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Active Learning: A Concept Analysis

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Active learning within nursing education is becoming increasingly important as leaders and accrediting bodies such as the Carnegie Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, National League for Nursing, and American Association of Colleges of Nursing call on educators to include innovative pedagogy in their classrooms. The traditional classroom teaching method, also known as lecturing, is not the most effective teaching method with new generation learners (Kroning, 2014). Active learning is an umbrella term with numerous strategies. The most cited active learning strategy within the nursing discipline within the past five years is simulation.

Page (1990) examined historical and contemporary perspectives of active learning and noted that while the names and labels of active learning have changed and evolved, the basic concept has remained the same throughout the twentieth century. However, there is no universal definition of the concept *active learning* as it applies to pedagogy. Therefore, the author conducted a concept analysis of the term *active learning* using the criteria delineated by Walker and Avant (2011).

The words *active* and *learning* in this two-word concept analysis were examined separately and in tandem. All uses of each term were considered for inclusion in the operational definition. However, active learning was explored in terms of teaching and learning in a formalized institutional setting to reach an operational definition for use in nursing education.

Following the method delineated by Walker and Avant (2011), the author identified defining attributes of the concept. Defining attributes of active learning include: student centered learning; teaching without the predominant use of lecture; and communicative dialogue to reveal active (psychological and or physical) thinking by the learner. The author also developed model, borderline, and contrary cases for the concept following criteria from Walker and Avant (2011).

Antecedents and consequences of the concept were identified separately pertaining to the teacher and the learner. Antecedents for the teacher include: preparation of active student-centered learning activity and understand role as facilitator of learning. Consequences for the teacher include: loss of control over the learning environment and satisfaction with student engagement in the learning process. Antecedents for the learner include: willingness to be an active participant in the learning process and direct his or her own learning. The learner must also understand their role as director of learning. Consequences for the learner include: stimulates critical thinking and improves knowledge retention.

The author identified empirical referents as a means of measuring the defining characteristics or attributes (Walker & Avant, 2011). Within the discipline of nursing education, there is a lack of rigorous, well-designed research on the use and effectiveness of active learning methods (Waltz, Jenkins, & Han, 2014). The author expanded the search for empirical referents outside the nursing discipline for a more comprehensive analysis of the concept. The existence of active learning can be demonstrated in multiple ways as evidenced by the various strategies such as simulation, gaming, case studies, and problem-based learning. However, it is imperative the student be an active participant in the learning process and direct his or her own learning. Active participation can be recognized by student engagement via communicative dialogue within any active learning *strategy*. Active learning can be further facilitated by the teacher through pre-class activities or in-class activities that encourage active thinking by the learner (Keegan et al., 2016; Prince, 2004).

Active learning can be recognized when teachers encourage and witness students engage in communicative dialogue, think out loud, or even physically work through psychomotor learning activities.

Learning that is student-centered may be recognized through focus on the students' gaps in knowledge identified through socratic questioning. Socratic questioning involves probing questions from the teacher with the goal of analyzing and recognizing an individual's thinking (Rowles & Russo, 2009). This in turn promotes active thinking.

The need for a shift in pedagogical practices from traditional lecture to active learning is not new to education. However, the nursing discipline has only recently begun to recognize and promote strategies for its use (Waltz et al., 2014). While general education literature has used the concept term as early as the 1700s, disparate evidence of concept utilization within nursing education still remains. Likewise, a universal definition for active learning has yet to be published for use across disciplines and in educational settings.

Active learning as an umbrella term includes multiple strategies. With the proliferation of emerging pedagogies, the concept will continue to evolve. This concept analysis demonstrated that active learning has specific defining attributes. While many active learning strategies may include one or more of these attributes, a true or model case of active learning must include all of the defining attributes.

The author suggests an operational definition for the concept to be used within nursing education as: teacher facilitated, student-centered learning that reveals psychological or physical thinking by the learner; teaching without the predominant use of lecture. Nurse educators and researchers can use this definition of the concept along with the antecedents and consequences to evaluate current practice. This definition may also be useful as educators work towards developing a more robust body of knowledge.

Leaders in nursing education have challenged educators over the past decade to implement active learning strategies into classrooms. It is imperative nurse educators begin to thoughtfully plan learning activities for didactic instruction to enhance student learning and critical thinking (Kroning, 2014). Similarly, Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, and Day (2010) called for a radical transformation of nursing education and noted the current approach (traditional lecture) is not the best approach to nursing education. Boyer (1990) noted that "great teachers . . . stimulate active, not passive learning" (p. 24). However, nursing education must begin to develop definitions of the concept *active learning* with the goal of theory development.

Ultimately, further research is needed to determine the concept's empirical referents within the nursing discipline. Active learning may appear different based on the nursing subject matter. To build upon this concept analysis, the examination of *thinking* in relation to *learning* would be useful based on the author's defining attributes of the concept. With further refinement of the concept, nurse theorists may begin to develop an active learning theory to guide nurse educators in the application of the concept. Further refinement of the concept's essence will aid in the advancement of the discipline of nursing education.

Title:
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Keywords:
Active learning, Definition and Nursing Education

References:
*Please note: The author attempted to indent line 2 per APA formatting guidelines but the textbox would not allow this action.

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Abstract Summary:
Active learning has become a popular term in nursing education. However, there is no unified definition of the term within the discipline. Using the concept analysis technique delineated by Walker and Avant (2011), the author provides an operational definition of the term active learning for use in nursing education.

Content Outline:

1. Introduction
    1. Lecture is not the most effective teaching method with new generation learners (Kroning, 2014)
    2. There is no universal definition for the term *active learning*
    3. Nursing leaders urge educators to utilize innovative pedagogy in the educational process.
    4. A universal definition for active learning is needed in nursing.
2. Body
    1. Defining Attributes
        1. Student-centered learning;
        2. Teaching without the predominant use of lecture; and
        3. Communicative dialogue to reveal active (psychological and/or physical thinking by the learner.
    2. Antecedents and Consequences
        1. Teacher

            a) Antecedents:

i. Preparation of active, student-centered learning activity.

ii. Understand role as facilitator of learning.

b) Consequences:

i. Possible loss of control over learning environment.

ii. Satisfaction with student engagement in the learning process.

2. Learner

a) Antecedents:

i. Willingness to be an active participant in the learning process and direct his or her own

learning

ii.Understand role as director of learning.

b) Consequences:

i. Stimulates critical thinking.

ii. Improved knowledge and retention.

1. Operational Definition
    1. Teacher facilitated, student-centered learning that reveals psychological or physical thinking by the learner; teaching without the predominant use of lecture
2. Conclusion
    1. Nursing Education Implications
        1. Develop rigorous, well-designed research on the use and effectiveness of active learning.
        2. Use this definition to evaluate current practice and develop a more robust body of knowledge.
        3. Concept definitions must evolve to determine empirical referents.
        4. Further refinement may cultivate theory development.

*Please note: The format of this outline was inittially created in a Miscrosoft Word document and once pasted into this text box it has changed the roman numerals/formatting. Content is appropriately aligned.

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