

LIFELONG LEARNING, CERTIFICATION, AND REGISTERED NURSING PRACTICE: THEIR INTERRELATIONSHIP

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A legislatively regulated and self-regulating profession, such as nursing, holds its members (registered nurses) accountable to the public it serves for the continuous development of the competencies they profess to hold. A requirement for competency is lifelong learning and can be evidenced through certification. In this paper, the interrelationship of lifelong learning, certification, and registered nursing practice is examined. Strategies used to support certification through a lifelong learning approach are described.

Key words: lifelong learning, certification, professional practice

INTRODUCTION

Cindy, a graduate of a university baccalaureate program, is a registered nurse and has been working as a team leader on an acute care medical unit for five years. She thoroughly enjoys her role and has learned a great deal from her experience, reading, and attendance at workshops held on site. Now Cindy is considering becoming certified in gerontological nursing, through her professional association. When she reflects on the cost and the time to study for the examination that it requires, she wonders “What's in it for me?”

Cindy is a registered nurse. An autonomous profession such as nursing, which is both legislatively regulated and self-regulating, holds its members accountable to the public it serves for the continuous development of the competencies they profess to hold. With the privilege of autonomy comes the expectation that a profession will establish a code of conduct, promote a high standard of knowledge for its members, and ensure safety to practice. The Canadian nursing profession accomplishes accountability by requiring its members to experience periodic reviews of performance, and by providing continuing education activities that promote members' knowledge and skills to meet these standards. The broad title for such activities undertaken by a registered nurse is “professional development” (Casey & Clarke, 2009).

Certification is an accepted method to validate that registered nurses have the knowledge and skills that are fundamental to fulfilling their role. While basic nursing licensure, a legislative requirement to practice as a registered nurse, indicates a minimal professional practice standard, certification denotes a high level of knowledge and practice. In the case study, Cindy is wondering about the value of getting certified in her nursing specialty.

Certification, by nursing organizations, demonstrates a voluntary commitment to a standard of excellence. When the individual nurse is certified, it demonstrates the value that one personally and professionally places on higher standards of practice and lifelong learning (Fleishman, Meyer, & Watson, 2011). A central component of certification is lifelong learning. For professions, such as nursing, its members, and the educators who work with them, it is important to understand the interrelationship between certification, lifelong learning, and

registered nursing practice. Understanding this relationship provides an introduction to strategies that might promote the decision of individuals to attain of certification and support lifelong learning activities for members of the profession. This will provide Cindy with an answer to her question “*What’s in it for me?*”

CERTIFICATION

Certification is a formal recognition based on specific criteria with established parameters that reflect assessment of educational preparation and the knowledge, skills, and abilities or competence developed through experience in a specialty area of practice. The American Board of Nursing Specialties defines certification as “the formal recognition of the specialized knowledge, skills, and experience demonstrated by the achievement of standards identified by a nursing specialty to promote optimal health outcomes” (<http://www.nursingcertification.org/faq.htm#1>).

The Canadian Nurses Association (n.d.) which guides national registered nursing practice and administers certification examinations in Canada, identified the purpose of certification as threefold:

1. To promote excellence in nursing care for the people of Canada through the establishment of national standards of practice in nursing specialty areas;
2. To provide an opportunity for practitioners to confirm their competence in a specialty; and,
3. To identify through a recognized credential, those nurses meeting the national standards of their specialty. (CNA, <https://www.cna-aiic.ca/en/certification>).

Certification itself yields direct clinical benefits. Those who advocate for certification argue that it improves the quality of care, sense of empowerment, and job satisfaction (Johnson, Ferguson, McKenzie, & Brassil, 2015; McLaughlin & Fetzer, 2015). Boyle, Cramer, Potter, and Staggs (2015) identified a relationship between certified registered nurses on hospital units and a decrease in the number of falls by patients. A study of certified oncology nurses showed that they scored higher on the Knowledge and Attitudes Survey Regarding Pain than did non-certified nurses (Coleman et al. 2010). Kendall-Gallagher, Aiken, Sloane, and Cimiotti’s (2011) study demonstrated that a more educated workforce, along with specialty certification, was associated with better clinical outcomes such as decreased odds of adjusted 30 day mortality.

LIFELONG LEARNING

The concept of lifelong learning has gained popularity within many spheres of society, including among academic, scholars, and employers. No educational principle is voiced with such resolve as the belief that an individual should keep learning from one’s early years to one’s old age. Knowledge acquired in school is inadequate for a lifetime as knowledge changes over time. History provides examples of this fact, e.g. many believed Columbus would sail off the edge of a flat Earth when he sailed West across the Atlantic Ocean. Psychiatric illness was once ‘cured’ by a lobotomy. These “truths” at their time later proved to be false because of continuous learning. The argument for lifelong learning emerges. Because of ongoing changes in the Canadian health care system, lifelong learning as a concept and a pragmatic activity, has acquired prominence in the nursing profession.

Merriam and Kee (2014) discussed the benefits of lifelong learning from a social capital perspective. They wrote that formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities of older adults promote an active and engaged lifestyle that helps create and preserve community. Asongu and Nwachukwu (2016) described the contribution of lifelong learning to political stability. They identified that continuing education is a useful weapon in the fight against political

instability. Similar benefits to lifelong learning have been described by other authors and researchers (Findsen, 2016; Hafford-Letchfield & Formosa, 2016).

Lifelong Learning, Certification, and Registered Nursing Practice: Their Interrelationship

There is a symbiosis when elements of different perspectives “work together”, each benefiting from the relationship. Each element, specifically lifelong learning, certification, and nursing practice working in collaboration with the other two, may be described as in a symbiotic relationship. They have adapted collaboratively and are constantly interacting to improve the scope and relevance of the others. This relationship is best illustrated, for the profession of nursing, within a Tri-Component Framework; although any autonomous profession can be substituted for nursing.



Figure 1: The Tri-Component Framework: The arrows indicate the continuous interplay of these three elements.

The Tri-Component Framework is made up of three elements, each contributing to the others: lifelong learning, certification, and nursing practice. The “make use of” or blending of the strengths of each element so that they can achieve identified goals is integral in the framework; for nursing, this goal is quality client care. The framework is drawn from reflection of the works of current writers. Eraut (2007) in discussing workforce learning acknowledged that working, [such as nursing practice], and learning are inseparable and fundamental. Changes in the requirements for work performance have become more complex and to develop the required capacities, nurses need to be effective learners in their workplace.

Certification for nurses appears to improve the structure and process of client care. By becoming certified in one’s field of expertise and by maintaining competency year after year, employers are being told that registered nurses have met standards that have been established and verified by a professional organization (such as the Canadian Nurses Association) and are committed to maintaining the quality of their work. Certification demonstrates to an employer, to

the public, and to health care clients that a registered nurse is faithful to improving their ability to provide quality care through the profession they have chosen.

Lifelong learning is critical to nursing practice. As a process, it will enable professionals to be up to date on new knowledge and health care developments. Achieving certification ensures others in the healthcare industry that professional nurses have the discipline required to effectively evaluate and implement changes that improve clinical quality and cost effectiveness. As a result, professional nursing practice is enhanced by presenting a holistic experience as opposed to an experience delivered in discrete fashion stemming from the traditional restrictive boundaries of some professions. Such co-operation between lifelong learning and certification builds a community of professional nurses with different skills coming together collaboratively to provide a positive impact on the client's health. All nurses have an obligation to be lifelong learners to develop and maintain the requisite attitudes, knowledge, and skills for safe nursing practice. Lifelong learning, certification, and nursing practice exist within the same Tri-Component Framework rather than being regarded as useful but single elements.

STRATEGIES

There is a responsibility as previously articulated for nurses to be lifelong learners and to consider certification as a commitment to professional practice. There is a growing body of literature that a registered nurse's certification contributes to quality care outcomes. Best practices in promoting a culture of certification have been identified as a commitment to excellence, providing a supportive and encouraging environment, setting a goal and goal-directed evaluations, providing educational resources, and rewarding excellence (Fleischman, Meyer, & Watson, 2011). The question then arises as to how to promote the interrelationship of lifelong learning, certification, and nursing practice. The outcome of which may well be an increasing number of registered nurses obtaining certification in their chosen nursing specialty.

Day (1999) suggested that only those institutions that are "concerned about the lifelong development of all their members" can develop lifelong learners (p. 20). The nursing profession may be considered an example of an institution because of its historical stability within society. Nursing associations have used different strategies to promote lifelong learning and certification. They emphasize to their members that working to improve quality of care is part of a registered nurse's commitment to professionalism.

According to the Canadian Institute of Health Information (2013), nurses are the largest professional group within the health-care workforce in Canada. There were 36,542 regulated nurses working in 2012 with an average age in the 40s. Over half are 45 years of age or older and may decide to retire within the next decade. The math is obvious. In the next decade, nurses will retire and new nurses will take their place. This is the group for nursing associations to work with to promote the benefits of certification and ongoing commitment to the nursing profession.

Certifying organizations, such as the Canadian Nurses Association, can work in partnerships with other health care associations to help make this a reality; however, most are geographically bound in terms of jurisdiction. Though just as health care has changed, the organizations that perform certification functions will need to change to be effective in this ever-changing environment. Traditional approaches to these functions involve an organization assembling requisite evidence and expertise to establish standards of practice by which an individual member is judged, and to develop examinations that evaluate qualifications. Testing format is changing from print based to an online submission. This creates some challenges that professional associations need to address. Age influences preferred learning strategies

Lammintakanen & Kivinen, 2012). With the average age of 40 as cited earlier, many nurses may not be familiar with online examinations. Presenting online tutorials may be one strategy adopted by professional associations. Finally, acknowledging global connections, there is a need for nursing associations to work with other autonomous professional associations to improve lifelong learning opportunities in the areas of reciprocity and portability of certification.

Nurse administrators have employed numerous methods to increase certification rates among their staff. Some effective strategies include: salary increases, bonuses, and recognition/reimbursement for nurses when they successfully pass their exam (Solomon, Lahl, Soat, Bena, & McClelland, 2016). Ciurzynski and Serwetnyk (2015) used a multimodal plan to successfully increase certification rates among pediatric nurses; including partnering with nursing leadership, providing financial support, and the introduction of test taking strategies to prepare candidates for the required examination.

To create optimal conditions conducive to lifelong learning and certification, educators and nursing associations need to ask specific questions: Why do registered nurses learn? In what contexts do they learn? What is conducive to their learning? When does learning of specific content contribute to certification? What are the barriers to achieving certification? These are only some of the important questions that require answers.

CONCLUSION

Today, there is an increasingly important need to continue learning and acquire necessary skills to adapt to the ever-changing health care world. As a result, nursing organizations are promoting lifelong learning. Certification offers concrete evidence of this learning. It is a noteworthy way for registered nurses, and indeed for any lifelong learner, to demonstrate that they “know”. Nursing associations need to lead new efforts to promote lifelong learning and certification in their members. However, ultimately the responsibility for lifelong learning and certification rests with each individual registered nurse.

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