

# The case for case-based learning

**Purpose:** To examine the use of case-based teaching strategies in active learning and validate their effectiveness throughout nursing education.



## Background:

The past decade in nursing education was marked, in part, by the goal of fostering student clinical judgment skills to both pass NCLEX® and enhance safe, effective entry-level nursing care. This renewed emphasis on clinical judgment and gearing teaching strategies to the bedside/client-side are believed to be positive trends.<sup>1</sup> As nurse educators, psychometricians, and candidates celebrate higher NCLEX® scores, we also seek to understand the nature of these increases, including concern about higher rates and their relationship to polytomous scoring, among other variables. Emerging from this is a need to uncover the correlation of NCLEX® pass rates with actual clinical practice performance. Essentially, many of us are asking:

- Are novice nurses really demonstrating better clinical judgment in practice than before the enhancement of the NCLEX®?
- Are we doing enough to ensure that current teaching practices truly foster student learning and safe and effective nursing practice?

✓ Recent research by experts at the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) re-examined clinical judgment and entry-level nursing practice. Their study reaffirmed the critical role of clinical judgment in many tasks expected of nurses in the first year of nursing practice.<sup>1</sup>

✓ In the past, nursing education became saturated with content and faculty felt pressured to “teach it all,” making it difficult for students and faculty to focus on the critical, “need to know” information. A refocusing was needed to ensure new nurses had the skills to quickly and accurately view a client situation, make decisions, and act safely and effectively, focusing on clinical reasoning and knowledge acquisition.

## Why case-based teaching works:

Learning through cases, as reinforced by the clinical judgment initiative of the NCLEX®, is just the refocusing that nursing education needs. Case-based learning is not a newly invented teaching strategy. Instead, creative versions and uses of cases, along with scenarios that may be used in innovative ways, have emerged to enhance realistic, context-based learning. Unfolding cases develop, with additional context and details, emerging as realistic client-centered activities to:

- Entice today’s learners with interesting and novel situations and challenges
- Allow for repetition, retrieval of information, scaffolding new information on previously learned concepts, and transferring lessons learned to new situations (situation cognition)
- Foster the development of discrimination skills by identifying relevant versus less essential information while absorbing the details of the context of a case to make decisions
- Ensure immediate application and reinforcement of learning in any setting
- Reinforce that clinical judgment is the “doing,” or nursing actions, resulting from clinical decision-making and critical thinking

Research is evolving related to the use of case-based learning. Indeed, the NCLEX® itself demonstrates robust use of electronic health record (EHR)-based cases to frame questions as it measures clinical judgment. While the linkages between a nurse’s thinking and client safety have been studied, it is the value of this teaching strategy and its capacity to shape the thinking of novice practicing nurses that must continue to be explored.<sup>2</sup> One study noted an increase in self-identified clinical judgment in nursing students following early and consistent use of unfolding cases throughout a nursing program.<sup>3</sup> Another national study revealed that nurse educators most commonly used cases and simulations to ensure clinical judgment skill building.<sup>4</sup>

## Best practices in case-based learning:

The nimbleness and ease of use of case-based learning allowed it to gain and maintain a critical foothold in nursing education and simulation. It is how we operationalize case-based learning and simulation cases that will ensure “we are doing enough!”

The literature indicates that cases are most effective in impacting clinical judgment and decision-making if they are:

- Clinically focused
- Realistic (for example, EHR-based)
- Context-situated
- Detail-rich
- Relevant
- Based on the Clinical Judgment Measurement Model
- Action-oriented
- Unfolding/evolving
- Client-centered
- Clinically current
- Authentic
- Evidence-based
- Thoroughly debriefed
- Representing a client care experience

## Cases may be used:

- By students in preparation for class, clinical, lab, or simulation.<sup>5</sup>
- To replace lecture in the classroom, effectively and iteratively teaching content.<sup>5-6</sup>
- As methods of formative and summative evaluation.<sup>2</sup>
- As exemplars to provide clinically based remediation<sup>5</sup>
- As study tools, in preparation for quizzes, exams, and NCLEX®.<sup>2</sup>
- In all forms of simulation (live simulation, virtual screen-based simulation, virtual reality simulation, and screen-based educational tools).<sup>7</sup>
- As the classroom component in flipped or scrambled classrooms.<sup>4-5</sup>
- With group exercises, knee-to-knee activities, peer teaching, pair/trio exercises, peer feedback experiences, and cooperative learning strategies.<sup>2,5,8</sup>
- Along with Socratic probing questioning, critical case review, faculty and peer feedback, and reflective/introspective debriefing discussions.<sup>9</sup>
- To assist students to appreciate the need for individual and collective competency in clinical judgment skills as they launch into the world of nursing practice.<sup>10</sup>

## Case-based assessment:

Case-based learning, while rooted as a teaching modality, also offers the opportunity for the evaluation of clinical judgment skills. Nursing faculty need valid and reliable methods to assess clinical judgment.<sup>8,10</sup> Although the NCLEX® and the clinical judgment initiative were designed to assess clinical judgment, and valuable measures of this construct exist as published by renowned experts, we must continue to ensure that enhanced performance on clinical judgment measurements clearly correlates with improved client care and safe outcomes in healthcare settings. For example, landmark studies used clinical vignettes, or cases, to assess new nurse performance and the ability to provide safe client care.<sup>11-12</sup>

Cases are effective mastery assignments to serve as formative evaluations, assessments of learning gaps, and determinants of levels of student competency, while providing the context for questions based on the Clinical Judgment Measurement Model.



## Top three actions:



**Use case-based teaching strategies** to their fullest potential and ensure that cases are valuable, realistic, interesting, and evolving to meet the needs of today's learners and rapidly emerging content.



**Transform the classroom with case-based learning**, where students are placed at the bedside and asked to use clinical judgment to provide safe and effective client care.



**Future research with students and novice nurses during nursing programs, orientations, residencies, and fellowships is needed** to affirm the value of cases in learning and assessment of clinical judgment skills.

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