**VARIOUS REFLECTIONS ON EVALUATION IN A PROGRAM BY COMPETENCE**

By Margot Phaneuf 29/05/03

These few reflections do not claim to resolve the multiple evaluation problems in a program structured by competence. They tend only to identify and to clarify the most obvious difficulties, to analyze practices and to propose some constructive avenues. They also show the necessity of adapting to change in the domain of evaluation, as well as in other aspects of teaching. In our moving, rapidly developing society, change itself may be the only constant!
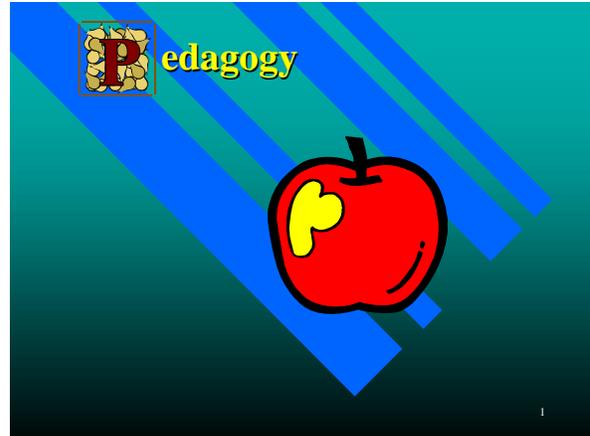
A program organised by competence possesses particular characteristics which we must take into account in all stages of its realization. It is conceived for a better integration of action and theory in and to prepare students to face complex situations they will encounter in the clinical field. To accomplish this, evaluation must be based on different essential elements of a competence - attitudes, behaviour, techniques, values, know-how and knowledge - which students should master to be able to take care of patients.
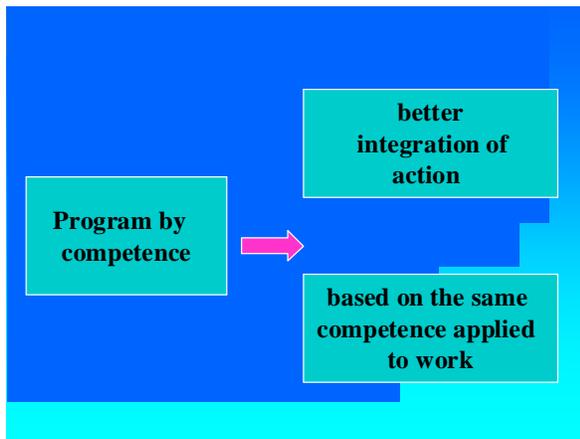
FOR AN EVALUATION ALIGNED WITH THE PROGRAM

This new orientation of the training program in nursing presupposes changes and multiple adaptations in the choice of concepts to be retained, in their organization, in links to be established, in learning strategies to be proposed to the student, but also in strategies used for evaluation. Methods used to verify the acquisition of a competence have to cover its main aspects. Besides, given that this competence must be essentially bound to action, evaluations centred mostly on theoretical elements can not be effective.

We now have to turn to more dynamic methods. Le Boterf warns us against erroneous interpretations of the term *competence* which might engender misunderstanding of this type of program and of evaluation.

SOME NEW CHALLENGES IN EVALUTATION

We must remain aware that this type of program confronts teachers with many challenges concerning evaluation. Certain aspects of this text are related to a program by competence, while others are related to more general strategies. Certain techniques are already in common use but it is helpful to point them out, while others remain to be considered. Globally, the evaluative components of the current program present requirements at various levels - technical, ethical, relational and administrative.

THE TECHNICAL LEVEL

For teachers, evaluation implies an educational know-how covering different angles of this reality of competence. The technical knowledge needed for the evaluation of a program by competence is not different from those in any other program, but the underlying philosophy and the values behind this type of program are particular.

FOR THEORETICAL CLASSES

Theoretical classes take up a large part of the teacher's contact with the students. Evaluation is realized through questions raised by the teacher to measure the student's degree of
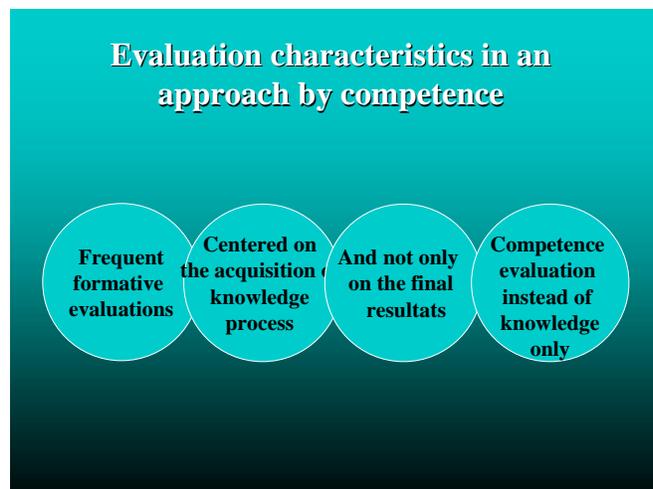

understanding. Whether it is through questioning during class or through exam questions, there is quite a considerable pedagogical impact in this approach. While such questions appear simple, they are nevertheless an art in themselves. However, these questions awaken interest and bear a learning dimension inasmuch as they comprise at one and the same time an evaluation of a knowledge dimension and a didactic aspect for the student.

This last aspect should lead the student reflect, to analyze, to draw on previously acquired knowledge, to develop her metacognitive capacities and to build her personal knowledge. But beware: in such a program, asking questions can not be used to measure knowledge acquisition alone. In this respect, the real wealth of well-formulated questions lies in their power to reach the many different dimensions of a competence. The implementation of strategies conducive to the development of competence also requires openness to creativity on the part of the teacher in offering dynamic methods with a wider evaluative dimension.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON METHODOLOGY/TECHNIQUES/STRATEGIES

It is necessary to remind ourselves that a competence is a global acquisition and that its implementation is essentially realized through action or at least by proposing strategies which
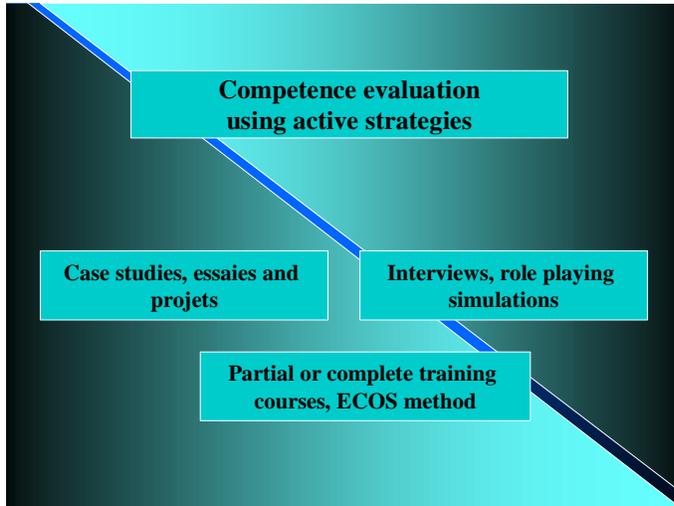
highlight some of the main dimensions of plausible situations, always as close as possible to reality. In other words, whether evaluation is normative or formative, it is necessary for us to utilize dynamic means other than multiple choice exams to appreciate the presence and quality of the targeted competence. Without excluding normative evaluation completely, this type of exam should be widely compensated with open questions which favour reflection and allow a much better measure of knowledge acquisition. To make correction easier and more fair, as mentioned in the paragraph on ethics, objective criteria can be defined in advance. Problems which might occur on a teacher's team could result from either too much rigour or too much laxity on the part of certain teachers. Establishment of precise rules will help to prevent unfortunate sidetracking.

There are several active strategies which can serve as means for evaluation. For instance, we can refer to case studies, interaction analyses, concept mapping, solving of problems drawn from reality, short essays, documentary research on a care subject, care plans, workshops on nursing diagnosis, observation reports, role playing, partial training courses, video recordings or realization, various types of projects, Internet surfing, team work, log books and observation grids for particular situations, etc. These strategies are equally adaptable for formative or normative evaluation. In connection with competence, it is necessary to remember that any means used to evaluate competence has to allow the teacher to define, to underline and to appreciate a certain number of its essential aspects.

Definition of an Approach by Competence

- It is a comprehensive concept of integrated knowledge, including acquired experience and personal evolution, appropriate for a given aspect of health care which, when mobilized in a concrete situation, allows the nurse to refer to cognitive, psychomotor, organisational and technical skills, and to demonstrate adapted socio-emotional behaviours, the whole, working in synergy and rendering possible the exercise of nursing at a level of performance compatible with the role and functions of that profession.

FOR TRAINING COURSES AND LABORATORIES

This teacher know-how consists also of other skills, which find their application especially in training courses. The primary skill requires a greater sharpness of observation in order to distinguish the behaviours which bring to the foreground the student's strengths and weaknesses compared with the competence to be demonstrated. Given the complexity of this multidimensional concept, the teacher needs a good capacity of attention and judgment to define, discriminate and appreciate attitudes, socio-emotional reactions, behaviour, relational and organizational capacities, and technical skills demonstrated by the students. Some of these aspects can also be

Training Course Learning

- It is not done solely at the time of the training course.
- It starts with cognitive and emotional preparation before the training course.
- It continues during the training course, especially through modeling on the teacher or the patient's nurse.
- It is supplemented by reflecting on the experience, by theorization on the training course, i.e. during the stay or afterwards at the time of clinical meetings.

observed in the laboratory. The enclosed illustration summarizes what a competence covers and what its evaluation must ideally include.

But as far as training courses are concerned, a program by competence presupposes another way of thinking. Contrary to what one can imagine, learning does not occur uniquely during the time of contact with the patient. It begins before the clinical training course with the implementation of preliminary measures allowing direction of the experience, to prepare the mind and to create links between

COMPETENCE ACQUISITION

The student shows the acquisition of a competence in:

- expressing her capacity to face problematic situations similar to those in the reality of a care environment,
- perceiving the difficulties adequately,
- taking into account the various dimensions of the situation ,
- setting up suitable and effective actions.

knowledge already acquired and what should be observed, verified and learned during training.

Learning is more effective when a student is well prepared, as much at the emotional and cognitive levels, as at the technical.

During a training course, learning can take place by modelling in contact with a teacher and with nurses in a clinical field. But this behaviour modelling allows the development primarily of automatisms. For the student, this can be useful only if accompanied by a reminder or emphasis

- **Each day of a training course should allow the student, according to her training level, to reinvent her nursing role through the application of the competences targeted in situations of increasing complexity.**

of certain important points, whether they be technical, organizational, behavioural, relational or

ethical. It is the steady stimulation by the teacher to observe certain dimensions more intensely, and it is the thinking process which she arouses through analysis, comparison, differentiation, synthesis, the questioning of certain practices and the establishment of clinical judgment that allow students to progress. But professional modelling alone can not give a real educational direction to the training. According to the level of training, the student has to go beyond the "lack of commitment" stage and develop a real capacity to act, organize and decide.

Program by competence characteristics

- Increasing and autonomous construction of knowledge.
- Dynamism of the student; decrease of the theoretical lecture courses and increase of personal independant research.
- Autonomous work and groupwork.
- Connections with already acquired knowledge.
- Methodology aiming to help the student to be more responsible, to practice metacognition and to control her success,
- Global tasks of progressive complexity, autoevaluations and frequent formative evaluations with dynamic strategies.

Every training day has, in a sense, to allow the student nurse to re-invent the role of caregiver through the application of a competence in different situations of increasing complexity.

Thus, the teacher has to find a just balance between the passive support which she offers the student, stimulation to spur her on and the development of responsible autonomy. And the evaluation becomes the sum of her observations on the result of her own interventions with the student. The enclosed picture supplies some indications on the behaviours of the student which demonstrate integration of a competence.

One can deduce from this, that in such a program the teacher's role is strengthened and enriched. It does not limit itself to the organization of the training class, approaches within the clinical field, accompaniment and behaviour observation of the trainee. This role requires a more active way of doing things to favour the students' progress at the organizational, technical and emotional levels and it demands an especially more dynamic approach to the construction of knowledge by students themselves. The mentor's presence with students allows them to better capitalise on the training experience to find its true meaning and value.

Teacher

Self-construction in the group and by the group

Student

Knowledge

Peers
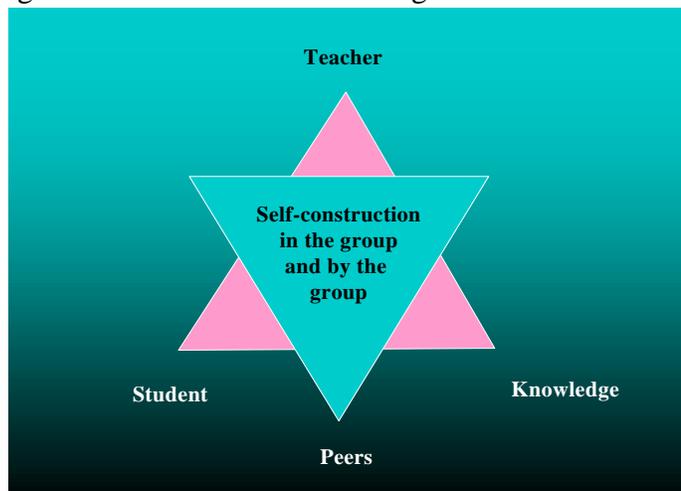
The climate, activities and excitement in the clinical field may seem a bit confusing to the students and they may not understand the exact meaning of what is going on. Then the teacher can give them clarifications; suggest orientations in order to avoid pointless stagnation in their learning. Besides, the teacher does not aim only to develop well-filled heads and skilful hands for techniques. She especially tends to favour well-formed minds, capable of approaching a

situation and taking into account all its different dimensions, uniting knowledge, compassion, and the capacity to make a decision and apply carefully considered action. The teacher's evaluative judgment will then inevitably be influenced by these considerations.

Similarly, the context of clinical experience poses the perpetual problem of the correlation between theory and practice. In this socioconstructivist approach, one no longer speaks about the transfer of theoretical concepts and knowledge to concrete situations. With an integrated method, one opts instead for knowledge construction by the student herself. In regards to the school milieu, this orientation is made necessary by our program approach, where students proceed to an integration of knowledge from different origins, communicated in theory by the courses in philosophy, sociology, psychology, biology and naturally, the courses in nursing care. This approach is much more demanding for students and for teachers who accompany the students-in-training. It presupposes a wider understanding of field situations and therefore allows students to develop action better adapted to reality. But this multidimensional aspect also requires more of teachers who have to grasp its complexity and for the evaluation, to take into account the effort, as well as the psychological, social and ethical facets of the situation and the student-proposed interventions.

So, without great risk of error, we can say that one of the strongest moments of learning-acquisition in education lies in the act of thinking about action. Whether it is in real time, with the patients, with the help of the teacher or the mentor nurse, or after the event, a posteriori, during clinical meetings, for a student, it is the moment to theorize about her experience during the training course.

- **We must ask ourselves:**
- **What is important to tell the student ?**
- **What will allow her to evolve?**
- **Where must she put her priorities ?**

These are moments of significant stimulation where feeding on acquired information and on direct participation, the student builds her own knowledge. These occasions are very precious and it is necessary for us to set up the conditions which favour them. The link between these meetings and the development of the student's capacity for self-evaluation is also important. Teachers have to widen their evaluation range and also urge the students to consider their own actions in the light of the competence to be developed and to appreciate what has been accomplished and the road taken. These characteristics are a part of attributes which one usually recognizes in a program by competence. This is what the next slide demonstrates.

One more aspect must not be neglected. In a socioconstructivist approach: the influence of the group is a major aspect. Students come into their own within the group and through the group. Thus, the sharing of experience, the common disclosure of difficulties, and the practice of collective research on different subjects related to clinical experience become interesting activities, as much from the cognitive point of view, as from the emotional and social. These

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activities enhance knowledge enrichment and favour dialogue among peers, the understanding of others and mutual respect. But it is perhaps from the emotional point of view that these groups are most productive. They lead the student to develop self-confidence and to feel reassured when confronted with new situations; however, the group can sometimes be strongly discordant. A group experience allows students to develop their teamwork and leadership skills. In this respect, it plays an important role in the training of student nurses and in their evaluation. The supervision of training courses with its need for intelligence and adaptability is a very demanding function for teachers, but it brings the benefits of assurance for the progress of the students and of their future competence.
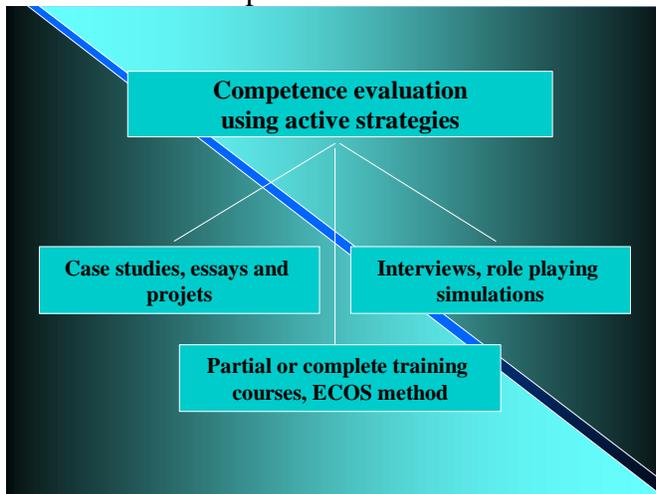

HOMEWORK: A CHALLENGING COUNTERPART TO LEARNING

A program by competence has to propose challenges of progressive complexity, always adapted to the capacity and level of a student's training. Evaluation also has to follow this gradation. It has to penetrate all aspects of training, from work-related to training courses to aspects ensuing from theoretical education.

Exercises and other homework are important aspects of an educational program because they prolong the pupil-teacher contact time, favour deepening of knowledge and, when well- conceived, become favourable instruments for knowledge construction. Correction of homework is one of the most important evaluation elements. But it is often a nightmare for teachers, and also for students who have to undergo this ordeal. Evaluation of homework is boring; it requires a lot of time and energy that educators can hardly spare.
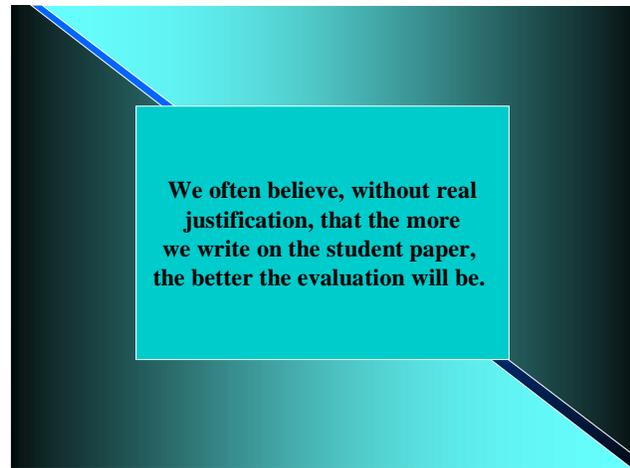
We often believe, without real justification, that the more we write on the student paper, the better the evaluation will be. Yet, a student's understanding and developing capacity to correct her mistakes are not inevitably proportional to the quantity of remarks made by the teacher. It is necessary to recognize that it can be very disheartening for a student to receive a copy which is quite scattered with red marks, like a "strawberry field". In any case, do students read everything that teachers write?

It is equally necessary to consider that when comments are too numerous, some students give up. But then, where are the students supposed to invest their efforts? What are the priorities? With

what tools are the students going to start? Too often they do not know, because everything seems of the same importance.

And what are we doing to their self-image? We know full well that as human beings, we often become identified with what we do. And, as a consequence, if in a student homework we declare that everything is bad, the student can easily conclude that she herself is worthless, that she does not have the needed capacities. Now, to exercise a competence, it is above all necessary to be sure that we have what is needed to acquire that same competence. Indeed, how could one claim to use what one is not able to have?

In this respect, the teacher's attitude is of utmost importance and as in all things, it is necessary to advise moderation. We must ask ourselves, "What is essential in what I want to communicate through my correction?" "What would best serve the pursued objectives?" Furthermore, correction should not inevitably be limited to underlining errors. Surely, in every work there are some positive elements which show the student's effort! So why not emphasize them?

But sometimes in the correction of papers and homework, the teacher may err in the opposite direction. Certain teachers merely grade the paper without any comment or even one laconic annotation. This method is more a marking system than a real evaluation and its power to become a significant stimulation for learning and the development of critical thinking is limited. The presence of remarks, explanations and orientations is necessary to arouse reflection and change. So, correction should be a little like a dialogue between pupil and teacher and should not reflect value judgments on the person of the student, but rather be a simple feedback on the quality of her investment.

- **Evaluation must not only highlight the student's difficulties but also seek to identify their causes in order to help her by proposing adapted means of remediation.**

For the teacher herself, it is also important to find a just balance between correction and evaluation in her work. It is possible to develop more pragmatic and less demanding methods in terms of effort and time. It is necessary for us to make logical choices which allow us, at the same time, to increase our contact with the students, and to be pedagogically appropriate, ethically just and well-balanced at the personal level. Evaluation is an integral part of the educational process and as in all the other stages of the training program, it deserves a second thought and sometimes also, certain adaptations.

ETHICAL LEVEL

Evaluation brings various problems where an ethical dimension must be also considered. What do we have to judge? Final result? Effort demonstrated? The progress which has been accomplished? Few teachers manage to agree on this subject. A fair evaluation should, however, take into account a little of all these. But the "how" poses serious difficulties. Indeed, how to be

fair to the students and also to the society which makes us responsible for putting competent professionals on the labour market? But one dilemma stands out: how can we identify precisely the real competence of our students? Regrettably, there is no magic answer to this question. Only a personal commitment, a sense of ethics and justice, a steady and warm teacher-student relation and local agreement in the faculty can open avenues which lead to resolution of these controversial situations.

It is true that the evaluation of a competence is not simple. Certain inner dimensions are not easily discovered in themselves, but they show through behaviours. Critical thinking and a sense of responsibility are examples. To observe them, or to judge the application of certain knowledge, or to appreciate homework is just like the good old times. The only way of remaining fair is to set precise objectives and very precise criteria. In this way, evaluation can be standardized for all students.

 But to carry our thought a little farther, we also have to decide on the importance which we want to place on formative and normative evaluations. Does one have to apply/use them in a periodic or in a continuous way? Does one have to privilege theoretical exams or give more importance to practical exams in care situations? Really, all these concepts have their value; it depends on the way of choosing and of using them. One thing is sure: normative evaluation is an administrative action, necessary to our system of certification. But we have to realize that we are kidding ourselves on the evolutionary effect of this kind of evaluation as regards the curiosity, motivation and work ethic of the students, who too often are satisfied with marks hardly above the passing grade.

Regrettably, we tend to see defects with a magnifying glass and to minimize qualities.
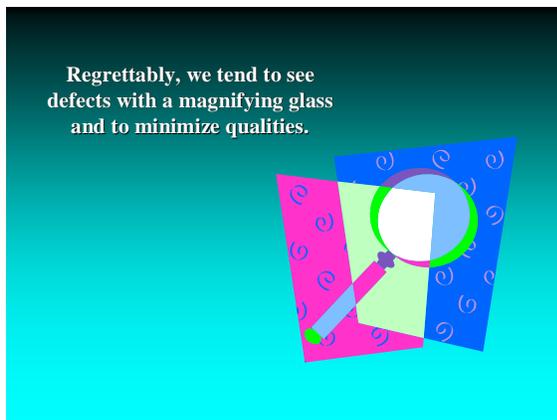
It is only in the pedagogy of mastery learning that this type of evaluation can be an incentive towards progress because the threshold of success is high and becomes an ideal to be reached instead of a minimal limit to be met but not surpassed.

On the other hand, formative evaluations contain a strong potential for evolution. They aim to highlight both the student's strengths and her weaknesses. Regrettably, we tend to see defects with a magnifying glass and to minimize qualities. Furthermore, when a student makes an error, we are quick to let her know, while we are much slower to reinforce her adequate behaviour or her brilliant interventions.

But it is also important to underline that formative evaluation has to go much farther than the simple identification of errors or the implementation of tests without commentary. It has first to arouse thinking and metacognition, and to determine the real nature of the student's difficulty, as well as its source, in order to indicate a useful means to remedy the situation.

Furthermore, while normative evaluation ought to be rare, formative evaluation must be more frequent. Yet we must also avoid falling into the trap of separating knowledge from skills. Since a program based on competence is more global and closely bound to action, the evaluation which sanctions it has to follow the same logic. But beware! Formative evaluations must not be changed into continuous normative evaluation, as sometimes occurs. This would bias its signification.

Another point should be underlined. It is important that teachers not always position themselves as judges of students and of their behaviour. Formative evaluations must not become a form of harassment where the students are

- **The teacher's intervention is a little like an application of the helping relationship in the practice of pedagogy.**

ceaselessly observed and measured. An evaluation centred on awareness and progress has to allow the student to develop in the context of a relaxed dialogue with the educators, hence, the importance of the relational dimension of evaluation.

THE RELATIONAL LEVEL

A harmonious educational link between pupils and teachers can germinate hope for evolution. Through questioning during evaluation meetings, teachers become "midwives" for thought, learning and self-evaluation, and so become factors for transformation.

The climate of warm understanding which they establish in these encounters and the focus on the evolution of the student render such an evaluation a real application of the helping relationship in the practice of pedagogy. This warm relationship acts not only by underlining the results obtained, whatever their nature, to give explanations or means to remedy difficulties, but also to heighten the student's self esteem, to encourage and comfort her in her difficulties, to stimulate her motivation, effort and success. Without these dimensions, evaluation would not really be formative. One could object that all this is time consuming. True enough! But in education, the time we lose somewhere is often time we gain somewhere else - on corrections, explanations or make-up exams.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE LEVEL

 At the administrative level, evaluation touches the dimensions of both sanction and certification because regrettably, it serves not only to classify, but also to downgrade i.e. to decide and choose among the students those who can pursue their progress through the program, and those that have to stop or to redo certain parts of their training. This difficult aspect of selection which the

teacher must assume, also carries ethical implications. Because it is bound to our responsibility of advocacy for patients and to our role as educators of future nurses who will take care of those patients, we are responsible to society.

This aspect is mainly related to normative evaluation. It is the decisive factor which decrees student failure and lowers the guillotine of penalty. Sometimes we can feel uneasy with certain decisions we have to make, but it is necessary to remind ourselves that this is an administrative and moral obligation.

CONCLUSION

Evaluation is a fundamental part of the learning process. Its exercise remains complex and delicate, but through its important metacognitive impact, it becomes an essential factor in the student's evolution. Applying evaluation in a program structured by competence does not simplify anything. On the contrary, it requires major changes of orientation. As for courses, a close link with real care situations is needed. It is as if school were drawn closer to life.

Evaluation depends at the same time on science (for its precision) and on art (for the flexibility it presupposes and for its capacity for adaptation and personalization). And on its rigour and seriousness depend the confidence of our health system users. Adaptation to a new program brings different challenges which demand creativity and open-mindedness, two qualities essential to facing today's world and life in the future.