

APPENDIX E

Appendix E: Suggestions for Teaching Early American Nursing History

One of the most rewarding experiences of teaching nursing is to be in the position to witness the awakening of a student to the historical impressions that professional nurses have made on society and culture. Stories from history serve as the most noble of teachers. Learning the history of one's profession is strengthening because it improves one's sense of identity and belonging. While all students who learn nursing history can become the story keepers of the profession, some go on to become the storytellers, those who research, record, and retell the past so that others may better understand the patterns of the profession in the hope that enlightened decisions will be made that will positively shape its future.

It is important that students critically explore their nursing traditions as part of the foundation for their development as nurse scientists, clinicians, and educators. The National League for Nursing (NLN) Position Statement: Innovation in Nursing Education: A Call to Reform (2003) states, "All levels of nursing education, undergraduate and graduate, are obligated to challenge their long-held traditions and design evidence-based curricula that are flexible, responsive to students' needs, collaborative, and integrate current technology."¹ Those who study early nursing history are given the tools and the opportunity to examine nursing traditions so that they are better able to fulfill what the NLN has suggested we are "obligated" to do. Students of early history, a period typically underrepresented in the nursing curricula, are given a broader historical framework from which to investigate nursing traditions.

The experience of studying nursing history can be likened to cultural immersion. To fully understand the past that one is studying, one releases all associations with present culture to allow oneself to be absorbed into the past, with its own peculiarities of being. Time and space become the portal of travel as one projects one's consciousness into another period. All facets of one's present life become assumptions. One's thoughts, observations, feelings, beliefs, and judgments must be turned consciously into questions to ensure that the entrée into a previous time is untainted by the presentist lens. This is not easy, as the ego that keeps us rooted in the present moment would have us compare the past to all that is around us and in us in this moment. It is to this preparation of the student that the teacher's first efforts are directed.

What follows is a brief sampling of some of the educational strategies and resources that I, Martha Libster, have used over the years to help students and practicing nurses connect to the profession's early healing traditions, which are very different from today's. My premise for this work is twofold: first, that those who take the opportunity to learn from the past are better able to create strongholds for creating their personal and professional future and, second, that the foundational humility and gratitude necessary for perpetuating the spirit as well as the work that is *nursing* is instilled in students and practicing nurses through the study of the elders, those who have walked the professional path before.

Preparation for Historical Study

1. Centering: identifying body, mind, and spirit with the present moment. I like to lead students through mindfulness exercises, such as eating an orange with one's senses fully engaged over a period of ten minutes. This allows the students to relax and release any defenses that would bar them from listening closely to the history they may be reading.

APPENDIX E

2. I define early American nursing history as the period before the 1870s, when the adoption of the Nightingale Model became the dominant nursing education culture and the focus of nursing practice was shifted from the community to the hospital. I begin the students' cultural and historical immersion with some reading from the period that serves as a marked contrast to contemporary life. For this, I have chosen such readings as McBride's *Women of the Dawn*.² The process of reading about the caregiving practices of healing women of the Abenaki Nation and other tribes, allows students of nursing to begin to broaden their present definitions of caregiving and nursing and to examine their preconceptions about the early history of American nursing.

Objectives

Examples of some of the objectives for a course on early American nursing state that the students will be able to

1. Analyze the role of the nurse of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America in constructing a caring community within the broader sociocultural context of the history of the American healthcare system;
2. Differentiate the elements of nursing practice that were defined as "expertise" when compared with women's roles as family caregiver;
3. Evaluate the influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American nursing history and traditions on contemporary nursing knowledge, practice, and American health policy;
4. Utilize the nursing metaparadigm to examine the health beliefs and practices of early American nurses.

Examples of Student Responses to Their Study of Early Nursing History

Author's Note: Thank you to my students, whose enthusiasm for learning history has been my inspiration and my delight. The following quotes are used with permission.

It is interesting to learn of things that earlier nurses did to help create the opportunities we have today. It was exciting to learn how nurses worked with so little resource, but provided quality care.

—T. M.

The historical work we learned with Dr. Libster presents a remarkably different picture of the early/mid-nineteenth-century nurse (or protonurse) from what I've encountered before. It evokes a much more dynamic world in which women actually enjoyed status and even (in the case of midwives) power as they extended their strength from the domestic sphere into the community.

—M. E. W.

When I read about the early nurses, I am impressed by their willingness to share and work together. This seems to be a difficult task in our current climate.

—C. W.

I thought nursing began with Florence Nightingale until I took a doctoral course in the history of nursing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was then that I realized that nurse educators do not give a thorough history of nursing to students. Through the study of history, I have learned that there is an identity of nursing. History is a story worth telling, but no one will realize its worth if it is not told.

—A. P.

APPENDIX E

Studying the history of nursing has changed me not only professionally but personally as well. Learning a portion of the history of nursing has helped me to understand and refine my identity as a nurse and as a nurse researcher. As I immersed myself into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was exhilarating to experience the art of caring demonstrated by these nurses. It is empowering to envision the nurses' autonomy, commitment to their patients, and the care they provided in the absence of the knowledge and technology we hold today.

—A. M.

This history course was a transformational and awakening experience that made me more sensitive to my relationships with clients, families, communities, and health workers I work with. It revealed to me some of the solutions for the present nursing crisis.

—S. S.

I vaguely remember reading about Colonial women applying home remedies like poultices and salves before taking this course. What I did not expect was the personal growth I experienced during the quest for hidden histories of women and men who established American nursing traditions and during the times my professor challenged me to question what appeared to me to be the obvious. I now have more pride in my nursing career and not only feel that I am connected to the past nurses who have come before me but that I have more to offer the nursing students that I am instructing.

—S. B.

Course Activities and Study Modules

Module 1: Introduction

Topics:

Historical immersion and the purpose of storytelling.
Exploring the questions, "What is a nurse?" and
"How is a nurse identified in early history?"

Books:

*Women of the Dawn*³

*Sisters of Charity and the Communion of Labour: A
Lecture*. History of early nursing written in 1855 by Anna
Jameson.⁴

Module 2: Colonial America

Topics:

Health beliefs and nursing, Social healers and professional
boundaries.

Book:

*The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New
England*.⁵

Module 3: Nineteenth-Century American Healthcare

Topics:

A culture of pluralism, health reform and self-care.
Sickroom management as the laboratory of the nurse.
Nursing expertise and creating healing environments.
Cultural authority and professional autonomy.

APPENDIX E

Books:

Enlightened Charity: The Holistic Nursing Care, Education and Advices Concerning the Sick of Sister Matilda Coskery, 1799-1870

Herbal Diplomats: The Contribution of Early American Nurses (1830-1860) to Nineteenth-Century Health Care Reform and the Botanical Medical Movement⁶

Module 4: What Is “Medicine”?

Topics:

Gender. The power of prescription.

Book:

Sickness and Health in America⁷

Module 5: The Bridge to Contemporary Practice

Topics:

Industrialization and the integration of technology and tradition.

Book:

Devices and Desires: Gender, Technology, and American Nursing⁸