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## Planting Seeds of Reflective Practice

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## Abstract

COVID-19 has forced educators to redesign courses for different delivery modalities. While this originally caused chaos for many faculty members, the continued need for flexibility has provided an opportunity to rethink how courses could best support students both during the pandemic and moving forward. A pre-licensure first semester fundamentals of nursing course changed from fully in-person to hybrid delivery. Adaptations were made with a focus on concepts of growth mindset and creating a supportive environment to foster early acquisition of reflection skills. Many of these adaptations can continue to be incorporated into a fundamentals of nursing courses beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

**Keywords:** growth mindset, supportive learning environments, reflective practice

## Planting Seeds of Reflective Practice

*I am SMART*

*I am CAPABLE*

*I am HARDWORKING*

*I am CARING*

*But, I am HUMAN*

*I will not stress over the things I cannot control*

*I will work hard in nursing school not for the “A”, but for my future patients*

*I will remain focused on my goals, not on any setbacks or challenges I may face*

*I believe in myself and [redacted] believes in me, too*

COVID-19 has impacted many facets of nursing education since spring semester 2020. As the initial chaos has settled, faculty members have had the opportunity to continue to adapt courses to better serve nursing students. In fall 2020, the first-semester fundamentals of nursing didactic course was modified to reduce student workload and stress. The course delivery was restructured from a fully in-person to a hybrid course. Changes included: eliminating exams in favor of a group project to meet course objectives, a focus on effort to mastery, and offering a variety of assignment options on select weeks. In the spring of semester 2021, the course was further redesigned with a faculty member change (in progress at time of submission). The course continued to include the modifications made in the fall except the large group project was removed. The spring 2021 course included the addition of content and assignments based on concepts of growth mindset, creating a supportive environment for growth, and planting the seeds of reflective practice.

Growth mindset, developed by Carol Dwek, (Dwek, 2008; 2016) involves integrating theory and personal development (Korstange, 2016). While nursing education has not historically labelled growth mindset as an essential to nursing education, Williams (2020) noted the more recent transition of growth mindset to higher education. Benefits of applying a growth mindset to nursing education have included motivation and adoption of effective learning patterns and sustained interest in achieving a new goal even in the presence of failure (Williams, 2020). These benefits

were particularly beneficial to disadvantaged students (Williams, 2020). Lewis and Williams (2020) detailed a positive correlation between a growth mindset intervention and decreasing fear of failure in first and second semester nursing students.

While the addition of growth mindset is newer to the nursing literature, aspects of growth mindset are present in preparing nursing students for reflection. The benefits of self-reflection support nursing practice by enhancing the ability to think about an experience and make connections (Korstange, 2016; Mahon & O'Neill, 2020). Reflective practice has been recommended in nursing curriculum by the Quality and Safety Education for Nurses initiative, especially as a part of clinical experiences (Cronenwett et al., 2009). The use of reflection after clinical or simulation experiences has been widely noted in nursing literature, with new insights of late (Barbagallo, 2019; Barbagallo, 2021; Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Lutter et al., 2018; Nagle & Foli, 2020). Reflective practice has been used to help students process not only clinical experiences, but also make emotional connections with challenging content such as providing care at the end of life (Josephsen, 2020; Schreiner & Wolf Bordonaro, 2019). In this paper, the actions taken to amplify and include concepts of growth mindset into course delivery and assignments, create a supportive learning environment despite alternate delivery format, and planting the seeds of reflective skills in a first-semester pre-licensure fundamentals of nursing course will be presented.

### **Growth Mindset Concepts**

Many of the concepts from Dwek's work in growth mindset were continued or integrated into this course (Dwek, 2016). One concept illustrated in course assignments is the ability of students to see the benefit of effort on mastery (Boyd, 2014). The students purchased their textbook as an e-version with a content package. The quizzes within the package on textbook content were scored with increasing levels of mastery, and quizzes were taken as many times as desired to get the preferred amount of points. The virtual simulations assigned from the package were also completed as many times as needed to achieve a passing grade (75%) for full points. By not focusing on the first achieved score as the end product, the effort put in to subsequent attempts is the key to future success (Dwek, 2016. p. 44)

Two additional concepts of growth mindset present in the course were persisting in the face of disappointment or difficulty and learning from constructive feedback (Dwek, 2016). Boyd (2014) described these as an integrative approach to building learning abilities beyond the classroom. The assignments in the first third of the course involved weekly reflections on course content. The ability to choose from a variety of assignments was introduced in week six. Those options included completing a reflection as above, or using early application of clinical reasoning and the nursing process to complete a concept map or care plan. Having a consistent assignment type allowed for repeated feedback that was incorporated in future assignments. The only formal written assignments in the course were developed as a series of reflective papers with increasing point values with feedback given between each paper. An affirmation was written for this course to be recited together at the beginning of each meeting (featured above, inspired by many sources). The statement in the affirmation, "*I will remain focused on my goals, not on any setbacks or challenges I may face*" supported this concept. The final growth mindset concept included in the course was learning from others' successes, found in the optional content for reflections.

### **Supportive Environment**

Barbagallo (2019; 2021) noted that reflection requires safe, positive learning environments. Bjerkvik and Hilli (2019) described the need for trusting relationships for students to be able to feel safe to reflect. Rebuilt as a hybrid course, the majority of content was delivered synchronously on Zoom for an hour and fifteen minutes divided into two groups. This course only met in-person twice during the semester (weeks four and eight). With 79 students enrolled, only twenty could meet at a time in a classroom for an hour and a half with physical spacing between students and across from faculty in order to meet COVID-19 safety standards. Zoom meetings and masked in-person meetings could do little to support building a safe learning community in a newly formed cohort without purposeful effort. Nilson and Goodson (2018) described the importance of creating high-quality interactions in an online learning environment.

As previously mentioned, one addition to the class was a weekly affirmation. Because the class met predominantly online, the students were asked to unmute their microphones (having video on was optional for this course) as a chaotic chorus was created reciting the affirmation together. In addition to including the concepts of growth mindset, the affirmation served to build a positive, supportive environment. Also, shared decision making is employed when possible (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). Group decisions included class discussion rules, random versus set breakout

rooms for group work, and meeting time preferences (within the schedule boundary). Flexibility in types of assignments and in the content each student chooses to review was another means to create a supportive environment (Nilson & Goodson, 2018).

Flexibility was also incorporated into attendance and due dates. There was no attendance grade. Zoom sessions each week were recorded with any content needed from class available in a folder in the learning management system (LMS) for any student who could not attend class. Group work with five or six was incorporated in some way most weeks (Nilson & Goodson, 2018), however, any work completed in the group was incorporated fully into the allotted class time, removing the requirement for out of class meetings. The work completed in the group was uploaded as an assignment, with full points for submission. Any incomplete group work was submitted as such. Students who missed class were still able submit the assignment by accessing the recording and materials in the LMS, they simply lost the benefit of learning from their classmates. Due to the large class size Spring 2021 semester, fully flexible due dates were not explored. However, per the syllabus, students could notify the faculty member of the need for extended deadlines prior to due dates for no penalty on submissions. Student hours (office hours) were available via the Zoom link in the LMS for the course (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). Student emails were answered as soon as reasonably possible and an open discussion board for questions was included in the LMS. Prompt response to email has been shown to enhance a caring environment in online learning (Mann, 2014). Purposely setting a supportive tone for the course was essential to adapt to the predominantly online learning environment (Nilson & Goodson, 2018).

### **Reflective Assignments**

Reflection in nursing education may require a new way of thinking about learning for students. Having completed a number of prerequisite science courses, students often look for the “right” answer, however, reflection as a process of learning does not have a single correct response. In a narrative review, Steven et al. (2020) noted the need to move from “we will reflect” to “we will reflect to learn” (p. E59). Reflection has been widely incorporated into nursing curricula; there is a need to ensure students move past retelling into more deep reflection (Naicker & van Rensburg, 2018; Steven et al., 2020). Deeper reflection requires reflection skill acquisition (Barbagallo, 2019; Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Mahon & O’Neill, 2020; Naicker & van Rensburg, 2018; Steven et al., 2020). When reflection skills are not well developed, the benefits of deeper reflection are not achieved (Mahon & O’Neill, 2020). Reflection was planted in this course in informal and formal assignments. The goal of the assignments was not to achieve mastery of reflection, but to start to identify the benefits of reflective practice and use their own voices to make connections between course content and their experiences.

### **Informal Reflections**

Informal assignments were submitted to the LMS. There was no specific format for their reflections, students were invited to submit reflections in prose, poetry, music, or visual arts. Allowing for artistic expression in nursing student reflection has led to positive experiences such as deeper understanding of their own thoughts on the subject presented and allowing for more freedom in showing knowledge (Josephsen, 2020; Lutter et al., 2018; Quinn, 2019; Schreiner & Wolf Bordonaro, 2019). One topic of reflection was asking students to define for themselves health and wellness. Their definitions could relate to their textbook, journal articles, or health organizations, but needed to be translated into their lives and their vision of future practice. This was done in the first week to introduce independent thought and to connect what they were reading with what they had experienced. Throughout the semester, students were asked to reflect on one of the required or optional readings from the week. They were also permitted to reflect on something else that was pressing on their minds or something from another week’s content they wanted to further explore. The optional content included videos such as TED Talks, journal articles, and/or selected episodes of *Amplify Nursing* or *RNMentor* podcasts. The podcasts supported the growth mindset focus with finding lessons and inspiration in the experiences of current nurse leaders. Dwek (2016) discusses the need to follow the journey of admired leaders to see their struggles alongside their accomplishments (p. 81). There was a basic rubric for the reflections focused on the depth of reflection. Questions and comments were given as feedback on submissions. Several works of art were submitted by multiple students throughout the semester. Reflections on the content of their choosing was overall thoughtful and showing signs of solid reflective practice being built.

## **Formal Reflections**

There was a series of three formal papers assigned in this course called 'Activating Soul'. The assignment was based on the work of Padykula (2017) where reflective journaling was used by RN-BS students in a holistic nursing course to detail their understanding of self-care and health promotion. The prompts of the assignment in this fundamentals course included students defining self-care and health promotion for themselves, identifying self-care activities they could use during nursing school and in their future practice, and to discover how self-care and health promotion relate to the nursing profession. The students were able to use any number of resources to support their work (one citation required) and followed a standard format. A bank of articles and resources was provided, but students were free to choose content that spoke to their experiences. The assignment involved all students taking a wellness self-assessment before each paper and based on the results, deciding where they wanted to focus their self-care or health promotion activities. The papers increased in maximum length from two to three pages and in points allocated. Feedback was given between each paper to build deeper reflection or clarity in expressing their ideas.

## **Course Review**

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to complete the university-based course survey during the synchronous Zoom session. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. One closed-ended question was added to the survey specific to the self-care reflection in this course. IRB exemption was obtained to share the survey results. The survey response rate for the course was 88% (70/79) for the close-ended questions. The rating scale for the close-ended questions ranged from 1-5 with 5 being the highest score. The response rate for the open-ended questions was lower. The question about barriers to learning received 48 out of the overall 70 responses with 14 responses being some version of n/a, leaving 34 responses with feedback. The question about aspects of the course most valuable to you received 57 out of the overall 70 responses with one being n/a.

There were seven closed-ended questions on the survey that specifically addressed the supportive environment that was intended for the course. Four questions related to encouragement from the instructor. There were positive responses to the questions about the instructor having a genuine interest in the success of individual students ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ), encourages student questions ( $M = 4.9$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ), encourages me to do my best work ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ), and instructor fostered learning in this course ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ). One question asked about instructor's demonstration of respect for students ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ). The final two questions relating to the intended supportive environment included prompt response to students ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) and prompt feedback on assignments ( $M = 4.8$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ).

The most common barrier to learning identified in the open-ended comments was being online ( $n = 14$ ). Also related to the format was the flipped classroom model with pre-recorded lectures which some students found valuable, but others found to be an infringement on out of class time. Another reported barrier was the multiple technology platforms used in the course. Many reported not find value in the extended package with the textbook while some did not like having multiple platforms to use. Other responses listed specific platforms they did not prefer. One student felt he/she could not share her opinion if it disagreed with the instructor.

The responses to the aspects that were most valuable included multiple aspects of the course. The most common response was about reflection ( $n = 18$ ). Students noted they thought more deeply about the content and felt that it was better to increase knowledge than studying for an exam. Students also liked the flexibility to choose an assignment or reflection topic. Collaborating and discussing content with peers also was mentioned frequently. Additionally, the ability to complete quizzing multiple times to achieve a desired score was listed, especially in place of traditional exams. A few students mentioned the class affirmation as a way to be connected each class meeting. There were also positive comments about the instructor including the words caring, engaged, fair, available, and compassionate.

## **Future Implications**

While these changes to the course were originally made to adjust to new teaching modalities and decrease student stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is utility in continuing and further enhancing these changes moving forward. The concepts of growth mindset will still be applicable to nursing students. One enhancement that could be made is to purposefully introduce the concepts of growth mindset rather than simply incorporating them into the course (Lewis & Williams, 2020). This may allow the students to explicitly see the benefit of the assignments they are asked to complete. The supportive elements built into the course will remain going forward. Stress is not something

that will be absent in nursing students after the pandemic. A focus on safe learning environments for students should be a priority in all nursing courses. Another enhancement that could be made when students are able to return to the classroom more frequently would be to include creating art as reflection during class (Josephsen, 2020; Quinn, 2019; Schreiner & Wolf Bordonaro, 2019). This may give students another option for reflective practice they would not have otherwise tried, or could open up the opportunity to use an art medium as an assigned reflection later. Additionally, integrating other types of group work such as assignments completed in-class and peer-to-peer teaching could be explored. Should this course continue to be online, including students in the decision of class model (e.g. a flipped class with short Zoom or full lecture/discussion synchronous on Zoom) would be appropriate. While the course was overall successful in meeting both the objectives and intended supportive environment, continuous improvements and feedback loops with the students will continue to be important.

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