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The leap to faculty in the time of COVID19

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ABSTRACT

Nurses are essential workers, particularly in a pandemic. Increasingly complex patients and an ever-changing health care environment are a few of the challenges that nursing faculty have to prepare novice nurses for, now more than ever, but it is proving difficult due to the limited number of nursing faculty. In order to continue to prepare nurses for practice, schools of nursing are looking for ways to recruit and retain new faculty. The transition from clinician to academia is challenging due to anxiety related to new expectations, adjusting socially into a new environment, and loss of a previous identity as a clinician; however, for faculty hired during the COVID19 pandemic, these challenges have been amplified due to the loss of learning through observation and social interactions. The idea that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context is rooted in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. This paper gives voice to two novice faculty who undertook the challenge of starting a ranked faculty role while working remotely during the COVID19 pandemic. Due to the increased likelihood of another pandemic occurring in the relative near future due to globalization; the second role of this paper is to propose measures for faculty enculturation, based on the Social Learning Theory, which can be implemented safely from home. Improved nursing recruitment into academia, and retainment, will improve the education of future nurses facing the challenges of modern healthcare.

Introduction

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) reports faculty vacancy rates to be approximately 7.9% (2019). As a result, the AACN (2019) reports that nursing schools in the United States turned away 75,029 qualified applicants from baccalaureate and graduate nursing programs in 2018 due in part to faculty shortages. Recruiting, welcoming, and retaining new faculty into schools of nursing across the country is an important imperative. Strategies are needed to make the transition less daunting and more seamless in order to entice master’s and doctorate prepared candidates from the practice setting into the academic setting where their skills can contribute to the education of future nurses.

The transition from a clinical or acute care nursing role to a ranked faculty position is fraught with challenges including, anxiety related to new expectations, fear of not fitting into a new social network, and the loss of a previous identity as a clinician expert (Weidman, 2013). These challenges are amplified today as a global pandemic sends novice faculty across the country home to redesign course content and clinical experiences from in person to online learning experiences.

Examining this phenomenon is worthwhile because of the likelihood that such an unplanned event could be repeated in the future (Glasper, 2020). The global spread of disease is an increasing threat due to globalization, urbanization, and climate change. This is evidenced by the following recent outbreaks which have taken place since 2002: (a) Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS); (b) H1N1 influenza pandemic; (c) Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS); (d) Ebola; (e) Zika; (f) Nipah virus; (g) cholera; (h) yellow fever; (i) Lassa fever (Kavanagh et al., 2020).

Purpose

This publication has a dual purpose: a) to give voice to the novice faculty who undertook the challenge of teaching from home during the most challenging of times and b) to propose key measures for faculty enculturation based on social learning theory. With unexpected circumstances from infectious diseases to natural disasters, schools of nursing are well served to gather the lessons learned from the unprecedented unplanned change of COVID 19.
Theoretical framework

The analysis of this remote onboarding experience has been conducted using the theoretical framework of Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory. Social Learning Theory states that learning takes place in the context of social interactions and is based on the five key assumptions listed here (Bandura, 2002).

1. Learning is not purely behavioral; rather, it is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. For new faculty, this can be accomplished by structuring work assignments for team teaching where experienced faculty can model behaviors for novice faculty, even if work is done in separate locations. The authors recommend that one member of the mentoring team be an expert at regulatory stipulations such as state board of nursing and accreditation requirements so that this information can be shared in the context of course development.

2. Learning can occur by observing a behavior and by observing the consequences of the behavior (vicarious reinforcement). By using a team of mentors for each novice nursing educator, universities can expose novice faculty to those who have had success in multiple areas required for tenure including research, teaching, and service. A program has been developed in our university for the express purpose of supporting tenure track faculty in all three essential areas. Gatherings have taken place in both virtual and socially distanced environments to support new faculty learn the expectations and timelines for tenure.

3. Learning involves observation, extraction of information from those observations, and making decisions about the performance of the behavior (observational learning or modeling). Thus, learning can occur without an observable change in behavior. Team teaching provides safe hands-on opportunities for novice faculty to learn about and apply elemental teaching skills such as syllabus development, learning outcomes, course objectives in didactic, clinical and lab settings, evaluation methods, and navigation of difficult student situations.

4. Reinforcement plays a role in learning but is not entirely responsible for learning. Team teaching provides a tremendous opportunity to reinforce behaviors because so many behaviors are observed by the seasoned faculty member.

5. The learner is not a passive recipient of information. Cognition, environment, and behavior all mutually influence each other (reciprocal determinism). Team teaching coupled with peer connections (with other novice faculty) allow new faculty members to share experiences and increase understanding of their significance and value in the learning process.

This framework was chosen for its ability to contribute to the understanding of the challenges of learning in a new role in isolation and its ability to inform impactful countermeasures. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. This contributes to our understanding of the new faculty experience during COVID-19.

Background

This article examines the unique experiences of two newly hired full time faculty members at a private liberal arts school of nursing at the start of the COVID19 pandemic, 2020. While new to the faculty role, we were experienced, doctorate prepared nurses with years of clinical expertise. We were offered full-time faculty roles on February 20, 2020 and on Tuesday March 17 we went home; home to stay safe from a poorly understood virus. Our start date, May 1, 2020 was spent at home preparing for an intense 8 weeks of teaching accelerated nursing students for the first time ever, and online. While we survived that experience, we are still home, yet to visit campus or sit in our office, all while preparing for another semester of unknowns.

Review of the literature

While much has been written about the challenges faced by new faculty transitioning from other roles, little has been written about the new phenomenon of learning and working remotely. In review of the literature, the words novice nurse educator, novice faculty, social learning theory, and faculty transitions were entered into the EBSCO and Proquest databases using the Bellarmine University library resources. The literature is replete with references to the barriers and challenges associated with the transition from an expert clinician role to the novice faculty role. Some researchers have found that the challenges are related to more than simple skill acquisition but are rather related to adjustments such as loss of a previous expert identity (Hunter & Hayter, 2019), social isolation (McDermid et al., 2016), anxiety, and lack of confidence (Weidman, 2013). Other challenges most noted include a lack of preparedness for the teaching, scholarship (research) and service triumvirate (McDermid et al., 2016), and a lack of core knowledge and skills related to teaching and facilitating learning (Bagley et al., 2018).

The development of resilience, defined as, “the ability to bounce back or cope successfully despite substantial adversity” (Holtz et al., 2018), has been cited as a key strategy for success for new and transitioning faculty. It is also evident in the literature that the building of supportive relationships is a crucial element of resilience and, therefore, an essential element to successful transitioning of new faculty to the academic environment (Holtz et al., 2018; McDermid et al., 2016). Other effective strategies for faculty support involved social connections such as teaching in teams, mentoring relationships in various designs as well as group workshops with new faculty where both skills and relationships could be developed (Hellier & Davidson, 2018; Hunter & Hayter, 2019; Sanderson et al., 2012).

Problem

The problems that arose in the weeks and months that followed March 17, 2020 can be broken into three categories: a) lack of socialization, b) lack of know-how, and c) students with new and unique needs. While they overlap, it will be helpful to examine them each individually.

Lack of socialization and relationship building

Social learning theory tells us that we learn, in part, by observing and modeling others (Grusec, 1992). In a new faculty role, it is ideal that the novice work with and work near successful experienced faculty. Skills that could be learned through this socialization include softer skills such as time management, structuring of the work to be done, and navigation of the social and political aspects of the organization to effectively do the work required. In a work from home environment the loss of this social learning was very impactful to us as novice faculty. Because resilience is correlated with successful transitions and resilience is greatly enhanced by strong trusting relationships (Holtz et al., 2018; McDermid et al., 2016), novice faculty were disadvantaged in both skill acquisition and relationship and resilience building while isolated at home.

It also must be noted that while traversing the experience of being new to the faculty role, we, and all of our colleagues, were also experiencing the full weight of a global pandemic that created huge uncertainty about the future on a personal and global level. Living this in relative isolation was an experience shared by novice faculty, experienced faculty, and entire communities across the country and the world.

Lack of know how

As novice faculty there were experiences that we described as “not knowing what we don’t know”. For example, investing time in
Developing test questions only to learn that a test bank was available, unbeknownst to the novice. Another example in this category includes the best use of the online learning platform for maximum impact and efficiency; how to accomplish something in two clicks and not six. Lastly, requirements related to the industry were often learned through trial and error. For example, registrar requirements for reporting student attendance and specific steps required when students appear to be unsuccessful. In these instances, learning would have been somewhat fluid and effortless in the campus setting surrounded by experienced peers.

**Students with new and unique needs**

In the rapid transition to home, students also found themselves in uncharted waters and required extra support from faculty. Three key areas where students struggled most included (a) fear of personal failure with the move to online learning; (b) fear of larger system failures such as possibly not receiving adequate clinical hours to take the NCLEX exam; (c) fear of missteps related to new expectations with virtual assignments and the navigation of those assignments in isolation. While expert faculty were working hard to resolve all issues at a high level, each faculty member was the frontline resource for students as they expressed concerns related to test anxiety with electronic proctoring, grieving the trappings of graduation, and worry for the health and future of themselves and their loved ones. The need to be a seasoned support posed challenges for the novice faculty who struggled to answer student questions with definitive confidence.

**Planning for the future**

Because unplanned events are likely in the coming months and years, leaders in nursing education are well served by proactively designing methods for meeting the needs of new faculty under changed circumstances. When the onboarding of new faculty must take place without the benefit of the social learning of the university campus, innovation can be used to improve the process for new faculty. Based on both a review of the available literature and lived experience, four key strategies were thought to be both impactful and synergistic when implemented as an onboarding program bundle:

(a) Team mentoring: The implementation of a constellation of mentors to include at least three faculty: a senior faculty, a mid-career faculty, and a junior faculty can enhance social learning each contributing valuable resources to the novice nurse given their experience and time in the position. Because learning involves the active observation of others, increasing the opportunity for a variety of organic observations with multiple faculty members may promote more rapid learning on various aspects of the faculty role. Mentor selection should include one mentor with strong scholarship expertise and one with strong teaching expertise and the alignment of teaching focus areas such as pediatrics, leadership, or critical care (Bagley et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2020). Although the university currently takes a traditional approach to the assignment and arrangement of mentors for new faculty; one carefully chosen mentor and informal relationships may be developed to fit the needs of universities of various sizes and student enrollments.

(b) Peer connections: While new faculty members may be a solo hire, grouping of newly hired faculty would be very beneficial to the novice. We, as novice faculty found that two of the most beneficial activities during our months at home included the review of literature for this article and the process of writing together. We found it enormously beneficial to know that the literature validated our feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and aloneness. The experience of collaborating accomplished the goal of peer connection. We were able to normalize our experience and create camaraderie that was invaluable. The university currently has a program that cohorts newly hired faculty and partners them with tenured faculty. The program is not specific to any subgroup of faculty but includes all new tenure track faculty and tenured faculty from across all departments and is coordinated by the Vice Provost. While social gatherings have diminished making relationship building in this program challenging, we recommend that this program be further leveraged to better envelop our now socially distanced faculty. Teams® has been enabled the program to continue in its revised form.

(c) Scheduled and committed time for connection: Predetermined times for both formal and informal connection with mentors and peers leveraging technology such as Zoom® or Teams® may result in increased consistency in social learning. Because we learn largely through observation of others (Bandura, 2002), opportunities for working together and role modeling can be created using technology in ways that limit isolation and increase social connection and increase learning. As mentioned earlier, the university has a program for the development of all newly hired ranked faculty members across all departments. This provides scheduled dedicated time for both faculty development and socialization. It is used for technical learning (such as mastery of the digital learning platform) as well as mentoring and relationship building.

(d) By organizing workload in a team-teaching model, mentoring is built into the experience of teaching through each step of the process (Hellier & Davidson, 2018). Workload can be identical to a traditional design while coupling an experienced and novice faculty member to develop and execute a course for a large number of students. Team teaching can be modified to fit the needs of universities of various sizes and student enrollments. Our department has successfully adopted team teaching to help ease the conversion of courses from in-person to online during the COVID-19 pandemic and eased the transition of new faculty into the teaching role.

**Conclusion**

While faculty vacancies continue to impact the ability of colleges and universities to accept qualified nursing applicants, fostering a nurturing onboarding experience for homebound new faculty could be essential to both recruitment and retention of new and enthusiastic faculty to educate the nurses of the future. The triumvirate of scholarship, service, and teaching can be daunting under the best of circumstances. In the age of pandemics and “safe at home” requirements, it can be overwhelming. Using a team approach to mentoring, peer connections, and a commitment to social connections through technology, social learning can be accomplished, leading to better engagement and confidence of the novice faculty.

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