

Measuring Student Learning By Measuring Behavioral Changes

Recently at WCU we have begun to talk about excellence in student learning as well as excellence in teaching, understanding that great teaching is not worth much if there is no great learning in response. But how can we measure learning? Is it enough if students give the "right" answers on a test? Or should changes in behavior also be used as criteria?

We teach our nursing majors how to teach clients better health behaviors, and I think we can use the same model to think about student learning in our classrooms. Whenever a client's lack of knowledge is adversely affecting his or her health status, the nurse identifies the behavior that must be changed and brings the necessity of this change to the client's attention. Health problems such as hypertension can be treated with medications, of course, but also essential are changes in behavior like eating less sodium, managing stress, and losing weight. We teach the client about the antihypertensive medications and how to take them for the most therapeutic effect and the least side effects. But if we then cheerfully sign off on our teaching plan, confident that the client has the requisite knowledge, we have not validated that a change in behavior will follow. The client might not take the pills. Maybe the pills cost too much. Maybe other expenses are more important this month. Maybe the client feels "fine" and sees no reason to continue the medication regimen. Maybe the side effects of a particular medication are just too unpleasant. Or maybe the client does take the pills as prescribed but doesn't make the other changes in behavior, continuing to eat excessive amounts of salt, letting stress build up, gaining weight, etc. Those pills are fighting an uphill battle.

So for our teaching plan to work with nursing clients, we may have to reemphasize the need for behavioral changes, helping the client work out how to accomplish them. We teach the client about the sodium values of foods, management techniques for stress, how to count calories, how to get more exercise, etc. We show videos and give out pamphlets at the client's reading level to reinforce our teaching. Perhaps the client indicates a basic understanding of this content. Is our task now completed? Maybe. How many people do you know who are willing to give up fatback and potato chips, can stop screaming at other drivers, and are willing to park their cars at the far end of the lot instead of right beside the front door?

The ultimate outcome that we really wanted was for the client's blood pressure to remain within normal limits, which we can easily measure. But if the blood pressure stays high, what do we do? We usually go over the medical facts again, maybe adding a lesson on how uncontrolled hypertension can lead to a stroke. Scare tactics sometimes work. But unless the client makes a

change in behavior, taking personal accountability for the ultimate outcome of health care, all our teaching is so much hot air.

Now, what should be the ultimate outcome of a college education? You probably have your own ideas, but I believe that as a result of our teaching all of our students should at least become responsible citizens with leadership skills and a concern for someone besides themselves. Too many students seem to think that the outcomes of a college education are 1) to get a job and 2) to make lots of money. Some students see no value in General Education or any course work outside of their majors, and a few of them can't even see any value to course work in their majors. Students read popular books that say people can learn everything they need to know in kindergarten and come naturally to the idea that practical experience is more important than theoretical speculation. If students do not value what we have to teach, why should they bother to learn new facts, much less change their behaviors?

Surely there is more to a college education than getting a job and making lots of money. Should WCU graduates learn not only about the world but also how to behave in it? I'll never forget the freshman I once had in a class who said the job and money he gained after college would enable him to devote volunteer time to his community. How wonderful that he had this perspective. How sad that he was so unique.

But students are perhaps not the only members of our community with a limited view of what a college education means. Too many faculty in universities around the country seem to think that a college education should focus on 1) knowing facts, 2) reciting formulas, or 3) mastering the content of a specific discipline. If all we do is teach facts, how will students learn new behaviors? If students don't learn new behaviors, how will anybody know they have been to college?

Let me give more nursing examples. In 1893 Lillian Wald founded the Henry Street Settlement in New York City and used the practice there to develop a model for community health nursing. I don't care if the student knows the date. I want the student to understand why Miss Wald thought her nurses should live in the community where they worked and what implications that concept of immediacy has for nursing practice today. In a more concrete area, I test for dosage calculations competency in our juniors. More than math anxiety is going on when students tell me that the client will take 14,732 capsules of a given drug in one week. I don't want the students to get hung up on formulas when they should be demonstrating common sense. In other words, the dates and formulas and other content-related tools are merely the foundation for behaviors in the practice of a discipline. The nursing faculty has a mandate to produce responsible citizens who are eligible for licensure. Student nurses must demonstrate by their behaviors that they can provide client care safely, or we don't let them graduate.

Is there not some way that every discipline we teach can test changes in behavior appropriate to that discipline? Should not every syllabus include at least one measurable objective of future societal or personal behavior to help every student become a more responsible citizen? When you are making your syllabus for next semester, what concrete behavior could you include as a goal for the students in your class? How would you teach that behavior? How would you measure it? Are there behaviors you think should be common to your department? Your

school? The university? If so, how could they become part of the curriculum? What would you have to do today to raise the consensus among your colleagues and students to make this behavior a reachable goal?

Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? Jesus ends with a quiz: Who was neighbor to the man who fell among thieves? And when the lawyer answers correctly, he is told "Go, and do thou likewise." Everything we teach should lead to some application for the betterment of the individual, the community, or the world. Unless the student makes a change in behavior, taking personal accountability for the ultimate outcome of a college education, all our teaching is so much hot air.

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*Send responses to the Faculty Center by the 8th of the month. Your responses will be published in **notes & quotes** on the 15th.*