AS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF NURSING in a stepwise baccalaureate program for RNs at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah, Kathleen L. Sitzman, MS, RN, is heavily involved in developing and maintaining online and on-campus curricula. Kathy is also a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado School of Nursing and one of the principal investigators in a three-year study funded by the National Institutes of Health, to assess factors that influence blood-borne pathogen exposure in nurses who make home visits. Some of her nursing education research — an exploration of the concept of caring online in BSN and graduate-level nursing classes — will be published later this year in Nursing Education Perspectives.

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Kathy teaches a variety of courses — nursing history and theory, nursing research, community health nursing, an honor's seminar, and a senior seminar — both online and in person to RNs who have completed their associate degree in nursing. Some students have been practicing for three months, while others have been practicing for as long as 30 years. This environment presents a host of challenges. Kathy tries to create learning situations where the more experienced nurses have opportunities to share lived experiences, and beginners have opportunities to clarify concerns. And, while she points to similarities between online and classroom teaching, she notes how difficult it can be to ensure content equity between the two modes of delivery.

Central to Kathy's teaching, integrated into every class she teaches, is nursing theory. Early in her graduate education, she explains, she learned how theory forms the underpinnings of practice, education, and research. "It was a revelation to me that nurse theorists are some of the most profound thinkers of our time. I became entranced with their brilliant and creative minds. Along with admiration for them, I felt proud that I was a nurse — just like them!"

This discovery led to further study and eventual dismay when she realized that many of her nurse colleagues discounted the relevance and importance of nursing theory.

In her teaching, Kathy emphasizes the importance of theory and the position of prominence it should hold in the profession. Because nursing theory forms the underpinnings of nursing practice in all realms, she finds it possible to smoothly incorporate theory into just about any content area. "I talk about Nola Pender's health promotion model in community health nursing. All of the theorists are pertinent in nursing research as we explore how best to perform research based on various theories. For the senior seminar and honors classes, I encourage students to choose one or two theorists that resonate with their own professional values and observations, and then incorporate their theories into whatever projects they might be completing."

With Lisa Eichelberger, a prominent nursing theory expert, Kathy is author of a textbook for baccalaureate-level students, Understanding the Work of Nurse Theorists: A Creative Beginning (Jones and Bartlett, 2004). Kathy relates how the idea for the textbook originated. "My first-semester BSN
students would come to class wondering why in the world they had to waste time and money on learning about nursing theory. They questioned its value and were dubious about the prospect of applying theory to their daily practice. I began searching for ways to make theory meaningful and personally applicable for these students.” Kathy adds that the textbook used for the course at that time was too complex for her students, who experienced frustration and confusion trying to glean useful information.

Rather than trying to convey the intricacies of nursing theory, Kathy found it more effective to provide opportunities for students to explore concepts in nontraditional ways. She started using art forms to illustrate different types of theory, which evolved into inviting students to create art pieces to demonstrate their understanding. After a few years, she decided to write a textbook for her own students so that she would not have to keep making handouts. “This was a nonthreatening introduction to nursing theory. It has enabled many students to develop a true appreciation and a solid, basic understanding.” She adds that while writing a textbook to outline her approach has been a tremendous amount of work and worry, she has been rewarded with students who are enthusiastic about nursing theory. “They demonstrate understanding far beyond what I first imagined would be possible.”

Dissatisfied with the traditional “sage on the stage” and “teach and test” methods of teaching and assessment, which do not get at the heart of what students need to know, Kathy has adopted inventive approaches for co-creating teaching and learning exchanges. For example, she often gives more than one option for completing required learning activities so that students can choose methods for demonstrating learning that make sense to them. She uses group work methods to encourage sharing and co-creation of knowledge.

And, if she has assigned a paper and a student approaches her, well in advance of the due date, with a creative way to meet the requirements, she will sometimes negotiate with the student, draw up a learning contract, and mentor the student through to completion. There are, she adds, many portals, or modes, for learning and expression. “Students are often able to spectacularly convey what they have learned through means other than written tests and papers. I find that if I help students identify what portals are most accessible for them, they not only learn the material at hand, they also learn how best to learn in general, which serves them throughout their education and lives.”

A current challenge involves creating innovative ways to educate increasingly larger class sizes, both in person and online. Kathy points out that with the current demand to educate more RNs, Weber State does yet not have adequate physical space, faculty, and online infrastructure to support large increases in the number of students accepted into the program. “We have been moderately increasing class size wherever feasible. Learning about and field-testing effective teaching techniques for large in-person and online classes has been of particular interest to me lately.”

Another challenge for Kathy involves effective time management. In addition to her teaching responsibilities and extensive committee work, Kathy does what she describes as a “fair amount” of writing for publication in peer reviewed journals. She describes how she finds the time. “Writing can be time consuming, so I maintain a disciplined approach to daily activities. I adhere to planned time-blocks each day that are devoted to writing, curriculum development, meetings, teaching, research, general paperwork and filing, and networking. Sometimes the time-blocks are only 10 minutes long, but if I use them wisely, it adds up to a tremendous amount of work over the long haul. Two key strategies involve ensuring that nothing is neglected or left for later and avoiding last minute crunches.” She adds that with so many work-related activities, it would be easy to overwork, so she is careful to devote time to yoga, exercise, and relaxation.

Kathy says that she loves to teach because she loves to learn. “In teaching every day, I learn something new each day from students, colleagues, and the ongoing research and course development required to keep class content vital and alive. Also, engaging in the ebb and flow inherent in the working routines of academia encourages creativity and freshness, and requires a high degree of flexibility that is challenging and stimulating.”

Reflecting on the faculty role, Kathy returns to the theorists. “Teaching provides daily opportunities to illuminate depths of caring in nursing that most nursing students may not ordinarily ponder, for example, core concepts of caring described Jean Watson, comfort as clarified by Katharine Kolcaba, cultural caring articulated by Madeleine Leininger, and health as expanding consciousness developed by Margaret Newman.”

Here she speaks of caring as the basis of the nursing profession as a whole, and also for the development of individual professional identities. She points out that nursing students typically do not examine the concept of caring but assume that it is related to nursing in a general, somewhat superficial way. “Nursing is unique in that it provides an opportunity for individuals to enact a professional life devoted to conscious caring on multiple levels. It is satisfying to help students recognize the importance of deep and multifaceted caring, and provide them with the knowledge to consciously perpetuate this defining element of the nursing profession.”

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