

Soft Skills Research: Aligning *Nurse's Touch* with Best Practices
Professional Communication

Assessment Technologies Institute, Inc.
February, 2012



Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Communication Skills in Nursing	1
Nurse's Touch: Professional Communication	3
Theoretical Framework	4
Education and Practice	5
Multi-method Assessment System	6
References	9
Appendix	10




Introduction

Soft skills in the nursing profession are undoubtedly important skills to possess albeit they aren't emphasized as much as "hard" skills (e.g., knowledge and psychomotor skills). While the value of soft skills is recognized, nurse educators are charged with the difficult task of allocating time to all of the various "hard" skills subject areas within the nursing curriculum. Frequently, soft skills are not afforded the time that may be needed for nursing students to attain these valuable skills. To address this issue, the *Nurse's Touch* product line was developed and is intended to provide a collection of materials to help students develop the social and personal skills that they will need to become successful nurses.

The entire suite of products within *Nurse's Touch* includes content area packages in *Professional Communication*, *Wellness and Self-care*, *Becoming a Professional Nurse*, *Nursing Informatics and Technology*, and *Leadership and Management*. The *Professional Communication* product line was specifically intended to provide the theory behind communication across various settings for health professionals, clients and groups. The *Nurse's Touch* development process was based on research that outlined best teaching and evaluation practices in the context of soft skills education. This paper specifically demonstrates how the *Nurse's Touch: Professional Communication* content package aligns with best practices associated with teaching and assessing the communication skills of nursing students.

Communication Skills in Nursing

Communication is the practice of distributing information using a set of rules (Northouse & Northouse, 1998). Numerous definitions have been used by researchers since the late 1940s to describe what is meant by communication. The concept that communication includes a transfer of information between a source and a receiver is a commonality of many of these definitions (Northouse & Northouse, 1998). Health communication is a subset of communication that relates to how individuals deal with health-related issues (Northouse & Northouse, 1998). Communication exchanges




can be characterized as verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, personal or impersonal, and subject oriented or relationship oriented. In general, health communication is concerned with applying concepts and theories to interactions that occur among individuals on health-related issues (Northouse & Northouse, 1998).

Importance of Communication Skills in Nursing

Soft skills in the healthcare industry are increasingly being recognized as valuable skills that are necessary for nursing professionals to encompass. For instance, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) stresses that students need and want experience with professional communication during their education to have a better understanding of roles and communication once they become licensed to practice. The IOM reports that studies have documented the magnitude to which poor communication and disrespect between physicians and nurses lead to adverse outcomes for clients (National Research Council, 2011).

Furthermore, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN, 2010) has long incorporated communication into every category and subcategory of the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX®), emphasizing that it is a process that is fundamental to nursing practice. In fact, the NCSBN (2009) conducted a series of studies on newly licensed RNs. These RNs indicated that they use therapeutic communication techniques to provide support to clients 99.13% of the time in their current practice settings and responded that therapeutic communication applies to their practice 100% of the time.

Moreover, employers desire to hire nurse professionals who not only demonstrate competency but also possess personal characteristics and abilities that are needed to be successful. During the recent economic downturn, more experienced nurses have a competitive edge over nurse graduates. Therefore, it is important for new nurses to gain as much advantage by being prepared to demonstrate




their professional communication skills during their interview. Wirkus (2009) interviewed several nurse leaders who have experience with hiring nurse graduates. Maria-Jean Caterinicchio, RN, MS, director of workforce development for Orange County Memorial Care University and board member of the Association of California Nurse Leaders (ACNL) said, “We look for an attitude of collaboration and communication.” Nurse interviewees are asked to provide examples of specific clinical situations in which they demonstrated therapeutic communication. In addition, they should be able to convey how they reacted to criticism and state how they effectively dealt with a client conflict.

While the value of communication skills in nursing is evident, concern regarding nurses’ lack of communication skills in the field continues to exist (Bowles, 2001; Klakovich, 2009; NursingTimes.net, 2007). Fortunately, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes desirable for effective communication can be taught and learned (Hobgood et al., 2002). In fact, there is overwhelming evidence for positive effects of communication skills education for improving these skills in healthcare (Aspergren, 1999). This is where ATI’s *Nurse’s Touch: Professional Communication* content package comes in!

Nurse’s Touch: Professional Communication

As the nation’s preeminent e-learning provider, ATI Nursing Education offers programs that are instrumental in improving faculty, student and program outcomes. With ATI’s support, educators have the power to augment curriculum, revamp courses and faculty development, improve student outcomes, and lower attrition rates. ATI eagerly responded to requests from customers and to implications in the latest nursing research when deciding to create the soft skills line of products, *Nurse’s Touch*. As with every content area package within the *Nurse’s Touch* suite of products, the *Professional Communication* package was designed to align with best practices demonstrated by research and theory. The research on soft skills education tends to emphasize three main characteristics of effective programs that are intended to teach and assess soft skills such as



communication, leadership, professionalism, and wellness and self-care. Based on a summary of the literature, effective soft skills education programs ideally possess the following characteristics:

1. Skills are based on a comprehensive *theoretical framework* and are connected to measurable outcomes (Bowles, 2001; Chater, 1975; Dewson et al., 2000; Makoul, 2001)
2. Includes both *education and practice* of defined skills (Aspergren, 1999; Georges; Kantrowitz, 2005)
 - a. Education on knowledge of skills and content
 - b. Practice exercises to apply knowledge of skills
3. Incorporates a *multi-method assessment system* that supports and evaluates attainment of skills (Epstein & Hundert, 2002)

For the full description of the research that supports each of these guidelines, please see our whitepaper titled *Soft Skills Research: Aligning Nurse's Touch with Best Practices*. The *Professional Communication* content package embodies these guidelines which are outlined in the following sections as they relate to this specific product line.

Theoretical Framework


The development process for each of the content area packages was the same. This process was based on several analytical steps which involved in-depth research from several prominent resources in the field which are listed in Appendix, converting proposed content outlines into measurable tasks or outcomes of the skills, and forming committees of nurse educators to review the outlines and tasks. Based on the final content outline, an ATI nurse content expert developed the content for the *Professional Communication* tutorial based on relevant references and resources.



Education and Practice

Soft skills should be taught through education on relevant content as well as through repeated application of skills in relevant contexts and the *Professional Communication* product line provides both types of learning. First, it provides comprehensive and thorough education materials to increase the communication skills of nurses. A tutorial that consists of several modules provides instructional lessons on five different communication topics which include: types of communication in nursing; the establishment of therapeutic relationships; factors that affect communication with individuals and groups; organizational communication and establishing collaborative relationships; and client education. Within these modules, extensive examples of appropriate and inappropriate communication techniques are provided in the context of multiple types of situations, across the lifespan, and various cultures. Thus, the *Professional Communication* tutorial provides students with a substantial amount of content information for learning and understanding communication skills within a nursing context. The *Professional Communication* product line also provides students with multiple opportunities to apply and practice the skills and knowledge that they learned from the tutorial. For instance, students are given the opportunity to review case studies and analyze responses while selecting/developing the response they believe is most appropriate. A case study is provided for each of the modules in the tutorial for a total of five case studies. Case studies allow students to apply the knowledge learned to clinical situations.

Furthermore, the *Professional Communication* product line also features *The Communicator*, an interactive simulation product giving students the opportunity to practice communicating with clients, their significant others and members of the health care team. After watching a short video, the student must choose which character from the video to respond to. Depending on what the student decided, there will be a unique response that follows. In essence, the student experiences the results of the




outcomes they have selected. Within this product, students also have the opportunity to identify therapeutic and non-therapeutic communication techniques using video-based client care scenarios. Both of these features of the *Professional Communication* product line provide students with the practice exercises they need to apply the skills they have learned.

Multi-method Assessment System

The most effective approach to evaluating communication skills is one that incorporates multiple methods of assessment in order to reflect the multimodal nature of the instruction. As such, the *Professional Communication* line provides several methods for assessing students' communication skills, each of which is reflective of the particular instructional mode utilized. Students are assessed based on their knowledge of the content as well as on their level of competency in applying that knowledge to clinical situations. This multi-method assessment approach ensures that students are geared towards achieving desired outcomes of communication skills education.

Students' communication skills are assessed within each feature of the *Professional Communication* product line. For example, an assessment is provided for each of the five modules within the tutorial; each assessment consists of test items that correspond to the content within the module. Rationales are provided for every answer option so that students are able to learn and reflect on incorrect as well as correct answers. Similarly, assessment items are presented to students with each case study in order to evaluate how students respond to hypothetical communication scenarios. Two online assessments, a practice assessment and a proctored assessment, are also provided. These assessments are intended to measure communication skills from all five of the communication content areas. The practice and proctored assessments are similar in format; however, the practice assessment is considered a low stakes test and may be used for formative purposes (i.e., to guide future learning



and instructional activities) while the proctored assessment is considered a high stakes test and may be used for summative purposes (i.e., to assess the attainment of skills).

Finally, *The Communicator* contains two different learning modes: the *Communication Simulator* and the *Technique Identifier*. The former simulates communication interactions between the student and clients, their significant others, and members of the health care team. Throughout these interactions, multiple-choice items are presented with many verbal and non-verbal communication options to choose from. Communication options correspond to rationales as well as simulated responses from the particular character involved in the simulated communication. On the other hand, the *Technique Identifier* provides the student with video cases involving multiple relevant characters; assessment items that correspond to each video case require the student to identify therapeutic and non-therapeutic communication techniques witnessed in the video case.

In sum, the multi-method assessment approach to supporting and evaluating students' communication skills is fully adopted by the *Professional Communication* product line. Students are assessed within each mode of learning in regards to both knowledge-based learning as well as practice exercises that require students to apply the skills they have learned. Students have the opportunity to evaluate what they learn throughout the course of the tutorial and apply that knowledge to case studies. The practice and proctored tests provide measures of acquired skills in both a low stakes and high stakes context. Finally, *The Communicator* provides two additional opportunities to assess students' level of communication skill competency through simulated communication.

References

- Aspergren, K. (1999). BEME Guide No. 2: Teaching and learning communication skills in medicine: a review with quality grading of articles. *Medical Teacher*, 21(6), 563-570.
- Bowles, N., Mackintosh, C. & Torn, A. (2001). Nurses' communication skills: an evaluation of the impact of solution-focused communication training. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 36(3), 347-354.
- Chater, S. (1975). A conceptual framework for curriculum development. *Nursing Outlook*, 23(7), 428-433.
- Dewson, S., Eccles, J., Tackey, N.D. & Jackson, A. (2000). Guide to measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled. Retrieved from www.employment-studies.co.uk on July 19th, 2011.
- Epstein, R.M. & Hundert, E.M. (2002). Defining and assessing professional competence. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 287(2), 226-235.
- Georges, J.C. The myth of soft-skills training. Retrieved from www.jtemanagement.com on July, 19th, 2011.
- Kantrowitz, T.M. (2005). Development and construct validation of a measure of soft skills performance. *Dissertations Abstracts International*: UMI 310058.
- Makoul, G. (2001). The SEGUE framework for teaching and assessing communication skills. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 45, 23-34.
- National Council of State Boards of Nursing. (2009). 2008 RN Practice Analysis: Linking the NCLEX-RN® Examination to Practice. *NCSBN Research Brief*(36). Retrieved from https://www.ncsbn.org/2008_RN_Practice_Analysis.pdf
- National Council of State Boards of Nursing. (2010). *NCLEX-RN® Detailed Test Plan*. Retrieved from https://www.ncsbn.org/2010_NCLEX_RN_Detailed_Test_Plan_Educator.pdf.
- National Research Council. (2011). Front matter. *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. 1. Print.
- Northouse, L.L., & Northouse, P.G. (1998). *Health Communication: Strategies for Health Professionals*, 3rd Prentice Hall, Inc. A Pearson Education Company.
- Wirkus, M. (2009). What are Hiring Managers Looking for in New Nurse Graduates. AMN Healthcare. Retrieved from http://www.nursezone.com/recent-graduates/recent-graduates-featured-articles/What-are-Hiring-Managers-Looking-for-in-New-Nurse-Graduates_20152.aspx

Appendix

Reference List for Professional Communication content outline

- Antai-Otong, D. (2007) *Nurse-Client: A life Span Approach*. Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett.
- Bastable, S.B. (2006) *Essentials of Client Education*. Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett.
- Berman, A., & Snyder, S. (2012) *Kozier & Erb's Fundamentals of Nursing: Concepts, Process, and Practice*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson.
- Cherry, B. & Jacob, S.R. (2011) *Contemporary Nursing: Issues, Trends, & Management*. St. Louis: Elsevier.
- Marquis, B.L. & Huston, C.J. (2009) *Leadership Roles and Management Functions in Nursing: Theory and Application*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Williams, & Wilkins.
- Miller, M.A., & Stoeckel, P.R. (2011) *Client Education: Theory and Practice*. Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett.
- Potter, P.A., & Perry, A.G. (2009) *Fundamentals of Nursing*. St. Louis: Mosby Elsevier.
- Varcarolis, E.M, & Halter, M.J. (2010) *Foundations of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing: A Clinical Approach*. St. Louis: Saunders Elsevier.
- Whitehead, D.K., Weiss, S. A., & Tappen, R. M. (2010). *Essentials of nursing leadership and management*. (5th ed.). Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company.