

MAXIMIZING PERFORMANCE: PROMOTING & EVALUATING CRITICAL THINKING

Featuring
ROSALINDA ALFARO-LEFEVRE

FALL PROGRAM presented September 13, 2002
By the Wisconsin League for Nursing
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

By Mary Eiche, RN, Ph.D.

The mediocre teacher tells,
The good teacher explains,
The superior teacher demonstrates and
The Great Teacher inspires!

A great teacher inspired over one hundred and twenty nursing educators from Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota at the fall program marking the Wisconsin League for Nursing's celebration of fifty years of excellence. Rosalinda Alfaro-LeFevre faced the daunting task of presenting content appropriate for use by nurse educators in a variety of settings. She accomplished her task with poise and aplomb, using the very techniques she championed to encourage critical thinking.

Throughout her presentation, Alfaro-LeFevre demonstrated that her audience (and by inference any student group) already has knowledge, attitudes and skills to add to the teaching moment. It is only necessary that the teacher recognizes and makes use of this. Her description of the conversation between two children – one saying to the other, "Let's play school. I'll be the teacher and you be the stupid," cogently demonstrated how early the assumption forms that students have nothing to contribute. Alfaro-LeFevre asked the students in this audience early on, however, to analyze a list of critical thinking indicators (behaviors). By doing this, they would contribute to a research project and, by way of recognition, would see their contribution respected.

The dictum "Reward people who contribute" continued as a theme throughout this presentation. To encourage discussion, Alfaro-LeFevre asked members of the group to use the 'Devil's Advocate Card' when they wanted to voice an opposing opinion. The audience also learned that there would be a prize for "the person who said the most significant thing" as a take-off on the "Survivor" series on television.

Alfaro-LeFevre's interest in critical thinking indicators proceeded from the research of the last ten years involving much better brain imaging. Science now recognizes that people have a greater variety of ways of dealing with their environment than previously understood. Even abilities that might be lost – such as the ability to speak, in certain brain damage cases – can be compensated for by the ability to sing. Nurses as a group are often characterized as carrying out their practice "intuitively" since many cannot or do not verbalize their thinking. In turn, it is sometimes difficult for students to focus on what they need to learn to become a skilled practitioner.

Alfaro-LeFevre emphasized that skills are not available if the knowledge is not there. The final word by a volunteer from the audience on the characteristics of critical thinking as demonstrated in nursing practice and presented in the Alfaro Indicators paper was perhaps the most telling. She opined that many of these characteristics had been recognized in a doctoral study 20 years ago – but still needed development. This certainly raises questions about the preparation of the nurse as educator in nursing schools and colleges today and makes Alfaro-LeFevre's work that much more important.

Alfaro-LeFevre encouraged us to learn more about how innate personality preferences and motives affect thinking, giving us a reprint of her article, "Do You Know What to do When Someone turns Blue? In addition, she recommended that we read The Color Code® by Taylor Hartman.

She stressed that another important way of recognizing the learner is to ask what he or she wants to learn. "When you lecture, pick the items they want to know" and then move to answer the question, "What can I (as teacher) have them do to learn in a way they will enjoy and retain?"

Having set the groundwork for using critical thinking, Alfaro-LeFevre had the group do series of exercises that would help them use critical thinking in nursing. The focus of activities pertained to teaching bedside nursing but could be easily applied to teaching in a variety of other settings. Responding to the material they were learning, many of the students saw how work sheets and tools they were reviewing could be used either as format for job descriptions and/or evaluation tools. Alfaro-LeFevre charged the clinical nursing instructor with carrying out the following activities:

- Foster, support, and stimulate critical thinking
- Emphasize and reinforce the learning that is taking place during the week
- Reward what you (the teacher) think is important
- Recognize behavior manifesting critical thinking ("When I see you doing this... I know you are - or are not – doing critical thinking")
- Measure (grade, evaluate) what is important.

As the day's conference ended there were many discussion questions posed. Some of these required lengthy responses and could not be answered in the final moments left. However, in a last demonstration of the characteristics of a great teacher, Rosalinda Alfaro-LeFevre took e-mail addresses of the attendees and sent e-mail responses in full and excellent detail after returning home. Handouts and a lengthy bibliography were provided for this day's conference. Obviously, they cannot be reproduced here as they represent copyrighted research. Again, this reporter would remind the reader that, as with most WLN conferences, you really had to be there. In addition, I suggest attendance at any presentation offered or any article, book or research project written by Rosalinda Alfaro-LeFevre. You will not be disappointed.