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# Challenge with Care: Reflections on Teaching Excellence

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A number of faculty have had no formal preparation to teach. Because little nursing research has focused on teaching excellence in recent years, when both nursing practice and approaches to teaching and learning have changed remarkably, this analysis integrates present perspectives and the research foundation for teaching nursing. A constant comparative method incorporating 27 doctoral student reflections and analysis of literature from 1960 to present resulted in four major categories: know and honor students, enthused, knowledgeable, and student centered. Linking the major categories, an Excellent Teacher Circle of Distinction emerged, described as “with enthusiasm and compassion the teacher engages the students and invites learning in a non-judgmental manner, yet, expectations of reciprocal respect and perseverance are present.” Better understanding of this foundation can provide direction for those new to teaching, as well as experienced faculty, so as to better prepare the nurses of tomorrow.

## Index words

Teaching excellence, Qualitative research, Nursing education and practice

NURSING FACULTY AND students are dissatisfied with faculty preparation to teach ([Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010](#)). The majority of research underpinning teaching effectiveness in nursing was conducted in the United States in the 1960s and the 1970s ([Jacobsen, 1966](#), [Kiker, 1973](#), [Layton, 1969](#), [O'Shea & Parsons, 1979](#)). In these studies, associate degree students, baccalaureate students, master's student, recent graduate, or staff nurse perspectives were examined, sometimes in comparison with faculty perspectives ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2007](#), [Gignac-Caille & Oermann, 2001](#), [Hamilton, 1995](#), [Lee et al., 2002](#)). [Moisiewicz \(2002](#), p. 12) conducted an extensive literature search for her dissertation and determined that “No studies have been done that are specific to teaching excellence in nursing.”

[Johnson-Farmer and Frenn \(2009\)](#) reported perspectives of faculty as excellent teachers, but the views of students today have not been described. Although students in a variety of educational experiences could be queried, the perspectives of doctoral students brought from their many prior educational experiences form a scaffold from which to further inform teaching excellence. By understanding the perspectives of students, we can better reach them where they are in order to work with them in moving the discipline of nursing forward ([Allison-Jones and Hirt, 2004](#), [Beitz & Wieland, 2005](#), [Benor & Leviyof, 1997](#), [Ironsides, 1997](#), [Kirkley, 1999](#), [Kotzabassaki et al., 1997](#), [Nehring, 1990](#), [Wolf et al., 2004](#)).

## Methods

Qualitative content analysis including a constant comparative method was used to analyze doctoral students' reflections on “What is teaching excellence in nursing—how would you know it when you see or experience it?” Students wrote the narratives of their experience of excellent teachers at the beginning of a course on nursing education. The proposal was reviewed for the protection of human subjects. Students had the option not to participate. Those who agreed signed a written consent to participate. Reflections used for analysis did not contain names.

The process of recruitment continued for 3 years. Doctoral students were invited to participate in the analysis of data and manuscript preparation upon course completion. One student, who had completed the qualitative research course, committed to the project.

Participants included students ( $N = 27$ ) enrolled in a doctoral program in nursing at a university in Midwestern United States. All participants were female, 4 were African American, 1 was Asian, and 22 were Caucasian.

Written narratives were coded line by line using the constant comparative method. The investigators examined data and began to code, categorize, and conceptualize from the beginning of the study ([McCann & Clark, 2003](#), [Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007](#)). The constant comparative method allowed the researchers to make sense of the data by constantly comparing incidents until categories and concepts emerged ([Fain, 1999](#), [Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)). Literature review and comparison continued along with data collection.

Specific steps were taken to enhance rigor ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#), [Polit & Beck, 2008](#)). Data were reduced to codes; quotes chosen for representativeness of the data were used as definitions of categories to enhance dependability. Coding was done independently by the faculty member and doctoral student to enhance confirmability. Codes emerging from the interviews were compared with extent literature to enhance transferability. To enhance credibility, we determined linkages among the categories from the data, and categories with the highest density formed the core categories. Member checks were conducted in that each cohort of students analyzed a sample of data, and a graduate of the program reviewed the narrative.

## Results

Four major categories emerged, defined from the data as the following: know and honor students, enthused, knowledgeable, and student centered as shown in [Table 1](#). Each of the major categories was defined from the data provided by doctoral students. Additional subthemes were also identified within each category, providing richness and depth to the category.

Table 1. Categories, Subthemes, Definitions, and Examples From the Data

<b>Know and Honor Students Category and Subthemes</b>	
Know and honor students	Definition: Listens and understands students. Communicating value and respect. Provides feedback in a way that encourages rather than demeans.
	Examples: Communicating effectively, constructively, and in a timely fashion. Differences in culture and learning are acknowledged, welcomed, shared, included and applied.
Listen	Definition: Capacity to listen to students and really hear them.
	Examples: Professional, speaks articulately, and ponders the question posed by the student before answering. Seemed to know how to handle my insecurities. Analyzes where a student is “lost” and connects the dots to bring him or her to understanding.
Believed In	Definition: Students tried harder because she (teacher) believed in our ability to succeed. I feel safe; I'm not surprised by their assessment of me (so I trust them).
	Example: What belief in students does is build confidence, a powerful influence for success.
Encourage	Definition: The excellent teacher creates an atmosphere where the student feels encouraged and trusted—encouraged and facilitated inquiry and challenged the student to delve deeper.
	Example: They say things such as “You can do it, we'll help you.” “Why don't you try this.” “What do you think?” “That's fascinating, tell me more about that.” “I like your thinking.”
Value	Definition: Student's answers were always perceived as worthwhile. Made me feel cared for as a student.

	Example: They cherish their influence on young minds. Nurse educators in pursuit of excellence keep sight of student individuality and realize that zealous students do not always come in neat packages with personalized instruction manuals.
Respect	Definition: Trust and respect for people and different points of view
	Example: Honor the knowledge that learners bring. Your opinions and thoughts are welcomed and encouraged.
Feedback	Definition: Thoughtful and timely feedback. Maybe critical but was never given in a condescending manner.
	Example: The language itself was such that it encouraged and motivated me to look at the subject and to “want” to strive for excellence in learning.
Communication	Definition: They had expert people skills
	Example: Communicating effectively, constructively, and in a timely fashion.
Culture	Definition: Differences in culture and learning are acknowledged, welcomed, shared, included, and applied.
	Example: Effort made to understand culture, characteristics, and variations, as well as impact on specific information that will be shared.
<b>Enthused Category and Subthemes</b>	
Enthused	Definition: Emphasized that our class could achieve great things and learn vast amounts.
	Examples: Encouraged to think in new ways, to question everything, to share my ideas, and to embrace my new role. Classes were classified as “killer” by the students, yet they were always full. She motivated me to continue to work hard because I didn't want to lose her respect. Leaves a legacy and impact on students.
Challenges	Definition: Pushing them beyond what they thought they could accomplish.
	Examples: Challenged into that uncomfortable gray area. High standards that oozed from their pores. This expectation of a high level of preparation drove me personally to excel and ensure, although at a more novice level, I was also highly prepared for what lay ahead.
Motivates	Definition: The ability to foster excitement, open minds, instill confidence, and convey their belief in the student's success.
	Examples: Inspired to increase knowledge, understanding, motivation, and performance. Awakened my mind.
Inspires	Definition: Passion for their content and the learning potential of their students.
	Examples: She expected great things from me. You (the student) feel the enthusiasm the professor has for this journey (the subject). Inspiration and the discovery of untapped personal potential. Touched my life.

<b>Knowledgeable Category and Subthemes</b>	
Knowledgeable	Definition: Teachers lead the student by their knowledge of the subject matter, their ability to know where the learners are, to advance knowledge in a systematic and designed approach, and to be able to build upon what the learner brings to the class.
	Example: Credibility and expert status are gained by a demonstration of staying current in the clinical as well as the academic arena connecting theory and research to clinical practice. The educator is not only an expert in a particular specialty focus of nursing but also well rounded in what impacts all nurses as they practice nursing.
Knowledge of subject	Definition: Has a strong command of the discipline through academic background, application of theory and research, clinical and life experiences.
	Examples: They instilled confidence that they knew their topics inside and out, including the historical development of their field. They were experts who wrote books in their fields.
Knowledge of connections	Definition: Draw connections to other courses and to application beyond the curriculum.
	Examples: Understands the curriculum and how they fit into it. Identifies new knowledge and how it relates to student's life and discipline. Every idea presented was with the same vigor of the last and the previous topics were brought into the new topic with either further building of the concept or comparison.
Knowledge of teaching	Definition: Orients, guides, and knows how to create the environments to facilitate students' acquisition, application, synthesis and construction of knowledge.
	Examples: Helps the student who is struggling to make sense of a clinical problem, teaches students how to find and use resources effectively. Is able to identify learner needs, interests, and goals with the intention of formulating clear objectives to meet them. Allows students to dialogue with one another, allows the right answer to evolve. Classes never seemed like class but instead an adventure in learning.
Reciprocal	Definition: Both teacher and student challenge each other to explore and expand their understanding.
	Examples: Teaching excellence occurs when an educator and student are placed together in an environment and change or growth occurs due to the relationship.
<b>Student-Centered Category and Subthemes</b>	
Student centered	Definition: The excellent educator is a committed lifelong learner while simultaneously in the role of facilitator, coach, guide, and motivator of students.

	Examples: Active members of a community of learners/scholars. I respect a teacher who acknowledges that he knows a great deal but still has more to learn and attempts to continually educate himself.
Positive role model	Definition: Model excellence for the student.
	Example: I was inspired and still look to him or her as the type of professor and nurse I would like to become.
Time	Definition: They make themselves available to the students.
	Examples: If this teacher was busy with her own research she made your work seem most important. She gave her time, energies and enthusiasm. Outside the classroom the teacher was concerned and often would ask how everything was going.
Evaluation	Definition: Constantly in the process of evaluation—not only of the effectiveness of their teaching methods but also of the learning needs as well. Frequently revise and refresh course content and methods of delivery.
	Examples: Willingness to admit errors. Open to change within the classroom setting.
Personal pride	Definition: They cherish their influence on young minds.
	Examples: Enjoy role as a teacher. The excellent nurse educator sees the student as the reason s/he never stops trying to reach each individual student where they are in order to bring the student to where they may “become.”

*Know and honor students* was the first major category defined as “listens and understands students, communicating value and respect, and provides feedback in a way that encourages rather than demeans.” The subthemes including listen, believed in, encourage, value, respect, feedback, communication, and culture offer further substance for this category. [Table 1](#) provides definitions and examples of each of the subtheme.

The second major category emerging from the data was enthused. *Enthused* was defined as “emphasized that our class could achieve great things and learn vast amounts when we put our minds to it.” Three subthemes surfaced as part of this category: challenges, motivates, and inspires.

*Knowledgeable* is the third major category and was defined as “teachers lead the student by their knowledge of the subject matter, their ability to know where the learners are, to advance knowledge in a systematic and designed approach, and to be able to build upon what the learner brings to the class.” The subthemes included knowledge of subject, knowledge of connections, knowledge of teaching, and reciprocal.

The final category, *student centered*, was defined as, “The excellent educator is a committed life-long learner, simultaneously in the role of facilitator, coach, guide, and motivator of students.” The subthemes included positive role models, time, evaluation, and personal pride.

An Excellent Teacher Circle of Distinction emerged as a core variable shown in [Figure 1](#). Teaching excellence is defined as a multifaceted concept, “Teaching is an art as well as a science, with the essence of teaching excellence imbedded in both spheres. Classes that create this teaching excellence

are typically not the easiest classes, most often they are the most difficult, time-consuming and challenging. They are those classes that you remember years after taking the class.”

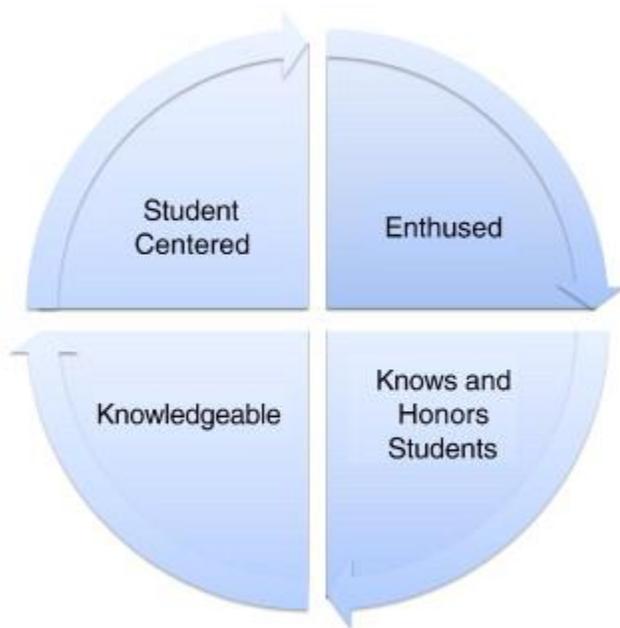


Figure 1. Excellent teacher circle of distinction.

Example quotes from the data further characterize the excellent teacher: A feeling of comfort and caring is evident when in the midst of a learning environment of excellence. With enthusiasm and compassion the teacher engages the students and invites learning in a nonjudgmental manner, yet, expectations of reciprocal respect and perseverance are present.

Excellent teaching allows a student to simultaneously be an individual and also part of a class, dream big, be creative, learn at his or her pace, and receive praise for effort. Excellent teachers look to the future and recognize the brevity of time they have with a student. They cherish their influence on young minds. Nurse educators in pursuit of excellence keep sight of student individuality and realize that zealous students do not always come in neat packages with personalized instruction manuals.

These quotes conveyed the distinctiveness of excellent teachers the doctoral students had experienced during their own education. The four themes were intertwined as described in the quotes; the excellent teachers linked them together to create optimal learning experiences.

## Discussion

As a part of the constant comparative method, codes were not only compared and contrasted among subjects, but themes and subthemes were compared and contrasted with findings reported in the literature. Interestingly, although only 15 citations appeared when the words *teaching excellence* were entered in the Cumulative Index for Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), an archival search of the literature in reference lists of articles and dissertations revealed a number of prior studies dating back to the 1960s. Although one might posit that the changes in nursing education and the practice for

which students are prepared have changed so much that little of the older studies would be relevant, in fact a number of similar themes emerged.

The first of the four major categories discovered in the current study was know and honor students. Similarly conveying confidence in and respect for the student, correcting students tactfully, permitting freedom of discussion, and conveying interest in students were found to be important in perspectives of 961 undergraduate students in five southern universities ([Jacobsen, 1966](#)). First- and second-year associate degree students indicated being treated as an individual; respect for students, not making them feel stupid or low, and showing genuine concern for their daily activities fostered their learning ([Layton, 1969](#)).

[O'Shea and Parsons \(1979\)](#) conducted a study of 205 students and 24 faculty asking them to list behaviors that they perceived to be effective in clinical teaching. The effective behaviors included being supportive, giving honest feedback and encouragement, and being available and willing to help.

In 1983, faculty were urged to assume a collegial or facilitator role to help students develop personal and professional competence. Genuine warmth and positive regard, fostering a responsive environment, and serving as a role model and resource were advocated ([Griffith & Bakanauska, 1983](#)).

Students in a baccalaureate program reported that an excellent nursing clinical instructor conveyed confidence in and respect for the student ([Bergman & Gaitskill, 1990](#)). A study of 483 baccalaureate students from 24 randomly sampled National League for Nursing-accredited programs found effective instructors to be professional, facilitated learning, and demonstrated mutual respect ([Hamilton, 1995](#)). Nine years later, baccalaureate students ( $n = 171$ ) at a Midwestern university rated personality as the most important characteristic of an effective teacher, "easy to get along with, personal to students" ([Berg & Lindseth, 2004](#), p. 566). Developing collegial relationships with the learners also emerged as a theme in [Gross' \(2006\)](#) dissertation examining instructional design processes among six [expert nurse](#) educators.

The second major category discovered in the current study was enthused. Similarly, graduate nursing students in 1973 rated creativity and stimulation as most essential ([Kiker, 1973](#)). Baccalaureate students in a university setting stated that an excellent clinical instructor encouraged them to feel free to ask questions and ask for help, thereby eliminating barriers to communication ([Bergman & Gaitskill, 1990](#)). Enthusiasm was ranked the fifth most important characteristic of an effective teacher by baccalaureate students in the [Berg and Lindseth \(2004\)](#) study. Presenting the topic with enthusiasm also was a theme that emerged in [Gross' \(2006\)](#) dissertation, in which a think-aloud method was used to elicit six expert teacher's instructional design processes.

Similar to the third major category, knowledgeable, [Moisiewicz \(2002, p. 12\)](#) interviewed graduates of a bachelor of science in nursing program and found teaching excellence was characterized by teaching skill, faculty student interactions, nursing knowledge, and critical thinking ([Moisiewicz, 2002](#)). Baccalaureate students reported that an excellent clinical instructor kept students well informed and was able to communicate with them ([Bergman & Gaitskill, 1990](#)). [Fong and McCauley \(1993\)](#) developed an instrument to evaluate clinical teaching, including 384 undergraduate students evaluating 27 clinical instructors. In a factor analysis, [nursing competence](#) accounted for 53% of the variance, with consideration for students and teaching competence accounting for 5.6% and 4.1% of the variance,

respectively. Teaching “at students' knowledge level, gives outlines, positive/negative feedback” was the second highest ranked characteristic of effective teachers in [Berg and Lindseth's \(2004, p. 566\)](#) study of baccalaureate students; however, subject knowledge was not among the 10 highest ranked characteristics. [Gross \(2006\)](#) found that making the topic meaningful and engaging, and being prepared were characteristic of six expert nurse educators' instructional design processes. Three of five major themes identified by [Johnson-Farmer and Frenn \(2009\)](#) relate to faculty knowledge: dynamic engagement, relevance, and planning for outcomes. Expert faculty described relating to the students' own experience, striving for relevancy by linking theoretical knowledge to clinical realities, and having outcomes in mind with each learning experience.

Similar ideas were found back as far as [Jacobsen \(1966\)](#) for the fourth category, student centered: keeps self available to student, demonstrates own ability as a nurse and teacher, making students think and motivating them, and holding high expectations for the student. The relationship that the teacher has with the student was found to be held in high regard in a descriptive study of 82 senior nursing students from a university setting ([Brown, 1981](#)). These senior nursing students reported that the instructor's relationships with students were more important than professional competence, highlighting the importance for educators to demonstrate an interest in the student ([Brown, 1981](#)). The importance of the student–instructor relationship in the clinical setting also was reported in a study of associate degree nursing students ([Ripley, 1986](#)). Concern for student needs was ranked fourth most important by baccalaureate students ([Berg & Lindseth, 2004](#)). Student centeredness was one of five major themes discovered in [Johnson-Farmer and Frenn's \(2009\)](#) analysis of faculty perspectives on teaching excellence.

[Mogan and Knox \(1987\)](#) developed an instrument, the Nursing Clinical Teacher Effectiveness Inventory, finding that the highest rated characteristics of best clinical teacher were: good role models who enjoyed nursing and teaching. These findings were congruent across 173 undergraduate students from seven universities in the United States and Canada, as well as 28 clinical teachers.

[Pugh \(1988\)](#) underscored the importance of input from students to allow faculty to individualize teaching methods and provide an environment that facilitates student learning. Pugh's work mirrors the excellence characteristics, reciprocal and evaluation, reported by doctoral students in this study. [O'Shea and Parsons \(1979\)](#) concurred that it is essential for the clinical instructor to have knowledge of the individual student's needs in order to learn in the high intensity clinical setting. [Gross \(2006\)](#) similarly found that six expert nurse educators sought to understand their students so that they could present new information building on prior knowledge.

## Limitations

This study was limited to doctoral students beginning a nursing education course in one school of nursing. However, the congruence across studies and levels of students provides greater confidence that the emerging themes are a useful foundation for new nursing faculty to begin their educational career and for more experienced faculty to pursue continued excellence.

## Summary and Recommendations

The gap in indexing of nursing education research and lack of commonality in key words make building knowledge difficult. Although it seems we are in the midst of constant change and new challenges, we might best look back in time for guidance as to our future ([Jacobsen, 1966](#), p. 218):

The projected need for teachers of nursing continues to exceed the current enrollment in graduate programs....It is therefore essential that current programs for the preparation of teachers of nursing be able to identify the behaviors that make for the most effective teaching, and that wasteful, ineffective behaviors be avoided....for the economic use of the current supply of teachers.

Our students have much to share with us. We only need to ask. Knowing what students think is distinctive about excellent teachers can help us all to become our best. Rather than struggle with the evaluations students provide, we hope the perspectives shared provide hope and encouragement. As we seek to further develop the science of nursing education, we also can scaffold our learning on prior nursing education research, to best prepare the nurses of tomorrow.

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