

COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND TEACHING-LEARNING STRATEGIES: PERCEPTION OF NURSING STUDENTS*

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ABSTRACT: Objective: To understand the perceptions of nursing students about the teaching-learning strategies for the development of communication skills in an integrated curriculum. **Method:** qualitative-comprehensive, of case-study type, with 55 undergraduate nursing students from a public university in southern Brazil, in October 2014 and August 2015, through 6 focus groups, recorded, transcribed in full and submitted to Bardin content analysis. **Results:** The strategies used to develop the communication were theoretical classes, tutorial, seminar, written evaluation, portfolio, training, the Interdisciplinary and Multiprofessional Practices, nursing internship and feedback. **Conclusion:** The curriculum examined favored the development of communication skills through the use of active methodologies and modular structuring.

KEYWORDS: Communication; Nursing Education; Curriculum

COMPETÊNCIA EM COMUNICAÇÃO E ESTRATÉGIAS DE ENSINO-APRENDIZAGEM: PERCEÇÃO DOS ESTUDANTES DE ENFERMAGEM

RESUMO: Objetivo: compreender as percepções dos estudantes de enfermagem sobre as estratégias de ensino-aprendizagem para o desenvolvimento da competência em comunicação, em um Currículo Integrado. **Método:** estudo qualitativo-compreensivo, do tipo estudo de caso, realizado com 55 estudantes do curso de graduação em enfermagem de uma universidade pública do sul do Brasil, em outubro de 2014 e agosto de 2015, por meio de 6 grupos focais, gravados, transcritos na íntegra e submetidos à análise de conteúdo de Bardin. Os resultados foram discutidos de acordo com os pressupostos do Pensamento Complexo de Edgar Morin. **Resultados:** As estratégias que colaboraram com o desenvolvimento da comunicação foram as aulas teóricas, o tutorial, o seminário, a avaliação escrita, o portfólio, o estágio, as Práticas Interdisciplinares e Multiprofissional, o internato e o *feedback*. **Conclusão:** O currículo em estudo favoreceu o desenvolvimento da competência de comunicação por meio das metodologias ativas utilizadas e da estruturação modular.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Comunicação; Educação em enfermagem; Currículo.

COMPETENCIA EN COMUNICACIÓN Y ESTRATEGIAS DE ENSEÑANZA Y APRENDIZAJE: PERCEPCIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES DE ENFERMERÍA

RESUMEN: Objetivo: comprender las percepciones de los estudiantes de enfermería acerca de las estrategias de enseñanza y aprendizaje para el desarrollo de la competencia en comunicación, en un Currículo Integrado. **Método:** estudio cualitativo comprensivo, del tipo estudio de caso, realizado con 55 estudiantes del curso de graduación en enfermería de una universidad pública del sur de Brasil, en octubre de 2014 y agosto de 2015, por medio de 6 grupos focales, grabados, transcritos integralmente y sometidos al análisis de contenido de Bardin. Se discutieron los resultados según los presupuestos del Pensamiento Complejo de Edgar Morin. **Resultados:** Las estrategias que contribuyeron con el desarrollo de la comunicación fueron las clases teóricas, el tutorial, el seminario, la evaluación escrita, el repertorio, las prácticas, las Prácticas Interdisciplinario y Multiprofesional, el internado y el *feedback*. **Conclusión:** El currículo en estudio favoreció el desarrollo de la competencia de comunicación por medio de las metodologías activas utilizadas y de la estructuración modular.

DESCRITOPRES: Comunicación; Educación en enfermería; Currículo.

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● INTRODUCTION

The adoption of new curricular organizations and teaching-learning methodologies is providing innovative alternatives for the training of health professionals. These methodologies attempt to integrate theory and practice, teaching and care, to form critical and creative individuals, capable of transforming social reality, taking into account the new skills profiles for professionals in this area. ⁽¹⁻²⁾

The National Curricular Guidelines for Nursing advocate the development of five general skills and abilities for nurse education: decision-making, leadership, administration and management, continuing education and communication ⁽³⁾.

Communication is a key factor in nursing care, and the nurse-client communication process should seek humanization and empathy in care. Thus, communication, a basic tool, must be developed and achieved as a skill for nursing professionals. ⁽⁴⁻⁵⁾

Different alternatives should be used to stimulate the learning of these communication skills, since training in complex thought and commitment cannot be obtained with only one strategy. A strategy is the ability to explore favorable conditions in order to achieve a particular goal. Thus, professors must be true strategists, capable of selecting and applying the best tools to facilitate student learning. ⁽⁶⁾

Thus, we chose to analyze a course based on a different pedagogical proposal, the Integrated Curriculum. It seeks to innovate several aspects of the teaching-learning process, such as the relationship between teachers and students, the relationship between theory and practice, the use of active methodologies, curricular organization in modules, aimed at multiprofessional activities, interdisciplinarity and nurse training through skills. ⁽⁷⁾

The Integrated Curriculum of the Nursing undergraduate course under study is a spiral curriculum organized in a general-to-detailed and simple-to-complex manner, providing successive approaches, totaling 18 modules over four years. Twelve crosscutting themes essential for the training of nurses, including communication, were included in this curriculum. ⁽⁷⁾

In view of the aforementioned, the objective of this study was to understand the perceptions of nursing students about teaching-learning strategies for the development of communication skills in an Integrated Curriculum.

● METHODOLOGY

Qualitative-comprehensive research, of case-study type, with six focus groups, composed of 55 students of the four years of the nursing course.

The present study was conducted in a public university in southern Brazil whose nursing course has been using the Integrated Curriculum for 15 years. This curriculum addresses crosscutting themes in its teaching-learning process, including communication, with 60 annual vacancies. The course is delivered in a full time course of four years. ⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾

The curricular framework is composed of 18 modules. In the first and second years of the course, the students have an Interdisciplinary and Multiprofessional Practices (PIN) module that they attend together with medical and pharmacy students. In the fourth year, they undertake internship training in Nursing, subdivided in hospital area and collective health. ⁽⁷⁾

The students were invited to participate in the study, in their classroom, by the main researcher, who also explained its purpose to them. The date and place of the research were later confirmed by email. The following inclusion criteria were adopted: students regularly enrolled in the undergraduate nursing course who spontaneously agreed to participate in the study. Students who took the course in more than one institution were excluded.

Data was collected in October 2014 and August 2015 period. The main researcher coordinated the focus groups with the collaboration of two observers and the supervising professor.

A video entitled "Nursing - We Make a Difference!" was played to explain the subject ⁽⁹⁾. The video addresses nurses' daily routine, involving different types of communication. Subsequently, the following questions were asked: How are communication skills being developed for nursing students? Would you like to talk about communication-related experiences? How is communication assessed during the course? What difficulties do you perceive in the teaching of communication skills? Do you have any suggestions for improving the teaching of communication skills?

The focus group discussions were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and data was analyzed through content analysis proposed by Bardin, ⁽¹⁰⁾ according to the three following steps: pre-analysis, material exploration and treatment of results involving coding and inference.

During content analysis, the groups looked for topics related to teaching-learning strategies involving communication, meaningful experiences for learning, and weaknesses and suggestions in the development of communication during their training. The results were discussed according to the Complex Thought of Edgar Morin, through two operating principles: holographic and recursive.

The participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the recording of their discussions, anonymity, and, finally, signed the Free Informed Consent Form. In order to ensure the anonymity of the respondents, the focus groups were represented by letters GF followed by the series number. The letters "a" and "b" were used when there was more than one focus group in the same series. As for the students, these were identified with letter S followed by the student's number within the focus group.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the educational institution to which the main author is attached, according to Resolution 466/12, under CEP/ UEL protocol no 200/2013, on November 15, 2013.

● RESULTS

There were six focus groups with undergraduate students in nursing, sorted by their academic years, as follows: two groups for students in the first year (nine + nine); two groups with students in the second year (10+9); one group with students in the third year (11) and one group with students in the fourth year (seven), totaling 55 participants. In order to observe the methodology of focus groups research that suggests a range of six to fifteen participants, two focus groups with students in the first and second years were established due to the large number of participants interested in participating in the study.

The focus group-related meetings were held in October 2014 and August 2015, during the students' lunch break, in their teaching institution, and lasted between one and one and a half hour.

The teaching-learning strategies, described by the students of the four academic years a nursing course aimed at the development of communication skills are shown in Figure 1.

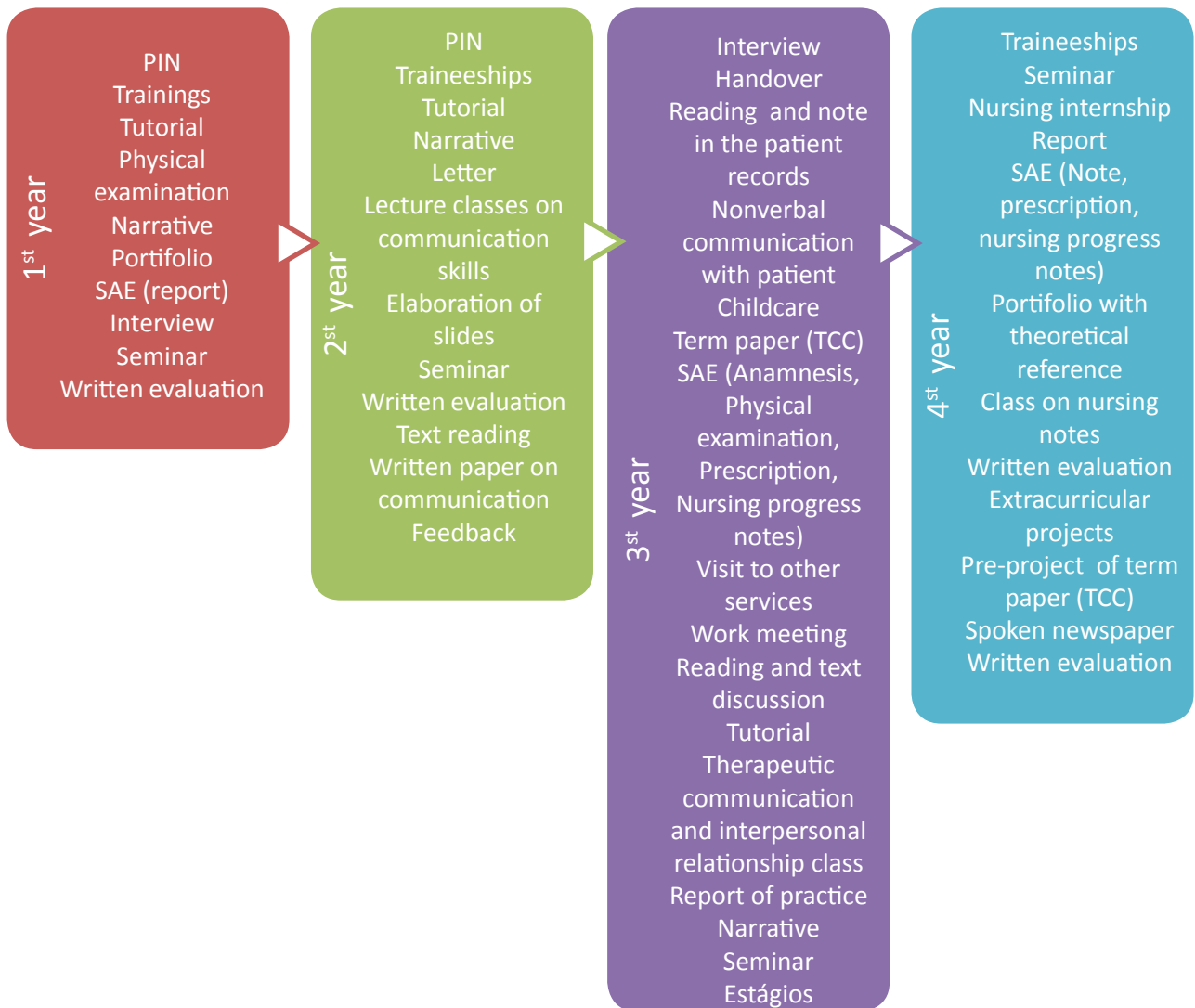


Figure 1 – Teaching-learning strategies related to communication, according to students of the four years of the Nursing course of UEL, Londrina, Brazil, 2015

The most frequently used strategies to develop communication skills were theoretical classes, tutorials, seminars, traineeships, Interdisciplinary and Multiprofessional Practices, (PIN) I and II, nursing internship, portfolios, written evaluations and feedback. According to the students, these strategies have contributed to the development of communication skills during their training.

Lecture classes

The lecture classes of therapeutic communication and interpersonal relationship, visual communication and the guidance on the subject provided by the professors at different moments were cited as the theoretical basis for the knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication.

The module that was most concerned with communication with patients was Mental Health, because we put ourselves in their shoes to understand or empathize with their views. (GF1aE10)

Regarding written communication, the participants reported the need to evaluate the writing skills of entering college students, and to include theoretical lessons of Portuguese in the curriculum to improve verbal communication.

There are many new graduates or nurses who make lots of misspellings and do not communicate properly. I think the writing skills of entering college students should be evaluated.(GF4E1)

The approach of some subjects (such as scientific work and nursing progress notes) was perceived as belated by the students in the fourth year. They suggested that these subjects should be addressed before the traineeships.

Tutorials

Tutorials seek to promote the development of critical thinking and meaningful learning, based on case studies conducted in groups of 8 to 12 students and a responsible tutor. This strategy was described as a tool that enables the development of oral communication, as students are encouraged to speak. According to the students, tutorials were more effective than lecture classes in the development of learning.

I learn more with the tutorial than by attending a class from eight to twelve, because the tutorial involves the development of writing and oral skills. (GF1aE5)

I think the tutorial helps us with our communication because we are compelled to speak. We cannot move forward if we don't improve our communication skills (GF2bE7)

Seminars

During the seminars, the students said they were evaluated for their writing, oral, posture, facial expression, tone of voice and degree of formality skills.

I think that in the second, third and fourth years we were more demanded in terms of posture, tone of voice, etc... we were aware that we were being evaluated... at first, it was very informal. Seminar] (GF4E4)

Practical traineeships

The traineeships are practical classes for the development of nursing techniques, procedures and assistance in professional areas. Although lecture classes are used in the teaching of communication skills, the students were able to develop written, oral and non-verbal communication skills during the traineeships.

We learn more from practical classes, especially communication skills: how to behave in the workplace, how to talk and address other people, the appropriate tone of voice, posture, gestures. (GF2bE3)

The nursing students reported that they are evaluated for their personal look and written communication in these traineeships. They said that they have been asked to remain calm and focused on work since the first year of the course, and in the last year of the course the professors were even more concerned with the students' written communication skills.

The students also stressed that communication skills are something they learn from an early age, and during graduation they develop this ability usually alone, since the teacher cannot be present at all times during practice.

There are three pairs of students and only one teacher in the traineeship. So she cannot be there all the time. Thus, we have to fend for ourselves regarding our communication skills. (GF1aE9)

The students reported some weaknesses in the process of communicating with patients and relatives, such as the difficulty of approaching and communicating with the patients, controlling non-verbal communication, and lack of preparedness to act in adverse situations, such as in cases of death, information on health status and health education.

Modules PIN I and II

In the PIN I and II modules the students of medical, nursing and pharmacy courses, carry out interdisciplinary activities in the basic health units, accompanied by professors from different areas. The different strategies used in these modules, such as home visits, narratives, tutorials, dramatizations, problematization, texts and synthesis, promote the development of communication skills.

The home visits promoted the development of oral communication through the interaction with patients' families, and the development of the written ability was perceived in the elaboration of narratives. The students also reported lack of guidance concerning the establishment of ties with the patients.

We were going to visit some families. A woman used to talk to us and get us coffee.. I did not want to talk to her because I felt very ashamed, but over time I had to talk to her because I had to elaborate my narrative (GF2aE2).

In my PIN there was little guidance on how to approach the patients, because we went to UBS and the professor said: we have a visit today. Please collect this information. Some patients were very open, but others did not want to talk, and the professor did not tell me what to do at that moment. (GF1aE5)

One weakness reported by the students was the existence of conflicts and the lack of integration among the students of the different PIN courses. The students suggested that the teacher should develop some integration strategies during this module in order to improve communication skills and the interpersonal relationship.

One suggestion is to prepare a lesson or another activity to demonstrate that everyone must do their part [...] perhaps a lecture, a game, a clash of realities through the PIN. (GF2aE2)

Nursing Internship

The nursing internship is the supervised internship that takes place in the last year of the course, consisting in weekly theoretical meetings on management issues, which provide an opportunity for nursing students to experience the daily challenges of professional life.

During the internship, the students in the four year of the nursing course said that they were able to relate theory to practice, develop written communication skills through nursing progress notes, and improved their oral communication skills.

In the internship our writing skills have improved a lot compared to the first year of the course because we can do the synthesis, assimilating theory and practice... and then, we quote some author and also some of our own observations related to theory and practice. We have evolved from the first year of the course till now, and we are better prepared now in the fourth year. (GF4E5)

Written evaluations and Portfolios

The written tests and the portfolio, also known as thematic folder, were perceived as evaluation methods. Regarding the written evaluations, the students reported lack of clarity about the objectives sought, lack of activities containing examples before the test, and the requirements of each professor.

We've just done a test on Mental Health, and guess what... we were asked to give an example of a nursing progress note. It was very hard for us to provide an example of a nursing progress note without guidelines, or models, you know? (GF3E4)

We must find out what the professor wants us do, know her personality traits, in order to satisfactorily answer the question. (GF2bE2)

We communicate through portfolios [...] And the professors focus on formal writing, with proper use of grammar. Your written communication must not be lazy regarding the use of grammar. It's not like sending an email to a friend. So, the professors are more demanding in this regard.

Feedback

The feedback from the professors were an evaluation strategy that helped students develop verbal and non-verbal communication skills. However, according to the students, not all the professors use this feature.

The professors give feedback to us: "You have to use a more formal language, you have to talk more to one another." Then, in the module, we learn more about practice, especially regarding communication skills, because we also we need the feedback from the professor. Some professors are more likely to give feedback than others. (GF2bE7)

● DISCUSSION

In view of the aforementioned, it can be affirmed that the results were discussed according to two operating principles: holographic and recursive. The holographic principle reinforces the interaction between the whole and the parts, advocating the idea that not only the parts are in the whole, but also the whole is in the parts. (11-12)

Therefore, in this study the whole can be represented by the communication skills to be achieved during the nurses' training, and the parts are represented by the different teaching-learning strategies proposed and developed in the Integrated Curriculum.

Given all the different strategies mentioned, we can infer that communication directly and/or indirectly pervades the teaching-learning strategies developed in the nursing course examined in this study. In other words, communication skills are being taught and stimulated in all its parts, contributing to the development of the whole.

Based on the holographic principle, it is known that the sum of the parts can be different from the whole, since the whole can be greater or smaller than the sum of the parts. ⁽¹³⁾ Thus, each strategy is experienced and perceived differently by each student, reflecting the singular and subjective development of the communication skill as a whole.

The recursive principle relates the cause and effect of an event, since the products and effects, seen from other angles, can be causes and producers. In this way, the teaching and learning of communication have this recursion, in which professors and students interact and act sometimes as cause, sometimes as effect. ⁽¹⁴⁾ Thus, we can observe that students' perceptions and suggestions contribute to the improvement of the teaching-learning process in the development of communication skills.

We can see that the students still face a dilemma with regard to active and passive teaching methodologies, because while they highlight the importance of lecture classes in the development of communication skills, they also report that they are sometimes insufficient. If we analyze this dilemma from the holographic point of view ⁽¹³⁾, we can understand that both lecture classes and active methodologies are the parts of the teaching-learning process, which together result in the development of students' communication skills.

Another aspect that deserves consideration is the request of the inclusion of a discipline of Portuguese language in the curriculum, since written communication to document nursing actions is one of the nursing tools. ⁽¹⁵⁾ However, the integrated modular organization does not contemplate isolated disciplines but rather integrated, continuous and gradual contents. Thus, learning and using the Portuguese language correctly is a part that integrates the whole communication skill.

It should be stressed that in the tutorials, professors and students should interact in a more comprehensive and recursive way ⁽¹⁴⁾, and it is necessary to speak and listen, to perceive and to analyze, in order to promote a space of shared creation of the learning. A study with nursing students about teamwork emphasized the importance of communication during the tutorials, emphasizing learning to listen, to speak and respecting the others' opinions. ⁽¹⁶⁾

The portfolio was perceived as productive in the development of the written communication skill. In another study also carried out with students of an Integrated Curriculum, the portfolio assisted the students in the construction of their own knowledge, through meaningful learning, relating theory to practice, theorizing their actions, associating their previous experiences with those acquired.⁽¹⁷⁾

We can infer that the portfolio construction uses the holographic principle ⁽¹³⁾ by adding different parts of knowledge, sources and experiences, in order to build knowledge as a whole. The relationship between theory and practice in this context is also perceived, since these parts add up and integrate the construction of a more consistent knowledge.

It should be noted that the students developed communication skills in a more autonomous way during their practices, since communication occurs through the encounter or reunion between people, and practice allows student and teacher interaction, identifying the weaknesses to be improved with regard to communication skills^(14,18). During the practices, recursive organization ⁽¹⁴⁾ is perceived in the communication process, since the students interact with the professor, patients, health professionals and other students, perceiving in themselves and in others, the weaknesses in their communication skills that must be improved.

Challenging situations involving communication are part of the daily routine of nurses. One study indicates that 91.6% of health professionals were not prepared to deal with adverse situations such as the news of death during their academic training.⁽¹⁹⁾

Control over non-verbal communication was another difficulty faced during the stages, as students encountered delicate situations that required the ability to make their non-verbal expressions aware. Non-verbal communication involves the expression of feelings and brings quality to the human relationship, allowing comprehension that goes beyond words, ⁽⁵⁾ representing 80% of non-verbal signals.⁽²⁰⁾

According to the authors, the feedback provided by the professors on the development of the verbal and non-verbal communication of the students makes it possible for them to make a self-evaluation of their interactions..⁽²¹⁾

The recursive principle must be present in the relationship between professors and students, to improve the teaching-learning process, especially in the development of communication skills. The student and the professor should have only one goal: to acquire and build knowledge, which requires interest, motivation, persistence and efforts on both sides.⁽²²⁾

The aforementioned teaching-learning strategies allowed the development of communication skills. However, according to the holographic principle ⁽¹⁴⁾, students may have achieved non-identical results, since communication is not a real equation or object, but a subjective and non-quantifiable skill.

The recursive principle ⁽¹⁴⁾ is present in communication because we are at the same time sender and receiver of a message that is produced and consumed at the same time. Thus, communication is recursive, as it involves exchange and reciprocity.

Both the holographic and recursive principles were present at different moments in the development of the communication skills, and a relationship could be established between them. These principles are also part of a whole, and this whole is complex thought. The complex thought does not mean the possession or achievement of whole knowledge, but rather the integrated knowledge.⁽¹³⁻¹⁴⁾

The development of communication skills during nurses' training does not comprise the achievement of thorough knowledge on communication, but rather a starting point to be developed and improved in the communication processes and in peer relationships. It is a lifelong learning process.

Understanding the perceptions of nursing professors on communication skills and devising ways to implement transversal themes according to different curricular proposals, as well as addressing the topic in other healthcare courses is also necessary, and these are the limitations of the present study. Reflecting on the importance of communication for the training and work of health professionals remains a great challenge that should be addressed in future studies.

● CONCLUSION

In view of the aforementioned, it was found that the teaching-learning process of the transversal theme 'communication perceived by students in the Integrated Curriculum investigated' is being conducted in a transversal way, through active strategies and methodologies. Given the importance of recursion, the suggestions for improving communication skills provided by the nursing students deserve consideration.

Analyzing the results of the study according to Morin's operating principles gave us insight into the complexity of the development of communication skills, according to which each individual experiences communication strategies in a unique way. Considering communication as part of human life, since it is part of constantly growing knowledge acquired after birth, providing circumstances that favor the development of communication skills in their students is a challenge for higher education institutions.

We hope this study will contribute to improve the development of communication skills during the training of nurses, with the use of the Integrated Curriculum examined, as well as to stimulate other nursing educational institutions to reflect on this theme.

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