulative results of these decisions concerning assessment strategies - mapping the assessment of student learning for competency and ability throughout all years of the degree program.

During and after these years of engagement, the undergraduate curriculum in our degree program has been reviewed twice for accreditation (Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing) and for regulatory approval (Nurses Association of New Brunswick). In both instances, the educational degree program and its curriculum have been approved with commendation for our curriculum work. In the context of preparing registered nurses for practice that protects the public and achieves health equity, our work has been situated within the discourse of democratic professionalism, where we believe it will continue to develop (Thompson, Mallet-Boucher, McCloskey, Tamlyn, Wilson; 2013).

In our presentation of this project at the AAU Teaching Showcase, three authors (McCloskey, Tamlyn, Thompson) were able to attend and engage in dialogue with conference participants. We appreciated feedback and comments from audience members at Memorial University, including those working in Nursing and in Marine Engineering Shipbuilding. Discussion of regulatory influences and the MPHEC (2006) Framework was especially interesting in terms of similarities and differences in the Maritimes. Insights from this session highlighted the unique perspectives shared by professional fields of study as practice disciplines, and their experiences in the assessment of student learning.

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Author Biographies

Monique Mallet-Boucher, RN, PhD, Senior Teaching Associate, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton/Moncton, New Brunswick. mmalletb@unb.ca

Claudia McCloskey, RN, MEd, Nurse Clinician II, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton/Moncton, New Brunswick. cmcclos1@unb.ca

Karen Tamlyn, RN, MN, Professor, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick. tamlyn@unb.ca

Janice Thompson, RN, PhD, Professor, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick. jthomps@unb.ca

Kathy Wilson, RN, PhD, Associate Professor, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick. kewilson@unb.ca