

Comparing their reasoning patterns, more than half of the college students adopted forward chaining strategies (vertical), i.e. data-driven. They used open-ended exploration of data, to arrive at conclusions. In contrast, students from hospital-based training school adopted more backward chaining (horizontal) strategies for decision-making. They formulated hypotheses and tested them by collecting data. Thus, a hypothesis-driven strategy was employed. When using hypothesis-driven strategies, the clinical decision was always context-dependent.

The graduation credit requirement was higher in the nursing programme conducted by the college than in the hospital-based training school. Thus, in the former, the students' workload was perceived as heavy. Time pressures and, stress from assignments may influence which learning approach a student develops. In cases of extreme pressure, students will attempt to cope by adopting a surface approach to learning.

Findings of this study have highlighted the variations in decision strategies among students in different learning environment. In particular, the use of patient simulation is useful in teaching and learning activities. Hospitals cannot afford to have students practicing on patients without adequate training and preparation beforehand. More importantly, the use of patient simulation can provide a safe environment for students to acquire the necessary clinical competency and allow them unlimited practice. With these different approaches, students are encouraged to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, and are allowed to practice their diagnostic thinking in a controlled environment. This is important in preparing nursing students to be competent practitioners. Area for further work include investigate the association between the types of scenario and diagnostic thinking process.

5. Conclusion

Diagnosing is a critical element in nursing training. Stage of learning is a key determinant of diagnostic reasoning process. This study is likely to distinguish the difference from two learning environments in terms of study approach among nursing students. To this end, it can be suggested a variety of methods of teaching so as to revisit the current nursing education in Hong Kong.

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