

# TEACHING TIPS

*Diane Billings, EdD, RN, FAAN  
Karren Kowalski, PhD, RN, FAAN  
Associate Editors*

## Online Learning Communities Can Provide Support for Nurses Preparing for Certification Examinations

Health care agencies realize that supporting certified nursing staff is a key component in assuring patient safety, enhancing organizational growth, and achieving Magnet status or other external recognition for their patient care. Wood (2002) noted that nurse certification is an effective way of putting forth a mark of excellence for the health-care system, thus distinguishing the system from its competitors. Research indicates that confident certified nurses provide safer patient care (American Association of Critical-care Nurses [AACN], 2003). Support of professional certification is a valuable tool in the recruitment and retention of a strong nursing staff (AACN, 2003; Wood 2002).

A simple but effective method of supporting staff seeking to achieve or to maintain certification is developing an online learning community. Online learning communities are virtual places where the best practices of the profession can be developed and disseminated (Billings, 2001; Norris, Mason, & Lefrere, 2003). Along with linking members of a group who would benefit from communication and information sharing, an online learning community can promote social relationships and the accomplishment of shared goals.

### FORMING AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Nurse educators can create online "communities" to provide

nurses who are seeking career advancement or validation through certification with essential education and communication. Using simple online communication tools, educators would be able to share resources and provide support during the examination preparation process. Using easily accessed resources, the nurses can view presentations of material, participate in practice examinations, and discuss case studies and methods of providing care. Being linked to a group of nurses preparing for examination and to the facilitators of the group through an online network could promote a sense of "connection," thereby overcoming the potential isolation of preparing alone for certifying examinations.

An online learning community is formed using online communication technologies such as e-mail, web pages, and learning management systems. The primary components of an online learning community provide a means of accessing information, interacting with group members and facilitators, and linking to specialty organizations for personal and professional growth. For example, one purpose for an online learning community could be to assist nurses preparing for certification examinations such as the Certified Critical-care Nurse (CCRN) or the Progressive Critical-care Certified Nurse (PCCN) provided by the AACN.

### CREATING THE TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Although the technical infrastructure will vary at each agency, most online communities can be established using already existing hardware and software. A simple approach to establishing an online learning community is to use the institution's e-mail system. In addition to communicating with members of the group, discussion forums can be established using e-mail as long as participants are careful about replying to the specific discussion "threads" and replying to "all" or to "individual(s)" as appropriate.

Presentation of case studies can also be accomplished through the e-mail. Facilitating a "round robin" with a case study can allow different members to comment in turn, consequently enhancing participation, information sharing, and critical thinking. A learning management system or other system for group e-mails, discussions, chats, and testing tools provides the ideal environment for hosting the online learning community as communication is facilitated by the integrated set of tools.

### PROVIDING INFORMATION

Another easy-to-use tool is a web page. A web page could be placed on the facility's learning management system or Intranet or on the Internet; it would allow participants to gain further access to

### EXAMPLE OF LINKS SEPARATED BY WHAT THE LEARNER CAN ANTICIPATE GETTING FROM THE SITES

#### *Links to educational resources for the AACN Exams*

- American Association of Critical-care Nurses—[www.aacn.org](http://www.aacn.org)
- American Heart Association/American Stroke Association—[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)
- Society for Critical Care Medicine—<http://www.sccm.org>
- American College of Cardiology—<http://www.acc.org/index.htm>

#### *Links to information for continuing education for the AACN Exams*

- AACN CERP site
- Directory of Online CEU's for nursing—<http://www.nurseceu.com>
- MedCEU's—<http://www.medceu.com>
- Cybernurse has a list of links for nursing CEUs—<http://www.cybernurse.com/ceu>

#### *Links to critical care nurses around the world*

- Australian College of Critical Care Nurses—<http://www.acccn.com.au>
- British Association of Critical Care Nurses (BACCN)—<http://www.baccn.org.uk>
- Canadian Association of Critical Care Nurses (CACCN)—<http://www.caccn.ca>
- European Federation of Critical Care Nursing Association—<http://www.efccna.org>

information. For example, an area on the designated web site could hold presentations or outlines of the main topics being tested. Another area could have practice test questions about the key concept areas of the examination, including references to research the answer. Drop-down menus can be easily added to allow for different options to be selected. An e-mail link could be added to the web site to assist the nurse to contact the facilitator (Clinical Nurse Specialist or Clinical Educator) for additional questions and further discussions. All of this could be accomplished via e-mail as long as the system provided for attachments, but a web page would add convenience and easier access for the nurses.

### LINKING TO LEARNING RESOURCES

Another area of the online learning community web site can include links to specific sites within the professional organization(s) that are offering the licensing or certification examination. For example, direct links could be provided to areas within the certifying agency's web sites to download the examination blueprint and application for the examination, to receive continuing education hours, and to obtain additional information about the topics covered on the examination.

The online learning community can be enriched by having links to key resources. The links can be suggested by the educator or by the learners themselves. The links can

be easily updated as the focus or as practice changes. The example (Sidebar) shown here is intended for nurses preparing to take the CCRN or PCCN certification examinations, but similar links can be found for other specialty practice examinations and for initial licensure examinations.

### SUMMARY

Achieving certification is a benefit to the nurses, to their patients, and to the organizations that support them. Developing an online learning community is a simple way for the institution to offer support to the nursing staff. Providing the resources for creation of online learning communities demonstrates the facility's commitment to communication, education, and professional development.

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Pam Pethel, RN, MSN, CCRN  
Cardiovascular/Critical Care Clinical Nurse  
Wishard Health Services  
Indianapolis, Indiana

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