



USING THE SOCRATIC METHOD (AND A BOARD GAME) TO IMPROVE NURSING

Research has revealed that many nurses are entering the profession with a lack of developed abilities for critical thinking. Could the answer be as simple as a board game? Some educators are convinced it can help.



LifeCareSimi

Critical thinking is an essential characteristic of a quality nurse, yet according to findings of **a report** in the Journal of Advanced Nursing, approximately one-quarter of newly hired nurses “had deficiencies in critical thinking ability, including problem recognition, reporting essential clinical data, initiating independent nursing interventions, anticipating relevant medical orders, providing relevant rationale to support decisions, and differentiation of urgency.”

That same report further recommended that “critical thinking, advanced problem-solving, and expert communication skills are an integral part of nursing practice and should be developed through nursing education programs.”

The ability to think critically is required for safe, efficient and skilled nursing practice, but unlike learning facts and material data, the ability to think critically can’t be lectured into aptitude. Nursing educators must find ways to challenge their students in ways that trigger and advance their abilities to assess situations and apply critical thinking.

CRITICAL THINKING IN A BOX

While simulation and role playing may come top of mind when considering methods of improving critical thinking skills in nursing students, a board game developed by LifeCareSim offers a unique approach to the challenges of evolving critical thinking skills.

The game, Ponder: The Socratic Way, is a hands-on role-playing curriculum builder that features audio and visual components. With the facilitation of an instructor, the game produces unpredictable, constantly evolving patient case scenarios. As students work to solve problems, the instructor seizes teaching moments and helps students pull things together and question what is going on with the patient. Students must apply all of the principles of the nursing process—assessment, diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation.

Though it may not fit into the traditional approach of medical education, institutions are beginning to understand the value of this “game” as a teaching tool.





GETTING ‘THE MOST JUICE FOR THE SQUEEZE’

One such educator onboard with utilizing Ponder: The Socratic Way is Dr. Gennifer Baker, an assistant professor at Martin Methodist College in Tennessee. As an educator who started as a bedside nurse, Baker has seen nursing education from multiple perspectives. She was introduced to Ponder: The Socratic Way when a colleague brought the game back to campus from a conference. Immediately, she saw utility in the game.

“It’s very hard to teach critical thinking from a didactic standpoint,” Baker explained. “You can’t just stand up there and lecture it to someone. But being able to do critical thinking through Ponder takes the stress out of trying to perform in front of a human being. The students are able to take a pause and think for a second since the patient isn’t actually in front of them with a plummeting heart rate. It’s a way to exercise or guide a bedside nursing student through a critical thinking process. And hopefully, over time as they continue with it, you can see their process is quicker and more thought-provoking. They’re able to see the big picture.”

For Baker, Ponder: The Socratic Way didn’t necessarily replace any existing tools or methods, but enhanced her ability to coach critical thinking in a different way.

“It’s a whole new avenue,” she said, contrasting how she can use simulation with a mannequin, but it requires a script and, thus, predictable outcomes. But with Ponder, there’s nothing predictable.

“On a mannequin, I can go through a script and see if the student goes through the actions that match the script, versus them rolling the dice in Ponder to create a scenario not predicted. The script has changed. Now, can they move forward to care for that patient?”

Nursing, like all medical disciplines, can be a life-and-death situation in real-world applications. That can make the learning part of medical education very serious and solemn. And probably for that reason, Baker’s students appear to appreciate the approach of Ponder.

“They enjoy it,” she said. “They get to laugh with it because it’s not so stressful. It’s not that they take it light-heartedly, but the stress factor isn’t there, which allows them to actually think through something. It’s a bit of a thinktank environment where they kind of brainstorm their way through something and talk it out loud with their teammates. Then, when they get together and compare notes the lightbulbs come on.”

And speaking of lights coming on, Baker admits that the learning and critical thinking development isn't limited just to the students. Because of how the game creates unpredictable scenarios, even the teachers are kept on their toes.

"There are things from an experience standpoint that I, as the educator, may think is best," she said. "But then here I have this new tech-savvy student who comes at it from a completely different perspective that's extremely innovative. Maybe I've always done it one way because I'm accustomed to it, but here's a new approach that totally works."

Since implementing Ponder: The Socratic Way as part of her curriculum, Baker has had other educators inquire about using it. She takes no pause recommending it.

"It's the biggest juice for the squeeze you'll ever get,' I tell them. You can teach an array of healthcare professionals or students in real time and you can't predict it because the patient status changes with a roll of the dice. You can truly take a patient scenario and it be a lot like a real-world human being whose medical conditions can sometimes be unpredictable and you're forced to think on your feet. To me as an educator, that makes it valuable, because I can sit with the same student six times and get six completely different experiences."

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FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER

Another educator using Ponder: The Socratic Way with his students is Dr. Cory Wilbanks, a faculty member at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center. Wilbanks has a unique perspective on the game because he was actually introduced to it as a student.

Wilbanks was a pupil of Ponder creator Dr. Hallie Bensinger, and was part of a group that played the game while in its developmental stages.



“We were about to take boards at that point, so we needed all the critical thinking we could get,” Wilbanks recalls. “This game really challenged us. It’s as if you’re in a real clinical setting, so it really made us think, and that’s what we knew we had to do for boards.”

Now in a position to educate students of his own, Wilbanks turns to Ponder to help build those critical skills.

“When you look at it, you might think it’s going to be this stagnant board game. But it challenges you the entire time. You get the sense that things will change and you have to do something. It creates a sense of urgency and forces you to make critical decisions,” he said. “It challenges you as if you were on the floor with real patients.”

Wilbanks uses Ponder with senior-level students entering into acute leadership courses, but recognizes the value of the tool for any level of nursing student.

“It would also be good for nurses entering their residency program when they first get hired because they’re fresh out of school and just starting to get a sense of patient care on their own,” he said. “I think it would be a good tool to refresh their critical thinking skills and their judgment.”

Like Baker, Wilbanks appreciates the game for its ability to create changing and diverse scenarios.

“It’s really adaptive. It changes and evolves. It never stops, which is like real life,” he said. “Things happen. Labs come back, patients change. I don’t think you can get any more real as far as challenging you throughout the day. It’s as if you were faced with a million challenges throughout your shift and you have to prioritize and critically think and do what you can make sure your patient is safe. It does a great job of capturing how it happens in real life.”

Having used the game as both student and teacher, Wilbanks is convinced it has a role in any nursing curriculum.

“I think every school should have a copy,” he said. “There’s obviously no replacement for the hospital setting. But if I could choose a replacement, it would probably be this game because it doesn’t lack for anything, aside from the face-to-face aspects of clinical. It’s challenging in a good way. I think it fosters critical thinking and it creates a great environment for learning.”



VALUE BEYOND THE PRICE

Faced with an ongoing and potentially long-lasting shortage of nurses, coupled with the increasing roles nurses are playing across different disciplines, educators will be charged with providing highly skilled and developed students to fill these critical positions. And part of developing those nurses will be instilling the ability to think critically under pressure.

Delivering healthcare is not a game, but that doesn't mean a game can't help improve the way we deliver healthcare, and do it at relatively little cost.

"I can buy a mannequin for \$30,000, but unless my student is standing there and can touch it, do they really get a full team effort?" Baker asserted. "I can use this critical thinking opportunity in a box, take it where ever I need to take it, sit down with my students and it didn't cost me \$30,000."

"You don't repeat the same scenarios over and over," Wilbanks added. "There's so many different ways the game can take you that I don't think you can put a price on it for learning."

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