Experiential learning through precepting

LEADING BY EXAMPLE and instructing through motivation. Preceptors are health care providers who teach, support, coach, evaluate, serve as role models and aid in developing competencies in students working to become future providers. The relationship enables students to experience day-to-day practice with a role model within a clinical setting. It prepares students for a postgraduate profession and exposes preceptors to new ideas and information being taught today.

“A preceptor’s role is really to guide our graduate students into the real world of primary care or specialty practice,” explained Debra Bakerjian, senior director for nurse practitioner and physician assistant clinical education and practice at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis. “The experience is a critical part of our programs because it allows students to apply their new knowledge and skills while gaining confidence and validation in real, clinical settings.”

Precepting dates back to 1882 and Florence Nightingale. As Irene Palmer describes in “From Whence We Came,” published in The Nursing Profession: A Time to Speak, Nightingale explicitly defined that the first year’s practical and technical training for nurses was to take place in the hospital under the supervision of those nurses who had been ‘trained to train.’ When nursing education moved into the realm of academia, the role of clinical preceptors diminished. However, as nurse practitioner programs in the United States gained steam in the 1960s, the role of clinical preceptorship resurfaced and offered an opportunity for faculty to supplement knowledge and skills within a clinical setting.

Precepting is an organized, evidence-based, outcome-driven approach for students rotating into clinical areas. The practice pairs experienced providers with current students in order to develop the students’ competencies.

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in assessment, diagnosis, ethics, safety and communication. Students come to preceptors with an expectation of learning something the preceptor knows, and to enhance or expand the students’ knowledge. Preceptors serve as teachers and coaches by creating a space for learning, providing opportunities for hands-on involvement and allowing time for reflection. Many realize that learning is a two-way street.

“Precepting reminded me why I went into nursing in the first place and made me think about what I was doing rather than just going through the motions,” said Virginia Hass, an assistant clinical professor, director for the Master of Science — Nurse Practitioner Degree Program and interim director for the Master of Health Services — Physician Assistant Studies Degree Program at the School of Nursing. “The students constantly keep me on my toes and ask questions, so I always see care in a different light and stay current with clinical guidelines and facts that I may have forgotten.”

Patricia Benner, a nursing theorist and author, argues in the Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society that “nursing, as a practice, requires both techné and phronesis as described by Aristotle. Techné can be captured by procedural and scientific knowledge… Phronesis is…practical reasoning engaged in by an excellent practitioner … through experiential learning and for the sake of good practice, continually lives out and improves practice.” Experiential learning requires an environment in which the experiences, and the learning that follows, are intentionally planned. From fast-paced surgical units to case-rich environments within rural primary-care clinics, the settings in which students learn are as varied as the people for whom they care.

Precepting, by its very nature, unites procedural knowledge and practical reasoning within a mentoring, educational environment. Students recognize the preceptor partnership offers them a chance to manage cases, collect basic data and improve their interpretation skills with the different cases they experience in a clinical environment. Students strive to be avid listeners and observers while proactively taking initiative. Preceptors model for students how to approach individuals and families with sureness, while instilling confidence in the future providers they mentor. Not only does the learner improve clinical skills, but preceptors benefit from reviewing the basics and seeking new knowledge.

“Some providers resist precepting students because they think it might slow them down too much,” Hass added. “I found I was more productive and more focused when I worked with students. Now as an educator, I recognize the value of imparting knowledge and experience to the next generation of providers, so they are better prepared for practice and can improve care for everyone.”