

# Student Perceptions of Skill Acquisition in a Process Education Learning to Learn Camp

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## Abstract

*High attrition rates in schools of nursing decrease nurses in the workforce. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived effectiveness of skills obtained during the Learning to Learn Camp and the student's ability to achieve academic, professional, and personal goals and complete the nursing program of study. The investigator selected a diverse sample of participants who completed the Learning to Learn Camp and returned to the program of study. Data were collected from interviews until data saturation and analyzed via content analysis. Many themes emerged and overlapped with the major themes being time management, self-assessment, faculty and peer support, and organizational skills. Results of the study indicated that skills obtained are effective in empowering students to be independent, self-directed learners. Considering participants' perceptions, a contextualized Learning to Learn Camp designed to facilitate nursing student growth is an effective strategy for empowering students to become self-learners.*

## Background

Attrition rates are as high as 47 percent in associate degree nursing programs (Harris, Rosenberg, & O'Rourke, 2014). When schools of nurses are unable to produce graduates, who are eligible to take the licensure exam, the result is a decrease of nurses in the workforce. The decrease of nurses is likely to negatively affect the quality of nursing care. Therefore, schools of nursing are obligated to explore reasons for high attrition rates, alleviate barriers to program completion, and increase student success.

An essential approach to alleviating barriers to completion of nursing school begins with determining at-risk students. Nontraditional students, students with language barriers, ethnically diverse students, and students from various demographic areas are at-risk for attrition. Students who have lower grade point averages in prerequisite courses, lower American College Testing (ACT) scores, and poor grades in initial nursing courses are at high risk for failure (Harris et al., 2014). Other factors placing students at risk include student's feelings of isolation, cultural differences, precollege academic disadvantages, and lack of faculty support (McKendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014).

Schools of nursing have implemented many strategies to reduce and prevent attrition to increase student success. Some of those strategies include faculty and peer mentoring, financial support, and early recognition and intervention for those students who have been unsuccessful on an exam, however many programs continue to have high attrition (McKendry et al. 2014). The school of nursing in this study has instituted a Learning to Learn Recovery Camp (the Camp) to aid in the retention of nursing students. Although Learning to Learn Camps exist, there is

no research regarding a contextualized Learning to Learn Recovery Camp for nursing students.

Meeting program completion rate requirements of the accreditation bodies increases the need for student retention and graduation rates, ultimately contributing to decreasing the nursing shortage. Strategies employed for student retention have been well documented in the literature. The success of the Learning to Learn Camp is that the Camp utilizes multiple strategies for retention in a one-week conceptualized Camp. Therefore, employing the strategies of the Learning to Learn Camp in schools of nursing should increase student retention.

The Learning to Learn Camp is an intense five-day experience that challenges students to grow and develop skills that are essential to college and life. The Camp integrates learning how to learn and mentoring (Beyerlein, Holmes, & Apple, 2007). Participants of the Camp examined in this research are nursing students who have been unsuccessful in their program of study in two semesters and are required to attend and graduate from the Camp as one last chance to return to and complete their program of study. Before the Camp was established, after two course failures in either of the nursing program options, students were not allowed to return to the program of study where the failure occurred. The Camp is the only Contextualized Learning to Learn Recovery Camp for nursing students in the world. Therefore, there was an interest in the students' perception of the effectiveness of the skills acquired in the camp. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived effectiveness of skills obtained in a structured Process Education experience (Learning to Learn Camp) and the student's ability to achieve academic, professional, and personal goals as well as complete the nursing program of study.

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As a facilitator in the Camp, the researcher was aware of the transformation and successes of the students who successfully completed the Camp. The questions that remained unanswered were the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of implementing the skills acquired in the Camp and if the acquired skills were effective with achieving their academic, professional, and personal goals. Also, the researcher investigated the perception of participants regarding academic goal achievements, professional goal achievements, and personal goal achievements after completion of the Camp. Additionally, the researcher explored the perceptions of the participants of the Camp regarding the recognition of personal areas of needed improvement (weaknesses) and how they improved in those areas.

## Literature Review

The review of literature included the theoretical support of Process Education/process learning, models of student retention, at-risk students, and student retention strategies. Considering the students attending community colleges, understanding the learning needs of nontraditional students is imperative (Chen, 2014). Chen states that adult learners are self-directed, and learning is enhanced when the learners' prior life experiences are recognized and utilized in the learning process. Incorporating the adult learning theories and strategies is essential for facilitating adult learners and retaining students (Jeffreys, 2015). Many of the participants of the Camp were non-traditional students who felt the need to work to help support themselves.

Tinto's (1977) model for retaining students includes ensuring student engagement and involvement in college activities. Therefore, a strategy to retain students is ensuring peer and faculty support because the indication was that academics alone were not the cause of student attrition, but socioeconomic and psychosocial factors also impact student success (Harris et al., 2014). Participants' demographics were congruent with Tinto's reason for lack of student success. Very few nursing students participate in extracurricular college activities. Frequently, participants lacked family support and stated they did not feel they had faculty and peer support. A key strategy of the Camp is Coach and Facilitator support. Coaches and Facilitators are faculty and staff volunteers who participate to support the students.

Other strategies for student success in nursing school include early recognition of at-risk students, early intervention, mentoring, faculty involvement, and tutoring. Some barriers of disadvantaged or at-risk students are poor academic preparation, ineffective study skills, and poor mastery of the English language (Igbo et al., 2011). The literature supported early recognition and intervention of at-risk

nursing students to increase student success. Students are required to have a C in their anatomy and physiology class and other prerequisites. Many of the students who have the grade of C are at a disadvantage when they start the nursing courses. Students meet admission requirements but have not had to develop study skills when in secondary school or while taking prerequisites are ill prepared when taking nursing courses.

Another key component of the Camp is facilitating self-directed learning and students taking responsibility for their learning. Knowles (1983) defined self-directed learning as learners taking the initiative in identifying their learning needs, formulating learning objectives, finding resources to meet objectives, carrying out the plan, and evaluating whether the objectives are met (Hatcher, 1997). Processes to becoming self-directed learners include motivation to learn something new and to acquire additional skills and knowledge (Hatcher, 1997). Camp participants are given a syllabus with assignments, requirements, and expectations prior to the beginning of the camp. Failure to meet the requirements results in dismissal from the Camp and the opportunity to return to the course of study.

## Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Many participants of the Camp have lost belief in their ability to be successful as a nursing student and ultimately as a nurse. Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy and Shelton's Model of Student Retention (2012) were used as conceptual frameworks for guiding this study (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 1996; Shelton, 2012). Bandura's theory identifies perceived self-efficacy as the belief in what a person is capable of doing and organizing and executing the courses of action needed to produce given attainments (Dapremont, 2013).

Shelton's Model (2012) defines student retention as choosing to continue in a nursing program and meeting the necessary academic standards to continue in a nursing program. Additionally, the model includes internal psychological processes and the effect these processes have on student success (Shelton, 2003). After completion of the Camp participants state a belief in themselves and more than 50 percent go on to finish their course of study and pass the licensure exam. These results are congruent with the theorists.

The design of the study was descriptive qualitative with qualified applicants from the associate degree nursing program or practical nursing program from a community college in one southern state to explore the perceptions of Learning to Learn Recovery Camp participants. Qualitative research is beneficial in exploring and understanding the way individuals or groups ascribe meaning to a social

or human problem (Creswell, 2014). Investigators conduct studies to inquire about unknown realities and viewpoints of participants (Polit & Beck, 2012). Additionally, qualitative studies are appropriate when there is little research conducted on the subject or the subject is new (Creswell, 2014). The researcher sought to understand the way the participants ascribed meaning to the experience of attending and completing the Camp and their perception of the benefit of the experience (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, a Learning to Learn Recovery Camp has not been implemented as a retention strategy in other schools of nursing. Therefore, a qualitative study was an appropriate research design for the current study (Creswell, 2014).

Identified strengths of the qualitative research design include the ability for the data obtained to provide depth and detail while looking deeper into attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Using open-ended questions and content analysis, objective descriptions offered validity checks about the beliefs, knowledge, and practices of the participants (Lakshman, Sinha, Biswas, Charles, & Arora, 2000). The openness of the research method encouraged participants to expand responses and lead to new and additional areas that could be studied (Lakshman et al., 2000).

Although the qualitative method is a valid research design that provides rich data regarding a person's attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, avoiding or completely controlling investigator bias is a major concern (Lakshman et al., 2000). To minimize the potential bias of the study the investigator included clearly formulated questions that were stated prior to the study. Another concern of the research design was that the design may be time-consuming because data collection continues until data saturation is achieved. Data saturation means that data collection continues until gathering data no longer reveals new insights (Creswell, 2014).

## Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

A demographic survey was used to collect participants' background information and characteristics (see Appendix A). Additionally, an investigator-developed 10-question scripted interview questionnaire with open-ended questions to collect participant data (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was based on the research questions which explored the perceptions of the students regarding their needed areas of improvement and how the Camp impacted overcoming those weaknesses. Data were collected until data saturation and themes emerged (Polit & Beck, 2012). Additionally, the questions focused on the perception of the participants' achievement of their academic, professional, and personal goals. Answers to interview questions were recorded via digital audio and memos for accuracy of data.

The sampling strategy was a single stage design with a convenience sample of nine participants who completed the

Camp. Seven participants were successful after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp (graduated from program of study or currently in program of study). Two participants were not successful after returning to the nursing program of study and are enrolled in another nursing program of study. The sampling was a single stage design because the investigator had access to the participants' contact information and could sample the participants directly (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the sample was a convenience sample because participants of the study were accessible and responded to emails or phone calls (Polit & Beck, 2012). The participants who were included in the sample were those who were willing and able to provide the information needed to answer the research questions. Participants were recruited from students who were unsuccessful in two courses in the nursing program of study. They were informed that participation was voluntary, and they could stop participating at any time. Additionally, participants were notified there was no financial compensation for participating in the study. Participants participated in the Learning to Learn Camp to meet requirements to return to the program of study.

Sampling continued until data saturation occurred with a sample size of nine participants. Data saturation occurred when the same themes recurred and there were no new insights (Polit & Beck, 2012). The sample size was small and it did not include any students from the practical nursing program, thus it may not be representative of the population of all Camp participants.

The investigator used a scripted interview tool to answer the research questions which included having participants describe the skills they acquired during the Camp (time management, organization, self-assessments, methodologies, etc.). Participants were asked to share which skills they used when they returned to their program of study and which skills were most and least effective and why they considered those skills most and least effective? Additionally, participants were asked which skills they have continued to use after graduating and achieving their personal, academic, and professional goals. The one theme that defines the core of nursing as caring comes from the question that asked participants if there was one thing or experience about the camp that made a difference in their lives, what would it be. As presented in the next section, the students overwhelmingly said that it was the love and caring from faculty and peers. Research questions, findings, and examples help to express the perceptions of the participants.

## Analysis

The interview data were analyzed by content analysis using open coding, categorizing, and connecting strategies (Polit & Beck, 2012). Content analysis is a process of organizing

narrative data from a qualitative study according to themes and key concepts (Polit & Beck, 2012). There findings are presented as answers to five key questions that this research was seeking to answer:

1. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp of the effectiveness of implementing the skills acquired in the Learning to Learn Camp?
2. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding the recognition of personal areas of needed improvement (weaknesses) and how have the participants improved in those areas?
3. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding academic goal achievements after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?
4. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding professional goal achievements after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?
5. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding personal goal achievements after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?

Certain themes emerged from all participants' answers to these questions that describe the skills acquired in the Learning to Learn Camp. Three themes for recognizing

personal areas of improvement (weaknesses), four themes emerged regarding academic goal achievements, three themes emerged regarding professional goal achievements, and two themes emerged regarding personal goal achievements. Thematic results were explained and excerpts from selected participant interviews are included to provide rich description and substantiate themes. These themes are delineated in Table 1.

These results can be compared with the existing body of literature on student retention and attrition and the causes (Igbo et al., 2011). This study confirms and strengthens the evidence base by looking at the students who have been unsuccessful and the reasons given for the failures and eventual success with a nursing program of study (Jeffreys, 2015). The themes presented in Table 1 overlapped between the five research questions as the factors for being unsuccessful and the similar skills acquired in the Camp shaped perceptions of the participants. When interviewing the participants, many of them expressed the same concerns and experiences. As addressed in the research questions, findings, and examples, the overwhelming themes were (a) time and self-management, (b) organization, (c) self-assessment, (d) test-taking, and (e) faculty and peer support (Jeffreys, 2015; Dapremont, 2013). Students' responses validating these skills as the major themes in the areas of Academic, Professional and Personal areas are presented in Table 2.

**Table 1** Themes Emerging from Data by Research Question

Research Questions	Themes
1. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp of the effectiveness of implementing the skills acquired in the Learning to Learn Camp?	Time Management Reading Methodology, Organization Preparing for Class Self-Assessment Test-Taking
2. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding the recognition of personal areas of needed improvement (weaknesses) and how have the participants improved in those areas?	Organization/Time Management Unpreparedness Self-Confidence/Personal Issues
3. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding academic goal achievements after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?	Time Management/ Organizational Skills Self-Assessment Perseverance Faculty And Peer Support
4. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding professional goal achievements after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?	Time Management/Prioritization Self-Esteem/Self-Confidence Math Skills
5. What is the perception of participants of the Learning to Learn Camp regarding personal goal achievements after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?	Self-Assessment Self-Management

**Table 2** Examples of Acquired Skills with Participant Responses

Skills Time and Self-Management	
<b>Academic</b>	<p><i>Participant J1:</i> “Had to learn time management during the camp with the assignments while in the camp. Either could be up all night or figure out how to do the work without staying up all night-use time wisely.”</p> <p><i>Participant T6:</i> “For one, time management. Something I thought I was really good at. That week was so pressed for time. I get everything done but working ahead really helped me.”</p> <p><i>Participant A8:</i> “I learned how to read material and actually pull what I needed to know from the material and not focus on the less important things.”</p>
<b>Professional</b>	<p><i>Participant D7:</i> “I’m doing good with my time management, I was able to use it at work.”</p> <p><i>Participant D7:</i> “Time management and organization are like together. At work. I found a method at work to divide my patients.”</p>
<b>Personal</b>	<p><i>Participant C2:</i> “I use time management in everyday life and in my personal life. Time management, I included my family in the time. I learned to give my husband time with an entire day.”</p>

Skills Organization	
<b>Academic</b>	<p><i>Participant E5:</i> “Scheduling, my notebook organized where I can get to my notes and stuff like that, didn’t realize how vital it is to be organized.”</p> <p><i>Participant K3:</i> “Prioritize what I need to be studying. Those subjects that I know more about, I do not study as much as those that I don’t know as much about. Secondary or tertiary to what I need to be studying.”</p> <p><i>Participant A4:</i> “Now I make a schedule to study. I did not do that at all before. Ok, I feel like studying now and I would just study for 30 minutes and be done for the day. Now, I have set hours when I come home to study. Different ways to help me understand what I’m reading. Before I would have to read the pages over and over. Now I read it and if I don’t understand it, I’ll write questions from what I was reading before class and I go to the teachers after class and ask them, before I didn’t do that. I didn’t ask enough questions. Improved on that.”</p>
<b>Professional</b>	<p><i>Participant K3:</i> “In my 1<sup>st</sup> two semesters, well actually first three semesters until Learning to Learn I did not grasp the concept of priority, now I almost use that word every day.”</p> <p><i>Participant D7:</i> “Time management and organization are like together. At work. I found a method at work to divide my patients.”</p>
<b>Personal</b>	<p><i>Participant E5:</i> “For me it was the organizational skills. I came in. I knew that it didn’t help but didn’t realize how vital it is to be organized. Information before hand, in between, and after.”</p>

Skills Self-Assessment	
<b>Academic</b>	<p><i>Participant C2:</i> “I was not adequately preparing for class. I do self-assessments every day and throughout the day.”</p> <p><i>Participant T6:</i> “Self-assessment in 4<sup>th</sup> semester, trying to figure out where I need to go. To reevaluate things. More of regrouping.”</p> <p><i>Participant J1:</i> “Self-assessment helped because we didn’t really look at what we were doing wrong. You don’t really pick up on things you don’t do. Let me know I had not been doing things like I should. I did not spend the kind of time that was needed for classwork.”</p>
<b>Professional</b>	<p><i>Participant C2:</i> “I do self-assessments every day and throughout the day. The camp helped so much that I use it so much naturally that I don’t realize that I’m doing it.”</p>
<b>Personal</b>	<p><i>Participant K9:</i> “On an emotional level, it taught me that I held onto a lot of personal stuff that I had going on with my family, more specifically my dad and I worried that if I kept suppressing that, I was never going to be the person I wanted to be.”</p> <p><i>Participant K9:</i> “To know that I have complete control over my happiness in my life and nobody else does. I was focused on personal goals that I needed to let go. I could be the adult I needed to be for myself and not for someone else.”</p>

## Skills Self-Assessment (continued)

- Personal** *Participant D7:* "It makes you feel like "I can do this." I didn't know I could be a good leader. At the end of the camp, I think I got lots of awards. I think I was like #2 on the highest score list. I didn't know that I could excel in that area."
- Participant E5:* "The self-assessment versus the self-evaluation. Because I've been through a lot of stuff. Put that wall up because I've always been so critical of myself and I didn't realize, I knew it affected some relationships, but I didn't know how much of a wall it built and I didn't want anyone else to see how I criticized myself."

## Skills Test-Taking

- Academic** *Participant C2:* "Test taking-I looked at questions a little differently. Answer choices and key words. Used all the skills when I returned to school."
- Participant K3:* "I learned how to breakdown questions, see the main scope they were asking for, get rid of the fluff of the questions."
- Participant A4:* "When they broke down the questions, understand how they were thinking when they asked the question. Broke down every question. That was most helpful."
- Participant E5:* "Test-taking was always hard because I can always get down to two answers. Of course, you always have the one that's the best answer. I always pick the wrong one. I've gotten better to recognizing the key words within the questions and answers as well. I didn't realize that before highlighting was a big thing for me, pulling out the key words. I try to answer the question before I look at the answers. That when I go through A, B, C, and D, I know when I look at it I'm pretty sure about it."

## Skills Faculty and Peer Support

- Academic** *Participant C2:* "Support of instructors and how much I was loved and cared about. I was embarrassed when I came back that I had failed twice. I felt defeated. The camp gave me confidence and let me know that people are not calling me stupid. I formed bonds with people that I had to work with. I still talk to people from the camp."
- Participant D7:* "When we were in class I couldn't feel that some of the teachers supported you and some of the class did not want you to succeed. I don't know why. They do that to you. I don't know. But in the camp, all the teachers are positive, all the teachers are so supportive, and you can just feel all the love. And even the students, we just accept each other more and we created like new friendships and I think a big factor is that your teachers support you and your peers support you, because it makes you feel like 'I can do this.'"
- Participant A8:* "I'd have to say. The instructors and everything that was there, I felt they actually cared for me as an individual and they wanted me to meet my individual needs. It wasn't a whole, well this person is doing this. Focused on me. It makes a difference when we know you all actually care for us and you want us to figure it out. It made me want to actually come to learn. Learning to learn, it's terrible, it hard. It was a hard week, but knowing that you have people pushing for you, you don't have a support system at home, it makes a difference."

## Recommendations and Future Research

Results of the study indicated that skills within the Learning to Learn Camp are effective in empowering students to be independent, self-directed learners, and lead to student success. Success for the students is that they are able to complete their program of study and pass the licensure exam. Five of the participants in the study have completed the program of study and passed the licensure exam on the first write. Two of the participants are still in their program of study. Two of the participants are in another program of study at the college and state that the Camp empowered them to believe they will still reach their goal of becoming registered nurses. The strategy of a Learning to Learn Camp for nursing student retention should be employed at the school of nursing before entering the nursing courses. Additionally, this Learning to Learn Camp is the only Contextualized Recovery Camp for nursing students (the principles and experiences in the Learning to Learn guide

are related to nursing) in the United States of America and should be implemented in other programs of study.

The initial recommendation is to conduct the research with a larger sample. Although data saturation occurred with the previous sample size, would the results remain the same with a larger sample? Learning to Learn Camps are designed not only for student growth, but also for faculty and facilitator growth and development. Therefore, future research should include: (a) faculty perceptions related to their (the faculty) skill acquisition as a facilitator of learning and (b) faculty perceptions of changes in student performance after students complete the Learning to Learn Camp. The participants who completed the camp and graduated from their program of study passed NCLEX® on first write. Additionally, future research should determine the relationship between students participating in a Learning to Learn Camp, program completion, and passing of NCLEX®.

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## APPENDIX A

### Demographic Survey from Learning to Learn Graduates

Age:

18-24 years  25-30 years  31-40 years  41-50 years  51 + years

What is your race/ethnicity?

African American/Black  Asian  Caucasian  Hispanic/non-white  Other \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:

Female  Male

Are you the first person to attend college in your family?

Yes  No

What is your highest level of education achieved prior to nursing school?

High School/ GED  Some College Hours  Associate Degree  Bachelor's Degree  
 Master's Degree  Specialist Degree  Doctorate Degree

How many hours did you work while in school?

0-16 Hours  17-32 Hours  33 Hours or more

Which nursing program recommended you for the Learning to Learn camp?

Associate Degree Nursing-generic  
 Associate Degree Nursing –transition (Practical Nurse, Paramedic, Respiratory Therapist)  
 Practical Nursing

After completing the Learning to Learn camp, into which semester of your health profession program did you re-enroll?

1<sup>st</sup> semester of the program  2<sup>nd</sup> semester of the program  
 3<sup>rd</sup> semester of the program  4<sup>th</sup> semester of the program

What was your primary purpose for attending the Learning to Learn camp?

A way to get back into school  
 A way to learn how to study  
 A way to learn new strategies for success  
 Other. Explain \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### Scripted Interview Tool

1. Describe the skills you acquired in the Learning to Learn Camp? (time management, self-assessment skills, use of methodologies, etc.)
2. Which skills do you plan to use when you return to school this fall?
3. Which skills acquired in the Learning to Learn Camp were more effective and least effective upon your return to your nursing program? Why?
4. Which factors aided in your success after returning to your nursing program?
5. What were the areas of improvement that the Learning to Learn Camp helped you to recognize? Describe how you have improved in those areas.
6. Name the skills you are using after graduating from your nursing program that have helped you in obtaining and maintaining employment?
7. Name the skills you are using after graduating from your nursing program that have helped you in reaching your personal goals?
8. Name the skills you are using after graduating from your nursing program that have helped you in reaching your academic goals?
9. If you could name one thing that about the camp that made a difference in your life, what would it be?
10. Why do you think you were unsuccessful in your nursing program after completion of the Learning to Learn Camp?