

Chapter 4: **Precepting in Action: Evaluation of Progress**

A. The Evaluation Role

During the student's assignment with you, you assess her/his performance on an ongoing basis to provide corrective feedback and determine learning needs. At the conclusion of the course you summarize your observations of the student's performance and judge their behavior using course objectives and/or specific evaluation tools as criteria. Assure that you, the student, and the faculty member share a mutual understanding of exactly what student performances meet the criteria and satisfy objectives. Students can't be expected to function at the level of agency employee. In other words, assure your expectations are the same. Although the faculty member assigns the grade, the faculty values and incorporates your observations, interpretations and professional judgment when doing so. Try the following techniques to evaluate student learning.

- **Cognitive learning: ASK QUESTIONS.** Use open-ended ones such as "What is their main reason for resisting change?" "Where will you find that information?" "How can you tell that cross training is effective?" "Who else should be included on this project?" "When should this plan be evaluated?"
- **Affective: OBSERVE.** You can explore attitudes, values and beliefs with questions, but the HOW of practice is the evidence of affective domain mastery. When demonstrating satisfactory affective learning, a student shows respect for the values and sensitivities of others during interactions.
- **Psychomotor: OBSERVE.** You can obtain some information about performance by talking through a procedure with students. However the only way to validly evaluate technical performance is to watch the student perform.

Preceptors sometimes neglect the evaluation aspect of the preceptor role because they "don't want to be the one to fail the student". But, preceptors don't fail students or stall their progress. Instead, a student's performance meets or fails to meet criteria. As the preceptor, you are in a better position than anyone else to collect the data that gives evidence of student competence. And as preceptor you have an opportunity to support professional practice standards and the credibility of the school of nursing.

Evaluating has two components:

- identifying opportunities for improvement- both in the student's performance and in the preceptor's teaching technique
- summarizing patterns and trends in overall performance and comparing performance with standards.

Your School of Nursing faculty contact will supply the clinical performance evaluation tool and criteria for rating. Become familiar with this tool so that you can begin to use the framework as a guide in collecting objective and subjective data about student performance. Ask the faculty for some

examples of outstanding, acceptable, and unacceptable performance in relation to the criteria for the level of student you will precept. Give the faculty member some examples of your student's performance and ask how the examples match expectations. Realize that there will be differences in expectations between students and employees that you may have oriented in the past.

Two concepts that provide help in evaluation are consistency of performance and the amount of assistance a student requires to complete an assignment/ project. Again, be sure to clarify expectations with faculty.

B. Formative versus Summative Evaluation

Formative evaluation is a process of ongoing feedback on performance. The purposes are to identify aspects of performance that need to improve and to offer corrective suggestions. Be generous with formative evaluation. Share your observations and perceptions with students. You might simply share your observation and then ask the student if he/she can think of a better approach for the next time. Formative evaluation need not make a judgment. When giving formative evaluation, offer some alternatives, e.g., "The staff may respond better if you..."

Summative evaluation is a process of identifying larger patterns and trends in performance and judging these summary statements against criteria to obtain performance ratings. This evaluation may take place at the mid-point and at the end of the course. Faculty rely heavily upon your evidence and perceptions to justify their ratings for assigning the final grade.

As a general rule, give both formative and summative evaluation in private. However, it may be important to capitalize on a learning need by discussing in the setting in which a problem behavior occurred. This may allow the student an opportunity to try out an alternative approach. Use your judgment and employ tact and sensitivity to avoid embarrassing the student.

C. Providing Constructive Feedback during Formative Evaluation

Feedback answers the question, "How am I doing?" It should be helpful to the person who receives it. Feedback is most helpful when the student understands it, is able to accept the information, and is able to do something about the information. Giving feedback effectively is key to effective precepting. Use the following guidelines:

1. **Focus on changeable things.** Feedback can only lead to improvements when it is about things that can be changed. Share ideas and information and explore alternatives rather than expecting answers and solutions.
2. **Make descriptive, not interpretive statements.** Act as a video camera and play back your observations rather than your interpretation about why things happened. State your observation, and then ask questions such as, "How could that have been done more effectively?" or "What was a potential risk with that approach?" Focus on behavior, not on the person.

3. **Make specific statements.** Give concrete and objective “playback”. Offer specific positive, as well as corrective, statements. “Good job” is too general; state exactly what was “good” and why. Give specific statements on how to improve. Format examples may include:

- "One thing I like about you is..."
- "One thing you do very well is...."
- "A recent problem you handled very well is..."
- "A value that I see is important to you is...."
- "One thing you've overcome is..."
- "You pleasantly surprised me when..."

4. **Give immediate feedback.** The sooner it is given, the more effective it will be. When you must delay, identify the specific time or incident to which you are referring. Comment on something the student has done well and something upon which the student needs to improve or practice.



5. **Use I-Messages** to deliver the feedback. This technique is often recommended for communicating assertively and resolving conflicts. The technique avoids the blaming or criticizing tone of you-messages, such as “You really need to be more assertive”. I-messages addressing these same problems might take the form: “When I watch you interact with the quality improvement staff, I notice that they seem to dominate the discussions with little outside suggestions.” Give the student an opportunity to respond to your comments. Then reflect back to assure you understood what was said. Next, provide specific criteria for improvement that you both can agree to work on.

In most situations, your statement of acceptable criteria is enough, and the student can follow through on your guidance. But, with a pattern of substandard performance or if an apparent attitude problem has developed, the process of eliciting the student’s perceptions and negotiating a solution assumes greater importance.

Step by Step “I-message” Process to Negotiate a Plan for Improvement

- When I (observe, watch, listen, etc)
- I.... (notice, get concerned about, think there is a risk of...etc)
- And I feel.... (express feeling if appropriate)

- Next, use active listening to clarify the student’s response. That is, reflect back to the student whatever he/she says in response.
- Then, express the criteria for improvement as you see them (e.g., more sensitivity to employee’s feelings, more practice with....)
- AND elicit from the student his/her needs in the situation (more time, more examples, more practice)
- Finally, negotiate what the student, or each of you, will do to facilitate the needed improvement.

Consult with your faculty at any time that you begin to perceive problematic patterns, attitudes, or serious deficiencies in performance. Your perception is sufficient reason to express concern. The faculty member will appreciate receiving early notice of real or potential problems and will assist you.

D. Strategies for Managing Problem Learners

Be sure you are solving the right problem—that advice is as valid for managing student learning problems as for managing organizational problems. Explore the perceived problem fully before putting solutions in place. Share your observations and ask for the student’s interpretation. Given the limited practicum time, it is very important to identify problems aggressively before bad habits develop or misinterpretations lead to irreconcilable differences. Many perceived problems resolve as soon as preceptor and student clarify differing perceptions of expectations. For example, you may perceive that your student, a mature experienced nurse manager, is “just not getting it.” You may mentally “write her off” in terms of providing her active enthusiastic involvement because you think she will “never be able to make it” in another setting. If you share your observations with her (not your dire predictions), you may discover that as a mature nurse she has numerous, complex “brain files” that she searches and matches to incorporate new learning. She knows herself well enough to tell you that she takes a little longer than her younger classmates to “get in the groove”, but once she settles in she outperforms many of them. The faculty member can validate the student’s learning history.

Identify the problem you perceive within the framework of domains of learning. Is this a cognitive, an affective or a psychomotor problem? Problems in each domain respond best to strategies particular to that domain.

Having explored and identified a problem with a student, ask the student to identify factors that are contributing to the problem and ways to overcome these difficulties. Capitalize on the “coach approach” discussed in Chapter 6 as a means to help the student find their own best solution. Offer suggestions and recommend resources, but give the student accountability for resolving the problem.

Determine if it is realistic for the student to overcome the identified deficiency/ problem within the time limits. Consider how much allowance should be given to family/ personal problems interfering with the learning process. If in doubt, discuss with faculty member. For more complex problems, determine whether it is appropriate to recommend professional counseling.

E. “Tightening the Reins”: Formulating a Collaborative Plan for Improvement

When you identify a need for improvement in student performance, be specific about the deficiency, the expectation and the resources that can assist the student. You may wish to formalize this process in writing, including dates for review and completion as presented on the next page. Most importantly, assure that you, the student, and the faculty member (if appropriate) share the same understanding of improvement needed and expectations.

Following is a sample approach used by a preceptor that provides some of the basics of a corrective interview.

- “I’d like to talk to you about your work”
- “One thing I’d like to help you with is...” (Be specific, providing objective description of the deficiency/ problem)
- “How do you perceive the situation?”
- LISTEN
- Clarify questions.
 - If there is a disagreement, acknowledge it, then express: “I still have these concerns...”
 - If the student introduces new information, express: “That changes things.”
 - When you both agree on the definition of the problem, move on.
- “What do you suggest we do?”
- LISTEN
- “Suppose we try....”
- “SO, we have agreed to... (review the agreement in detail).
- “We will meet again on ... to review the progress we’ve made.”
- “Here are some of the things you are doing well.” (Be very specific).

In the box below, create a learning plan for some aspect of practice that might be especially challenging to a student who is working with you.

Student Learning Plan

Note: Some problems are better handled using the “coach approach” as described in Chapter 6.

<p>Description of unsatisfactory performance/ problem:</p> <p>Description of satisfactory performance (goal):</p> <p>Steps to resolution:</p> <p>Learning/ human resources available:</p> <p>Date for review:</p> <p>Date for completion of plan:</p>

F. Strategies for Handling Complex Problems.

Obviously there is not one perfect way to handle every problem situation. Some situations require a direct approach of simply clarifying expectations against behavior, while others provide great opportunities for using the coach approach.

- 1) The student who “knows it all” and is bored watching you perform.
 - Validate the student’s competencies yourself.
 - Point out differences between the student’s previous experiences and expectations of the Advanced Practice Role.
 - Allow student to identify experiences that they might find challenging.
- 2) The student who is stressed out over personal circumstances.
 - Acknowledge that personal situations do need to take priority at times. But, if there is an ongoing pattern of distraction, learning is jeopardized.
 - Do not get intimately involved in solving the student’s problems or take on the problems.

- Keep the focus on the clinical experience and whatever problems are arising because of preoccupation or absences. Ask the student what different arrangements she/he could make to allow for increased concentration on the business at hand when in clinical.
 - Consult with faculty if necessary.
- 3) The student who fumbles when trying to use specialized forms or skills (ex, systems application, reading spreadsheet, interpreting control chart).
- Encourage the student to practice with a fellow student or other willing person.
 - Suggest that the student chunk down the procedure/process and work on smaller sections to gain mastery (ex: using basic Powerpoint presentation without the “bells and whistles”).
 - Remind the student that learning occurs on a continuum, and not to be discouraged.
 - Provide opportunities commensurate with abilities.
- 4) The student who is insensitive to feelings of staff at meetings/ evaluations.
- Model the behavior you expect of the student. For example, inquire how they feel about the new policy being enacted or proposed.
 - After the meeting, give the student feedback in private. Remind the student that successful leadership requires teamwork. Each member of the team needs to be respected for their views and opinions.
- 5) The student who wears unconventional dress.
- Discuss sensitive issues without “over emotionalizing”.
 - Confront the student with his/her deficiencies regarding your/ agency’s expectations for professional dress. Ask for feedback.
 - Acknowledge that personal/cultural differences may exist, but some adherence to the agency’s professional code of dress is necessary.
 - Clarify your expectations for performance.
 - Communicate objectively, directly, clearly.
- 6) The student who is too insecure to lead a group meeting.
- Focus on resources and approaches available for her to learn.
 - Role model for the student.
 - Chunk the behavior into smaller units. Encourage the student to practice in other settings (university classes, etc)
 - Provide opportunities for student to practice on-site.
 - Co-lead the next meeting with the student.
 - Provide constructive feedback in private.
 - Celebrate small successes.
- 7) The student who carries a work beeper and is constantly making personal calls.
- Identify the reason by confronting the student regarding her behavior.
 - Clarify that clinical time should be devoted to clinical issues. Learning can be jeopardized by outside distractions.
 - Ask the student what different arrangements could be made to avoid these interruptions.
 - Consult with faculty as appropriate.

G. “Loosening the Reins”: Strategies for Letting Go

Providing more autonomy for the student is a challenge for the preceptor. Yet the student will not successfully complete the objectives if all of his/her practice is closely supervised and assisted. Assure yourself of the student’s competence to perform the required tasks and then allow the student to perform those aspects independently. Monitor progress through documentation, reports from students, and responses you receive from co-workers. Discuss and negotiate the letting go process with the student. Find out what type of support will contribute to the student’s growing independence.

A very important key to letting go is to assure yourself that the student will recognize the need for information or assistance and actively seek it from you or whatever resource is appropriate. Davis, Sawin and Dunn (1993) identify the following indicators as signals that students are ready for increased responsibility.

- Mutual increase in comfort and trust between student and preceptor. Preceptor trusts the student not to get in over her/his head and to be responsible for his/her own actions and decisions.
- Student proves that he/she will not miss something important. There is no longer a need to review every detail with the preceptor.
- Student shows ability to tie in past experiences with new skills and apply them to new scenarios.
- Student recognizes limits of knowledge and admits to weaknesses.
- Student asks appropriate questions.
- Student becomes a self-started, can cope with an unstructured setting or a change in the schedule.
- Student asks for more challenging experience and exhibits confidence.

H. Collecting Data for Summative Evaluation

Use the course objectives and evaluation criteria which the faculty provided. Collect objective and subjective data that give evidence of the student’s performance in relation to the evaluation framework. Many preceptors find it useful to save examples of the student’s work for comparison across time. Or review weekly progress notes you used in discussions with the student. Be sure to also include the perspectives of significant persons with whom the student interacted. When collecting data from these colleagues, refer to a specific situation or project and ask a focused question about an aspect of the student’s performance, behavior or attitude. Perceptions of others can guide your observations toward particular aspects of the student’s practice.

I. Preceptor Evaluation

Self evaluation: The art of teaching is challenging. Although you have so much expertise in your specialty of practice, and are motivated to help teach “all you know” to a student, not all teaching experiences may be equally successful. Although you use a particular approach quite expertly, another approach may be more effective in a given situation with a particular student. The art of teaching involves assessing the situation on an ongoing basis to determine if modifying the approach might yield better results.

Develop the habit of reflecting on a brief segment of your interactions with the student. Recall the student’s response and the evidence of learning that you observed. Were you satisfied? How might you modify your approach in the future? Does the student need more theoretical work prior to assuming practice in the clinical arena? If needed, consult the faculty member about specific difficulties during the course of the practicum. At the conclusion of the experience you may note some areas in which the student has not fully achieved objectives. You will have more valid data to support this conclusion if you have tried a variety of approaches to assist the student.

Faculty evaluation: Clarify the expectations of the faculty member at the onset of the practicum. Ask, “What is my most important role with this student from your perspective?” The answer will vary depending upon the student’s previous experience. Seek ongoing feedback from the faculty member.

Student evaluation: Seek feedback from the student about which of your approaches are most helpful and which are not. Let the student know that you expect feedback, just as you give it on an ongoing basis. Acknowledge and act on the feedback as appropriate. If you choose not to act on it, let the student know why.

Students will complete a written evaluation of the experience with you and of your practice setting as a learning experience. Request that the faculty member share these results with you. Remember to keep “constructive criticism” in perspective. Some believe that since learning requires change and since most people don’t like to change, we should not be discouraged when students give less than enthusiastic praise of the learning experience and the teacher. Some of the most rewarding moments in teaching come when a former student visits and says, “I hated it at the time and couldn’t see the value of it, but NOW I’m so grateful that you required me to...” Reflect on the feedback, identify any different approaches you might employ the next time, enjoy the well-deserved praise and validation, and then move on to the next experience.