From Failure to Success

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**Purpose:** To help students achieve success when retaking the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX®).

**Introduction**

In 2017, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing reported NCLEX passing rates of 45.56% for RN repeat candidates and 35.3% for PN repeat candidates. The 2018 percentages are 39.76 and 36.74, respectively (NCSBN published NCLEX results). This means that the majority of repeat test takers fail—a potentially devastating experience that can discourage some candidates from ever taking the NCLEX again. This is why Kaplan Nursing provides academic and motivational support for students who have experienced failure on the test after completing the NCLEX Review course.

**Literature Review**

Much has been written about strategies to predict outcomes and prevent failure on the NCLEX examination, but very little focuses on strategies for remediation after failure. Students cite anxiety, lack of confidence, poor study habits, and poor test-taking skills as reasons for their own failure (Griffiths et al. 2004 Lutter 2017). Many are discouraged after failing, but most soon become determined and motivated to test again (McFarquhar 2014). Key factors in NCLEX success have remained constant: knowledge base, anxiety control, and test-taking strategies. (McDowell 2008) The Kaplan NCLEX Review Course is based on these three
strategies and contributes to successful outcomes for candidates who complete the course.

**Method**

Kaplan Nursing has developed an online seminar to provide continued support for those students who purchase Kaplan’s Complete NCLEX Review Course but who do not pass the NCLEX exam. The NCLEX-Expert Success Seminar has three objectives. After completing the seminar, the candidate should be able to identify the following:

1. **The single concept the NCLEX exam is testing**
2. **The correct use of the Kaplan Nursing Decision Tree**
3. **Valid factors to consider when creating a plan of study**

Kaplan Nursing provides students access to Kaplan NCLEX experts who will give them ongoing academic support throughout their enrollment, right up until they take the NCLEX exam. Students can also contact the experts to get additional support after the exam if they are unsuccessful. Based on the concept of self-efficacy, we made a conscious decision to let students initiate contact with the NCLEX Expert for additional help. Research over the last twenty years has shown that self-efficacy is the strongest single predictor of college students’ academic achievement and performance (Artino 2012). When the student identifies their need for help they are directed to the NCLEX Channel in their Kaplan resources to attend an online seminar (live or recorded), which covers the following topics:

- **Common causes for lack of success**
- **Methods of preparation that lead to success**
- **How best to use the course resources**
- **A new focus for the course resources**
- **Guidelines for setting up a new study plan**

The seminar focuses on self-reflection and self-evaluation. It delves into the most frequent reasons for failure, asking students to reflect on the question, “Does this describe me?” If the answer is yes, it encourages students to write down what
strategies they would use to correct for the reasons why they failed. Having students self-reflect allows them to personalize their reasons for failure and take concrete steps towards changing their study plan to achieve success on the exam.

When asked to describe how they felt when learning they failed the exam, students use similar words: devastated, discouraged, defeated, and failure. Self-evaluation within the structure of reasons for failure helps the students find specific areas to change, as well as the motivation to try again with a definite plan for a better test outcome.

Anxiety, lack of a foundational base of nursing content knowledge, and lack of knowledge of what the NCLEX tests can all contribute to failure on the NCLEX. The seminar addresses all of these areas, but the predominant weakness seen in students who fail the NCLEX is a lack of critical thinking skills. The literature reflects this. Critical thinking continues to be a crucial component of success on the NCLEX exam (Kaddoura et al. 2017). The Success Seminar spends time helping students hone their critical thinking skills and view the NCLEX questions from a clinical reasoning perspective. It encourages students to interact and ask questions regarding this process. The class allows for interaction with faculty via chat. Even though the Kaplan review course progresses from essential content review through critical thinking and clinical reasoning, many students get stuck in the content phase and continue to approach questions from a content-oriented perspective. By reiterating how the NCLEX exam tests thinking ability through the use of computer-adaptive testing the seminar personalizes the students’ experience by demonstrating the meaning of the three methods to determine the pass/fail outcome. The seminar encourages students to interpret this information based on their test experience. Did they fail with 75 questions? With 265? This is a powerful way of taking what was theoretical knowledge when they first took the course and applying it to the personal deficiencies they have recently discovered in themselves. It motivates and reinforces the need for a critical thinking framework and provides an impetus to stick with and master the Decision Tree.

Students frequently expect the Success Seminar to provide new test questions to help them prepare to retest, but instead it begins by presenting the reasons why students are unsuccessful on the exam and having students think about how they personally need to change how they study. It then explains the importance of

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**Lack of critical thinking skills is repeat testers’ predominant weakness**
viewing test questions using clinical judgment, so that they select the answer that reflects the safest decision one can make in a specific clinical situation. In this way, the seminar helps students see that they can utilize the same study resources but take a different approach to them this time around. Most students admit they originally approached the questions from a content perspective, looking for the “right” answer. But when they approach the questions from a clinical reasoning perspective, the questions become a whole new set of resources. This approach to studying is different, and NCLEX Expert cautions students that they will need to work hard to change their ingrained test-taking habits. NCLEX Expert provides practical tips for making this mental shift, helping students understand the underlying philosophy and make it more meaningful for them, so they can put it into practice.

NCLEX Expert asks students to complete all of the assignments in all three phases of the course. Many students admit they do not complete all of the assignments the first time through the course, so NCLEX Expert explains the purpose of the phases and how they build on one another. This gives students everything they need to prepare for the exam.

The last principle discussed in the seminar is the time factor for preparation. Students frequently say they are instructed to take the test as soon as possible after graduation, but most admit they did not feel ready to take the exam when they did so. The overwhelming attitude among students who take the seminar is that they want to repeat the exam “as soon as possible so I can get on with my life.” While this is understandable, inadequate preparation frequently results in an unsuccessful outcome. The seminar provides self-evaluation questions that students can ask themselves as they progress through their study plan. Numerical scores on tests are not part of the evaluation. Instead, the seminar asks students to focus on progression patterns in their results, development of their critical thinking skills, and their use of the framework of thinking used in the Decision Tree.

**Conclusion**

The Success Seminar empowers students to change their study preparation for the NCLEX exam through self-evaluation and correct focus on crucial areas. As a
result, students who retake the exam after taking the seminar have a passing rate of 68%. This is significantly higher than the national average. By utilizing the resources from the NCLEX Review Course and approaching them from a critical thinking and clinical reasoning perspective, students can adjust their paradigm for NCLEX preparation and change their outcome to one of success.

References


NCSBN published NCLEX results, retrieved: https://www.ncsbn.org/10645.htm

NCSBN published NCLEX results, retrieved: https://www.ncsbn.org/12171.htm

Success seminar follow-up 3 months: Formstack collected data