

IF YOU ASSIGN IT, THEY WILL READ! OR WILL THEY?
A DESCRIPTION OF READING ACTIVITIES OF COLLEGE NURSING STUDENTS

Sue A. Beeson, Ph.D., R.N., Assistant Professor
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
School of Nursing, P.O. Box 26172, Greensboro, North Carolina 27402-6172

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to describe the reading/study activities of college nursing students when given assigned readings in nursing courses. An additional purpose was to describe the perceptions of college nursing students toward assigned readings.

Methods: The study began with a qualitative focus group of six senior nursing students who discussed their study strategies when reading assignments. Their comments were used to develop a questionnaire that was administered to eighty senior nursing students. Students were asked how much, when and why they read. Open-ended questions allowed them to respond to how they learned best from readings and to make recommendations for strategies faculty might use to facilitate student learning from reading assignments.

Findings: Most students (79%) reported that they spent no more than five hours per week reading assignments. Six said they did no reading. The primary reasons for reading were to understand what was presented in class (41%) and to make better grades (45%). Several students (22%) highlighted important points as they read. Many students (40%) skimmed assignments and some (23%) reported reading only the introductions and summaries. Only 7% took notes as they read. Most students (91%) believed that assignments were too long but stated that the difficulty level was about right. Students said that they learned more when faculty referred to the readings in class, pointed out essential areas upon which to focus and what to study for tests. They believed that they would learn more if faculty didn't assign so much and discussed which sections were important. They revealed that they were frustrated, discouraged, and overwhelmed by assigned readings, with the outcome often being very little or no reading. Students asked for more direction from faculty about how and what to read, and expressed frustration at feeling that faculty expected them to be responsible for "everything" from their readings.

Implications: The findings led to the following recommendations. Faculty should read the assignments, identify "necessary to know" material, and suggest which material might be skimmed or skipped. During class discuss some of the readings, explaining which article or section of the text is being discussed. Let students know if and from which readings test items will be taken. Share tips with students about how to read textbooks and articles such as reading headings and summaries, looking up key words, highlighting, underlining, taking notes or writing essays that require students to synthesize the readings. There is a need for more investigation into what nursing faculty expect of their students when they assign readings, how much and in what manner students read, and what strategies help them learn most effectively. Reading assignments are one of the most widely used strategies for teaching nursing students, yet almost no information is available to guide faculty in using this strategy effectively.