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Quick Answers

Q: What I Can I Do to Stimulate Creative Thinking?

A: E-mail Assignment Builds Creative and Critical Thinking

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Clinical reasoning is perhaps one of the most important skills required of the nurse. Therefore, we incorporate an E-mail Project into the curriculum to help students develop critical thinking skills while improving skills with e-mail technology.

By answering questions that require critical thinking, students increased their skill in answering application and analysis questions based on scientific principles.

Using e-mail technology in a learning exercise alerts faculty to weak areas in the students' learning, increases experience among students who were inexperienced in the use of computers and e-mail technology and gives shy or non-assertive students an active voice with faculty.

Preparatory setup

The students receive a free e-mail account from the university's learning center. Each student is responsible for notifying the nursing department's secretary of their e-mail address.

Questions created

The faculty member develops a critical thinking problem, case study, or question based on material from the present week's content.

Usually two related questions in multiple-choice format are given. The problems are relayed to the nursing department secretary who sends them to the students by Wednesday afternoon.

Students check and respond

Students check their e-mail, form a reply, and send it via e-mail to their clinical instructor by Friday at 5 p.m. To promote critical thinking, the student includes the scientific rationale supporting the correct answer and reason why the other choices were incorrect.

Faculty respond

Faculty then read and evaluate each e-mail response and provide feedback to the student. Students are given credit toward their grade for participating, but are not graded on their individual responses.

Outcomes evaluation questions

Toward the end of the term, students are given questionnaires to evaluate the project. Three statements are presented with Likert-type responses following each statement:

- The first determines the student's perception on the project's ability to increase critical thinking.
- The second inquires if the questions were challenging.
- The third questions the project's feasibility.

Additionally, two open-ended questions encourage students to comment on how the exercise could be improved.

In general, students appreciate the individual feedback given with each critical thinking question and the one-on-one contact with their clinical instructor. Students want us to continue the "E-Mail Project" into the next semester.

Unintended outcomes also significant

In addition, students became familiar with viewing and responding to questions on the computer. What's more, they became skilled answering application- and analysis-type questions in a supportive forum.

Since learners are required to give a scientific rationale supporting their answer, they are encouraged to review textbook information. In addition, having to explain why an answer was correct or incorrect prompted further critical thinking practice.

Additionally, many students consulted with classmates concerning each problem. This dialogue improved their critical thinking skills in a non-threatening manner. Overall, this was very simple but effective method of helping students improve analytical thinking skills.