“Learning to see and think like a nurse: Clinical reasoning and caring practices.”

Patricia Benner, R.N., Ph.D., FAAN

Nursing understood as a practice discipline presents a set of challenges for both teaching and learning. To become an expert practitioner, the student must gain access to a coherent understanding of the practice of nursing. The challenge to nursing educators, indeed educators in any practice discipline, is how to equip students with the necessary cognitive skills and to teach them to act on their judgments about patient's needs—be they at the bed-side, with families, or in society—in situations that are under-determined, contingent, and changing over time. To do this successfully, teachers and students must integrate what we call the "three apprenticeships" involving 1) learning to think like a nurse, 2) learning to perceive, judge and perform like a nurse and finally, 3) learning to behave ethically and compassionately on behalf of the patient. This lecture will present a paradigm case of an expert teacher who embodies teaching practices that invite students to appreciate and take part in the knowledge, practical know-how, ethical comportment, and artistry of nursing as a practice.

How does the masterful teacher set up the conditions of possibility for the student's experiential learning, moving from novice to expert? How does the expert practitioner teacher in nursing invite the student into the practice in a way that fosters an appreciation for the integration of the knowledge, practical know-how, ethical comportment, and artistry of that practice? Examples will be drawn from students' narratives of learning and from the case of the expert teacher.

Most clinical nursing practice requires a flexible and nuanced ability to interpret a not-yet-defined practice situation as an instance of something salient that should call forth an appropriate practitioner response. Once a clinical situation is understood or grasped by the student, how can the teacher then guide the student further toward recognizing the relevant research, possible interventions, and other inherent possibilities available in the particular situation? How does the student nurse come to recognize possible good and less than optimal ends in actual clinical situations? The teacher must help the student nurse see both the medical and nursing implications of a situation, since the nursing implications always require an understanding of the pathophysiological and diagnostic aspects of the patient's clinical presentation and disease, and also an understanding of how best to strengthen the patient's own physical, social and spiritual recovery resources. For nurses, assessing and soliciting the patient's physiological, social and spiritual resources available for weathering the demands of recovering from an illness or injury and/or coming to terms with loss are all central to the ends of good nursing practice. Thus good clinical judgment can never be reduced to the technical aspects of the situation, but must consider the patient/family human concerns as well.