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# Drawing Students into Learning

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# Drawing students into learning



Joanna Rowe admits that she is no artist. But she creates cartoons to help nursing students grasp complex subjects and hone critical thinking skills.

Instead of giving lectures and power point presentations, Rowe, professor of nursing, walks to the white board, grabs a marker and draws a cartoon representing a specific medical condition, such as sickle cell anemia. Lines represent veins and small round red circles represent healthy red blood cells. She explains that when a child with sickle cell becomes stressed with fever or dehydration, the cells become elongated in a semi-circular shape, similar to a sickle, and have difficulty passing through veins and arteries. Using lines, arrows and thought balloons, she walks students through various scenarios and treatment options.

Rowe began perfecting this method some 20 years ago when too many nursing students were failing nursing courses and clinicals.

Always curious, and with a love of learning, she consulted with Ellyn Arwood, a national expert in neuroscience learning theory. They discovered that 95 percent of nursing students learn through visual mental processing – they actually think in pictures, Rowe said.

Rowe ultimately changed the entire way she teaches based on how the brain processes new information.

“It’s fascinating to me that when I work with students, I have to create a picture in their heads or create a visual image about a specific condition or disease,” she said. “I can’t just tell them, so I cartoon it. This is not art. I’m drawing for language.”

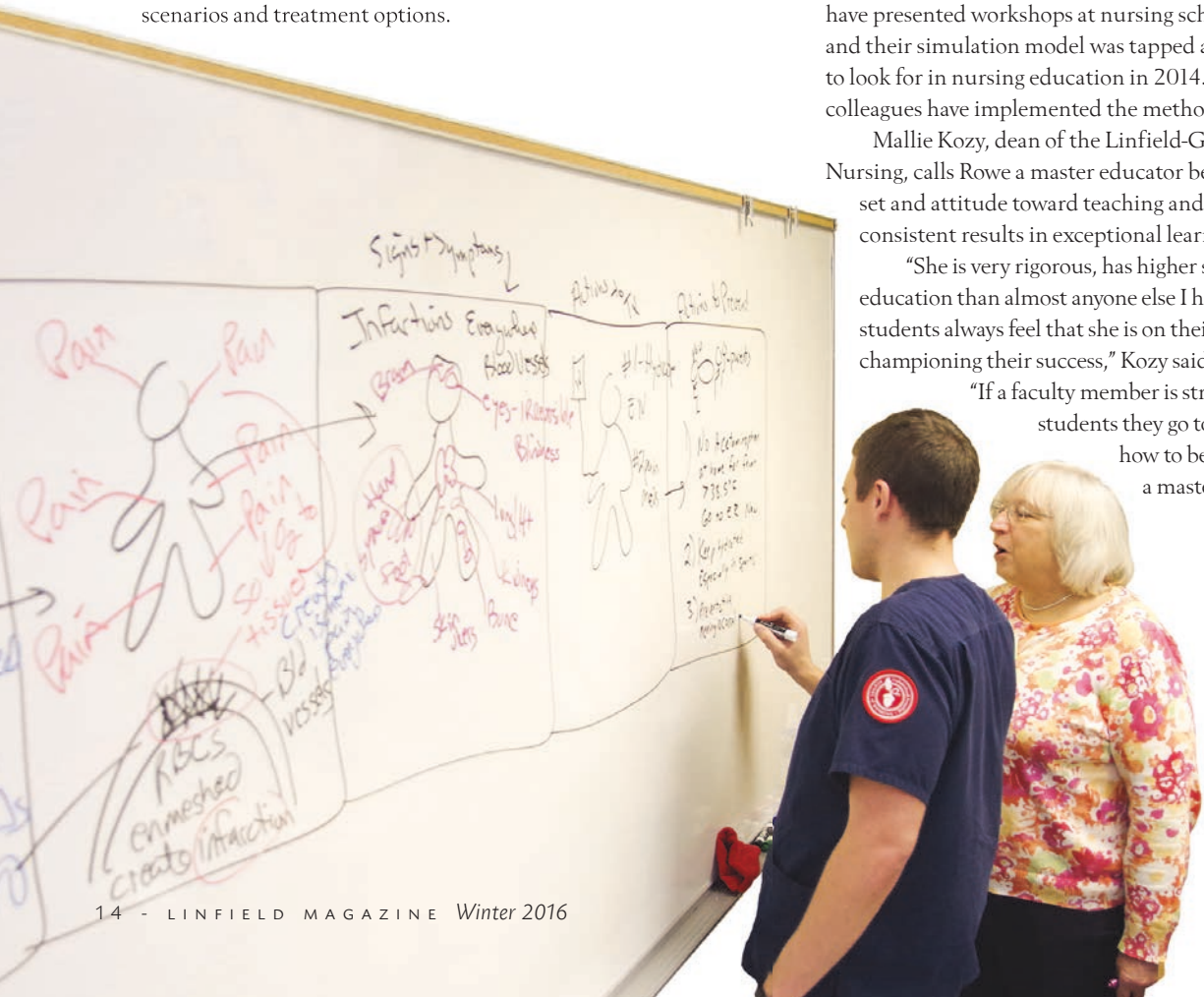
Rowe and Arwood have continued the research and developed a nursing learning simulation model using visual methods. They have presented workshops at nursing schools around the country and their simulation model was tapped as one of the top things to look for in nursing education in 2014. Some of her Linfield colleagues have implemented the methods as well.

Mallie Kozy, dean of the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing, calls Rowe a master educator because she possesses a skill set and attitude toward teaching and her students that yield consistent results in exceptional learning.

“She is very rigorous, has higher standards for the quality of education than almost anyone else I have ever worked with, yet students always feel that she is on their side; rooting for them, championing their success,” Kozy said.

“If a faculty member is struggling with a group of students they go to Joanna first for ideas on how to be better. That’s my idea of a master educator.”

*Professor Joanna Rowe uses cartooning to explain various medical conditions to Jason Kintz '16, a technique she has developed over the last 20 years to help students grasp complex subjects. Studies have shown that the majority of nursing students learn through visual mental processing.*



## Lessons to learn

One of the key lessons nurses must learn is to be what Rowe calls “bilingual.”

“As a nurse, you can be very smart and know all the anatomy, physiology, pathophysiology, but if you don’t have the ability to communicate with a patient in a way that makes them feel safe, you will never be successful,” she said.

Students also must understand they are not responsible for the choices their patients make. They are responsible for providing and communicating information so the patient can make choices that match their life, values and beliefs.

“Nursing is not about doing, it is a service profession,” she said. “Our job is to bring everything to meet the needs of the patient so they can make choices. We offer options. That is the quintessential nurse. Students come into nursing because they want to help people and make them better. I tell them that you help people by making them safe, but you don’t give advice, you give options.”

It is also critical that students stay curious and always ask the question “why,” she said.

“If you are not curious you may not figure out the answer,” she added. “If you are curious you don’t get in a rut or jump to conclusions.”

## Spiritual perspective

While Rowe teaches the science of nursing and medicine, she also teaches from a spiritual and humanistic perspective. An important part of what students must learn, Rowe said, is to leave negative energy behind.

“You need to be totally present and available for your client,” she said. “That’s what allows you to practice from the heart, which is what nursing is all about – it’s the art and the science together.”

“I really believe that we bring an energy force with us into a room,” she said. “It’s important that I stop outside that patient’s room and make sure that I leave my negative energy behind. That’s practicing from the spiritual perspective – not religious, but spiritual.”

Although once a skeptic, Rowe became aware that there is more at play in the healing process than just art and science. Her natural curiosity made her question why some patients died, while those who should not survived. She began exploring energy fields and energy works and how that can affect a patient’s wellbeing. She has also studied the ancient healing arts of shamanism and reiki. The teachings of shamanism focus on a connection of heart energy that promotes the well-being of all creation. Reiki is a healing technique based on the principle that the healer who is attuned to energy fields channels energy into a person so that person’s body directs the energy where healing is needed.

“The whole idea of what shaman means is that you are working from the heart,” Rowe said. “You can open yourself up to possibilities, and bring yourself into the present to understand the messages of the world or universe.”

“I teach the hard science, but I also teach the art and the spirituality of nursing,” she added. “I cannot question that there are spirits and energy and miracles and angels. That is a really important part of how I choose to practice. I believe it makes me more present to the students, patients and the world. And I share that with my students.”

Rowe earned a master’s degree in pediatric nursing, and specialized in pediatrics and trauma nursing, working as a trauma nurse in emergency departments, neonatal and adult trauma intensive care, as well as in a liver transplant unit working with both adults and children. When she completed her Ph.D. early in her career, she chose to focus on human communication, instead of nursing.

“The key to nursing is the ability to talk to people, to guide them through options,” she said. “One of the major ways to remove obstacles is by educating and communicating so (the patient) can make decisions.”

– Mardi Mileham

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– Joanna Rowe  
Professor of Nursing

### Rowe File

BSN: nursing, Indiana University

MSN: pediatric nursing,  
Indiana University

Ph.D.: human communication,  
University of Denver

- Lead Co-editor *Family Health Care Nursing: Theory, Practice and Research* (5th edition), selected by the American Journal of Nursing as first place Book of the Year in 2015.

- Recipient of the Edmond J. Safra Visiting Nurse Faculty Program alumni award for creating the family case study in the chronic illness chapter, which discusses how to work with families living with Parkinson’s disease.

- Research interests/academic interests: Neuroscience learning theory, Simulation in nursing education, Family health care nursing

- Prior teaching experience: University of Portland