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Answering Student Questions during Examinations: A Descriptive Study of Faculty Beliefs

Outcomes of examinations have serious implications for students. Thus, implementing evidence-based test administration practices is critical. Conversations with faculty peers revealed a variety of beliefs and practices including permitting students to ask questions during test-taking, answering questions on a case-by-case basis, and not permitting students to ask questions. A review of the literature offered little empirical evidence on testing practices and, specifically, no evidence on how to respond to students who ask questions during an exam. This study describes nurse educator beliefs about answering individual student questions while administering an examination.

According to Twigg (2012), tests are used to measure learning outcomes and provide faculty with information to make grading decisions. Additionally, exam scores may be used to compare aggregate student performance against standardized norm-referenced tests to evaluate curricular effectiveness (Waugh & Gronlund, 2013). Finally, exams may help determine the effectiveness of teaching strategies (Bain, 2004). Because examination outcomes have serious implications for both the students and the program of study, it is essential to enforce testing practices that produce valid assessments of individual student knowledge.

An exhaustive literature review was conducted using ERIC, CINAHL, EBSCOhost, MEDLINEplus, and GoogleScholar. Key words used in the literature review included: *test, administration, student questions, asking questions, testing practices, disruption, assessment, proctor, nurse, education, belief, perception, and exam policies*. Despite this exhaustive review, no empirical research was located to guide best practices for test administration or responding to individual student questions during testing. This topic has not previously been published in either nursing education or higher education literature.

The literature provided expert opinions about test administration practices. For example, Twigg (2012) stated, “To reduce student anxiety, the faculty should...avoid unnecessary conversation before or during the test. Faculty should avoid giving unintentional hints to individual students who ask for clarification of questions during the test” (p. 477). According to Zimmerman, Sudweeks, Shelley, and Wood (1990), faculty should not “provide unfair help to individual students who ask questions during the exam. Only provide information relating to the administration of the exam, not to the content of the test items” (p. 8). And finally, Waugh and Gronlund (2013) stated, “The administration of a carefully prepared achievement test is largely a matter of providing proper working conditions, keeping interruptions to a minimum, and arranging enough space between students to prevent cheating” (p. 84). Common themes among these sources suggest that faculty should incorporate exam administration strategies that reduce anxiety, minimize interruptions and avoid giving hints when providing clarification to students who ask questions.

Method

This study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Institutional review board approval was obtained from the authors’ academic institution. Consent was implied when participants completed and submitted the SurveyMonkey™ survey.

Participants were identified from publicly available school of nursing web pages. Nursing faculty email addresses (n=548) were obtained from 27 Commission of Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) accredited nursing schools representing 20 of the 50 states in the United States. Ninety-two individuals responded to the online survey (16.7%); 27 did not meet the inclusion criteria screening question: “Please indicate if you currently teach a didactic course in an undergraduate nursing program that requires quizzes, tests or examinations”, resulting in a

final sample size of 65 (11.8%) nurse educators.

A researcher-developed survey, informed by recommendations from the literature and anecdotal faculty comments, was created. The survey underwent critical review by a panel of six didactic nurse educators from the researchers' university. Two revision recommendations were incorporated, and content validity was assured following a second critical review by the same panel. The instrument was composed of two general questions about test administration policies, nine Likert-scale questions measuring faculty beliefs about nursing students asking questions during examinations, and five narrative response questions. Likert-scale questions were scored using a 7-point range from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), and included reverse order questions to limit response bias. The survey instrument was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha=.87$).

Results

The final sample size was 65 (11.8%) nurse educators who were teaching didactic undergraduate courses. Majority of participants were white (89.2%) females (86.2%) with ages ranging from 33-76 ($x=55$ [SD 8.81]) who were working full-time (89.2%) in public universities (50.8%) and primarily Master's prepared (41.5%). Participants' teaching experiences varied between 1 to 40 years ($x=16$ years [SD 10.98]). Fifty-seven (87.7 %) reported their school of nursing did not have a policy regarding answering student questions during an exam.

Survey results are presented in Table 1. Overall feelings about allowing students to ask questions during tests were found to be generally negative (55.2%), generally positive (39.7%), and neutral (5.2%). These calculations were generated by computing the mean of a respondent's ratings across the survey items, and comparing this mean to the original 7-point scale of agreement. Participants also reported a wide array of personal perspectives about answering questions during an exam, including not answering any questions, only

answering clarifying questions, instructing students to write their questions on the exam, asking students to raise their hands to ask a question, and instructing students to walk to the front of the room and quietly ask the question. Participants (20%) who reported having a personal course policy about asking questions during an exam described a variety of strategies for communicating the policy, e.g., communication before exams or during course orientation, in the student handbook, or in the syllabus.

In response to the question, “why do you think some faculty members allow students to ask questions during a quiz, test or examination?”, the most prevalent text data revealed the following reasons: (a) clarify the definitions of words; (b) to answer unclear questions; (c) provide definitions of English words to English language learners (ELLs); (d) to appear responsive to student needs; (e) to be perceived as being nice or helpful; (f) because of insecurities about the quality of test items.

Two common themes emerged from the narrative text data among faculty who reported they do not answer questions during exams. First, participants reported that answering questions for some students creates an “unfair” testing environment. One participant observed, “Letting students ask questions during an exam introduces too many uncontrollable variables.” And according to another participant, “It is difficult to answer questions without giving unfair hints.”

The second theme centered on maintaining a testing environment free of noise and distractions. A participant stated, “I feel answering questions during exams is very disruptive.” Another participant reported, “This [question asking] may be disruptive to the rest of the class who are taking the quiz.” Participants also spoke about the inability to effectively monitor the testing environment when they are distracted by an individual student who is asking a question. “Because of the disruption, it does not support the student’s ability to master exam taking and it

takes away from the ability to proctor an exam.” This finding was similar to that found in the quantitative findings. Specifically, faculty agreed the ability to effectively monitor the test environment is disrupted when students ask questions during an examination (M= 4.88[1.67]).

Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations

Findings from this study present the multifarious beliefs nurse educators have about answering student questions during exams. Nurse educators tended not to favor the practice of permitting students to ask questions during exams; yet, allowing students to ask questions during testing was identified as a common practice (4.61 [1.38]). Collectively, quantitative and qualitative findings revealed beliefs corresponding with expert opinions in the literature; e.g., responding to individual student questions causes disruption in the testing environment, hinders the ability to effectively monitor the test environment (4.88 [1.67]), and could provide students with hints (4.73 [1.41]). New findings also emerged from this study. Faculty were undecided about the fairness to all students when faculty answer an individual student’s question (3.88 [1.80]), and about whether answering a student’s question provides him or her with an unfair advantage (3.85 [1.73]). The highest level of agreement came with beliefs that exams evaluate a student’s ability to independently select the best answer (5.71 [1.46]) and a belief that tests provide a reliable method to evaluate student learning (5.21 [1.24]).

The variation in faculty beliefs may be due to the lack of empirical evidence about test administration practices, thus contributing to an educational environment based on tradition, personal preferences, and trial and error. Faculty diverse practices and beliefs suggest nurse educators are struggling with the issue of how to manage individual student questions during exams. Divergent beliefs about answering student questions and without evidence to guide this practice, it appears likely that these opposing views will continue. Two important limitations to this study include a low response rate and self-report; thus, causal inferences cannot be made. A number of factors could have affected our

response rate. Faculty receive multiple emails, of which some are requests to participate in research, and faculty just do not have the time to respond to all the requests. In fact, some respondents asked us to remove their emails from our list. There was a single emailing of the invitation. Perhaps reminders to the invitees would have resulted in an increase in the response rate. Some faculty may not perceive the salience of the topic, thus not respond. Incentives may have increased the response rate, however, we did not offer any incentives to complete the survey.

Based on the findings from this study, nurse educators should individually and collectively reflect on test administration practices, ultimately dialoging with peers and creating consensus among all faculty to implement an agency specific test administration guideline. The guideline should explicitly state that individual student questions will not be answered during a test, however, students will have an opportunity to write comments about test questions on a *question query* form. The *question query* form is attached as the last page of the test or examination booklet. The guideline should be communicated via course syllabi, appropriate handbooks (student and faculty), and in the classroom to ensure consistent application across the curriculum. An additional recommendation is to establish a peer review panel of colleagues who will review exams for content, formatting, syntax, and spelling. Faculty should also conduct readability analyses to avoid colloquialisms, idioms, and cultural phrases that may be unfamiliar to ELL students (McDonald, 2014).

This study describes faculty beliefs, however, what remains unknown is student beliefs about question asking during examinations, thus, a follow up research study should be conducted to explore student beliefs. Additionally, one participant stated, “faculty know how to answer

questions appropriately and fairly” while other participants reported struggling with answering questions. A qualitative study should be conducted to explore these opposing faculty beliefs.

This study highlights the divergent test administration practices of nurse educators and the variables nurse educators should consider when establishing test administration policies. Findings from this study revealed that the majority of participants (87.7%) have no policy about answering questions during examinations. This study provides nurse educators with evidence upon which to discern current practices and strive for standardized test administration practices that is applicable within their educational environment.

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Table 1.
Beliefs about Answering Student Questions during Tests or Exams

| General questions | n (%) |
|--|--|
| 1. Does your school of nursing have a policy regarding students asking questions during a quiz, test, or exam? | Yes- 7 (10.8 %) No- 57 (87.7 %) No response- 1(1.5 %) |
| 2. Do you have a personal course policy regarding answering student questions during a quiz, test, or exam? | Yes – 13 (20 %) No - 29 (44.6 %) No response–23(35.4%) |
| Likert Survey Items: Scale: 1= <i>strongly disagree</i> to 7 = <i>strongly agree</i> | Mean (SD) |
| 1. Quizzes, tests, or examinations evaluate a student's ability to think through test questions and <i>independently</i> select the best choice or answer. | 5.71 (1.46) |
| 2. Answering student questions during a quiz, test, or exam inhibits a student's ability to learn test-taking strategies. | 3.43 (1.80) |
| 3. Answering individual student questions during a quiz, test, or exam is fair to all students taking the quiz, test, or exam. | 3.88 (1.80) |
| 4. The test-taking environment is NOT disrupted when individual students ask questions during a quiz, test, or exam. | 3.00 (1.77) |
| 5. Quizzes, tests, or exams provide a valid and reliable method for evaluating student learning. | 5.21 (1.24) |
| 6. Students who ask questions during a quiz, test, or exam are NOT given an advantage over students who do not ask questions. | 3.85 (1.73) |
| 7. Students who ask questions during a quiz, test or exam are looking for hints to help them answer the question. | 4.73 (1.41) |
| 8. The ability to effectively monitor the test environment is disrupted when students ask questions during a quiz, test, or exam. | 4.88 (1.67) |
| 9. It is common practice for faculty members in my school of nursing to allow students to ask questions during a quiz, test, or exam. | 4.61 (1.38) |