

Critical Conversations, Meaningful Connection: Communication Role Play in Nursing Education

Emily G Chin PhD, RNC, CNE
Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing Loyola University Chicago

Background

Interpersonal communication is a struggle for many students
Apparent in formal presentations¹ and casual conversations²
Communication complexity increases with
Emotion
Power dynamics
Errors
Adopting a Just Culture³ and offering students space practice difficult conversations is critical to comfort and ability
AACN Essentials⁴ mandates competence in:
Interpersonal communication (Domain 2)
Sensitive/difficult conversations (Sub-competency 2.2d)
Accountability for safety (Sub-competency 5.2d)
Sustaining a just culture (Sub-competency 5.3d)

Objective

The purpose of this project was to develop an exercise to strengthen students' ability to communicate effectively in complex, high-stakes clinical situations.

Population

Two cohorts of an in-person, undergraduate OB nursing course
Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 semesters



Intervention

Prior to Class:
Read Bailey (2021)⁵ and Prober et al. (2022)⁶
Review a Just Culture PowerPoint
Complete a CEU-Style quiz

Participation During Class:
Group role play where the students role played as the nurse and ChatGPT served as a standardized partner^{7, 8} in two scenarios:
Disclosing a minor medication error to a patient
Advocating for review and bedside assessment of Category II Fetal Heart Rate tracing to a provider

Prior to Spring 2026, a Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT)⁹ coversheet was added to increase students' understanding of the exercise and improve engagement.
Purpose: Why? What's in it for me?
Tasks: What are the directions?
Criteria for Success: How am I evaluated?
Voluntary feedback was collected via Forms

Results

This activity helped me understand how to engage in a difficult conversation?

	Fall 2025	Spring 2026
Agree	67/77 (87%)	78/82 (95%)
Neutral	10/77 (13%)	4/82 (5%)
Disagree	0/77 (0%)	0/82 (0%)

Challenges or fears around difficult communication?

- Fear of saying the wrong thing
- Anxiety about confrontation or conflict escalation
- Nervousness when speaking with authority figures or upset patient
- Lack of confidence in advocacy or assertive communication

Strategies you might consider using in the future?

- Validating feelings and acknowledging emotions before addressing problems
- Using de-escalation and conflict management techniques
- Checking in with others during difficult conversations to assess understanding or emotional overload
- Being direct and clear while maintaining an appropriate tone

Implications and Next Steps

Practical communication simulations can be performed in the classroom
Students welcomed the opportunity to participate
Little opportunity to practice conversations in a structured, psychologically safe setting
Valued the realism and rehearsal aspect of the activity
Consideration for further revisions
Smaller groups
Asynchronous participation
Live role play
Provide more specified feedback
Translate the intervention to other nursing environments and disciplines
Creation of connection, can be made even in difficult conversations

References



"I think it is so hard, especially with our generation, to be forward and have difficult conversations since we use technology so often to communicate and hide behind a screen. This was helpful to guide us, but not using a real patient, giving us practice for something that we will face in the real world."





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Biography

Emily Chin, PhD, RNC, CNE is a Clinical Associate Professor and Program Director of the 4-Year BSN program at Loyola University Chicago. She has taught courses across all levels of the BSN program, including Pathophysiology and Introduction to Nursing. However, her favorite course is Obstetric nursing, a tremendous place to share her 22 years of Labor and Delivery experience and enthusiasm for the specialty.

Dr. Chin has contributed to several projects at the Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing promoting inclusive excellence in nursing, including two HRSA-funded projects. For the CARE (Collaboration, Access, Resources, and Equity) Pathway to the BSN, Dr. Chin served as the Academic Development Leader. In this role, she developed the first-year seminars, helping students transition to the nursing program. For the Social Determinants of Health-Nursing Providing Access to Healthcare (SDOH-NPATH) grant, Dr. Chin was a SDOH Core Team Member where she worked closely with a local high school to enhance students' understanding of nursing and expand recruitment into the profession.

Dr. Chin is currently working with a team developing the Conway Summer Institute for students transitioning from Arrupe College to the School of Nursing. The program will be a 5-day summer immersion, funded by the Bedford Falls Foundation, to equip participants with the tools, confidence, and community necessary for success at the School of Nursing.

Contact Information



Emily Chin, PhD, RNC, CNE
Clinical Associate Professor, Director 4-Year BSN Program
Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing, Loyola University Chicago
echin2@luc.edu