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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONTINUOUS TRAINING OF NURSING PROFESSORS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify proposals for improvement in the continuous professional development of nursing professors. **Methods:** A qualitative descriptive study with 15 participants intentionally chosen, who are faculty members from two higher education institutions and participated in focus groups. The qualitative content analysis process was submitted to the evaluation of two judges and concordance coefficients emerged from it, which guarantee inferences and the categorization process. **Results:** The professors' recommendations comprise two categories: themes and factors involved in continuous professional development. We highlight among the themes recommendations on thematic training, training model, research, reflection/sharing experiences, connection with clinical practice, collaborative work, connection to the community and interchange with institutions of higher education. We highlight, among factors involved in training, encouraging individual motivations, time availability, funding, example set by leaders and institutional recognition. **Conclusions:** Faculty professional development includes pedagogical and scientific qualification and the use of training strategies encouraging knowledge mobilization and development.

Keywords: Continuing education; Higher education ; Faculty.

INTRODUCTION

Training is one of the most frequent topics in discussions on education. This is a field of knowledge and research that focuses on the processes through which professors learn and develop their professional skills⁽¹⁾.

Professors carry on continuous professional updating to cope with succeeding social changes. Professor training is not restricted to the purpose of teaching certain subjects. It also aims at promoting student reflection and critical thinking. Professor training is carried out in practice and in the constant effort to know more and to develop professional skills⁽²⁾. This implies a continuous training based on critical reflection and on sharing practice throughout a professor's career and implies a lifelong learning process.

In the past, the approach to continuing professional development was synonymous with improvement, permanent education, in-service training, retraining, permanent training, professional development or even faculty development. This issue comprised professor training activities aimed at improving knowledge, qualification and professional attitudes to promote teaching quality^(2,3). Today, this terminology is still used often with the same meaning and referring to the same reality.

In this “journey” back to the concept of continuous training, it seems important to call attention to Estrela & Estrela concept⁽⁴⁾, bearing in mind that “*it comprehends the array of institutionally framed activities, which after initial training are aimed at faculty professional development towards a practice that benefits the students and the school.*” (Our translation).

The concept of continuous training arises associated with the concept of professional development through learning, which is inherent to it^(5,6).

Continuous training may be seen as a part or a component of the faculty professional development process^(3,6) or it may have faculty professional development as a result. In a professional development perspective, it must be considered as an individual, permanent and continuous process with multiple stages⁽²⁾. It includes a lifelong personal development, a professional training directed to teaching and development, and updating professional activity. Given these assumptions, we can affirm that continuing training is a phenomenon that occurs along the professor’s life, integrated in daily activities and social practices⁽²⁾.

Continuous training is also a collective process, which must be put into effect in school through different formal and informal experiences and contribute to faculty professional skills development⁽²⁾.

Teaching presupposes a learning process throughout professional life. Continuous training becomes essential in this learning process. Processes of direct training (conferences, courses, seminars, workshops etc.), learning in school (classroom activities, friendly criticism, processes of evaluation, action-research, evaluation of workbooks, collaborative work focused on certain tasks) and held outside school (in professional development centers, thematic networks, informal groups) are all training contexts that allow professors to build their own learning^(3,6) and develop professional skills.

Professor continuous training must consider the epistemological reflection of teaching practice as a source of practical and theoretical knowledge. This teaching practice must be considered a space inside the academic curriculum, essential for building practical thought of professors, in the multiple dimensions comprising their activities⁽¹⁾, itself an autonomous space of training. Reflection is an instrument professors should use to discuss and examine their practices. Reflection centered on experience and on teaching methods proves to be essential for building new knowledge, for learning and for developing professors’ skills^(5,7,8).

Training demands faculty participation in reflective processes and implies research processes directly linked to educational practices. Research is essential as a training strategy for questioning, understanding and transforming professor’s practices^(2,5,9). These processes should be developed as part of a collaborative work, essential for learning in and about practice, promoting faculty professional development^(2,8,9,10).

Research-action as a teaching method is fundamental in understanding and transforming practice. This research carried out in school by professors enables to elucidate difficult situations in learning contexts, creating conditions for understanding, innovation and improvement of processes in educational contexts⁽⁵⁾. Professors as a researchers of their own practice must be seen as “*epistemological subjects*” capable of creating and using theories about their practice⁽¹⁾.

Continuous training should be designed with collective spaces to work, cooperate and collaborate, and with the support and consideration of elements of recognized scientific and pedagogical merit, internal and external to the school, as a development strategy for professors and teaching⁽⁹⁾. It should also facilitate the consolidation of professional collaboration mechanisms, innovative experiences, discussion spaces and the existing networks in the interests of a common learning, of a shared investment and of building practices that allows thinking and developing researches on education and society^(2,11).

Following this assumptions and thoughts, and assuming that faculty training is a complex process that will follow the professional throughout his career, supported by teaching practices, in the richness of experiences and particularly in the relevance of formative processes, we decided to conduct this study proposing the following central question: *What are the proposals for improving faculty continuous training in the field of nursing?*

We believe that the findings of this research can represent an important contribution to the reflection on continuous training and help understanding the relevance of formative processes in faculty professional development, particularly in the field of nursing.

METHODS

We carried out a descriptive research using qualitative approach methods in order to identify proposals for improving continuous training of professors from public institutions who give nursing classes in Portugal.

Research objective

We defined the following objective for this study:

- Identify proposals for improvement in the continuous professional development of nursing professors.

Participants

Participants are nursing professors from public higher education institutions in Portugal.

This decision was based on the importance of choosing professors with institutional stability.

Sample includes professors from two higher education institutions in Portugal. Participants were intentionally selected and properly framed within selection criteria. The sample of 15 nursing professors includes a group of eight professors from one institution and seven from another. Group composition was based on Ramos⁽¹²⁾ recommendations, i.e., the number of participants should vary between five and eight.

Fifteen professors participated in focus groups, being eight (8) women (53.3%) and seven (7) men (46.7%). Most professors are between 51 and 60 years old (60%), followed by professors between 41 and 50 years old (40%). We found that seven (46.7%) of these professors have a master's degree and six (40.0%) have a Ph.D. As for years of teaching service, six (40%) professors have between 25 and 29 years of service. We call attention to the fact that nine (60%) of these professors have 20 or more years of service. Most participants are assistant professors (eight, corresponding to 53.3%). We also found that 11 (73.3%) of these professors teach in courses of the second cycle, whereas four (26.7%) teach only in courses of the first cycle.

Sampling techniques and data analysis

We opted in this study to use focus groups as data collection technique. According to what is suggested by Ramos⁽¹²⁾, abundance of data, low cost, stimulation/participation of those involved in the process, and the fact that the group is an element of stability and consensus in the debate were decisive in choosing this data collection technique.

The two sessions took place in the higher education institutions involved, in a location defined by school directors, namely in the professor's meeting rooms. They were moderated by the researcher, who used the script created for that purpose.

The moderator began each session informing the theme and objectives of the study. Each professor was asked to focus on personal teaching experience and particularly on aspects concerning the object of study. The process was formally explained, defining expectations (of engagement) regarding the participants, and his role as moderator of the discussion, comparing opinions on the theme discussed⁽¹²⁾. The moderator collected data for characterization of the group and subsequently introduced the subject and the question that was the main thread of the discussion:

- What are your proposals for improving faculty continuous training in this scientific area in this institution?

Participants freely discussed the theme in both sessions, focusing on their teaching experiences. There was a respectful environment for participants express their positions and beliefs on the theme under study.

The two sessions were recorded using audio resources. Later, they were properly transcribed and subjected to categorical thematic analysis, Bardin⁽¹³⁾. This qualitative data analysis technique allowed us to interpret data gathered from focus groups.

According to ethical principles that should guide the design of this type of study, we articulated joint efforts with institutions and participants to ensure respect for ethical principles. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of two higher education institutions, one in Portugal and one in Spain.

Data validation

The qualitative content analysis process was submitted to the evaluation of two judges concerning:

- Fitness-relevance of inferences in each data entry;
- Relevance of the categorization process;
- Mutual exclusion properties, homogeneity and objectivity of the categorization process.

Coefficients of agreement obtained (Table 1) guarantee inference and the categorization process validity.

Table 1 - Coefficients of agreement resulting from data validation by the judges

Evaluation item	Coefficient of agreement
Fitness-relevance of inference of each data entry	,615
Relevance of the categorization process	,82
Mutual exclusion properties, homogeneity and objectivity of analysis	1,0

This validation process and the recommendation of judges/experts allowed us to make some changes in coding and categorization process.

RESULTS

Results are centered on “Recommendations for faculty continuous training”. They comprise two categories: themes and factors involved in training.

Themes mentioned by the professors as recommendations were:

- Training in thematic areas;
- Training models;
- Research; Reflection/ sharing experiences;
- Connection with clinical practice;
- Collaborative work;
- Connection to the community;
- Exchange with other institutions of higher education;
- Develop skills to reach other markets and
- Planning the continuous training.

These professors called attention to the following elements of training:

- Encourage individual motivations;
- Time availability;
- Funding;
- Example set by leaders;
- Institutional recognition;
- Mandatory professional update and
- Institution strategic plan.

DISCUSSION

We found in the participants' speech recommendations concerning many themes.

The following thematic areas stand out on the theme of training:

- a) Didactic training, curriculum development and teaching comprise an area that comprehends knowledge inherent to pedagogical activity and that is essential for professors become a facilitator of student learning⁽¹⁴⁾. This recommendation on pedagogical training of these professors is assumed as an essential contribution to teaching quality and corroborate the studies from Gonçalves⁽¹⁵⁾ and Zabalza⁽¹⁴⁾.
- b) Training in current themes in nursing, training for citizenship, namely in basic life support, and training for internationalization were considered a bet for the future by these professors.

Regarding the teaching model for nursing, beyond the courses, stand out the allusion to more participative approaches, encouraging dialogue and collaborative in continuous training^(2,11), such as reflection, sharing, gatherings, deepening themes and thematic workshops. These proposals express a new point of view, a new way of being in training and accomplishing lifelong learning. Although still using individual learning models, these professors express willingness to change learning practices that left their marks on continuous training, strengthening a collective and collaborative work essential to the transformation of practice.

Recommendations focused also on research as a continuous training strategy for professors, which makes questioning, understanding and transformation of professor practices^(2,8-10) possible, guaranteed the necessary availability⁽⁵⁾ as well as professor need to prepare for managing international projects and its importance to nursing.

These professors often allude to sharing experience and reflection, individually or in group. They are essential training and professional development strategies for knowledge mobilization. They are framed within a collaborative culture and allow a contextualized approach, indispensable for understanding teaching practices and are thus assumed as a contribution to professors learn from one experience to another^(5-7,17-19). In these professors' speech particular attention is given to thematic workshops as a space for reflection and sharing experience, therefore one of the ways to guarantee continuous training and professional development of these professors^(5,14).

Clinical practice is the base for building professional knowledge and nursing teaching professionalism^(15,20). Connection with the clinical practice is precisely one of the recommendations, because of its strong connection with practical activities and health institutions where students develop their clinical skills. Connection with clinical practice are in accordance with the results from Gonçalves⁽¹⁵⁾, in which professors interviewed point to a nexus between teaching and practice in nursing, considering that the nursing professor knowledge has traits of conceptual logic, but also instrumental and practical.

Collaborative work is also a recommendation for faculty continuous training. These participants highlighted it as a strategy that makes sharing experiences, ideas and learning possible, and that leads to collective decision-making, contributing decisively to the development of professor skills. Training based upon a collaborative work dynamics is one of the recommendations of these professors for learning in and about practice, and to improve continuous training in their institution. These findings corroborate data from other authors' work^(3,5,9-10,18,19,21).

Connection to the community is one of the recommendations from the professors who participated in focus groups. The professor's job involves a connection to the community⁽⁵⁾ and it should be the subject of attention for professors in training and professional update, meeting needs and considering trends in the surrounding community and worldwide.

The exchange with other national and international institutions of higher education was highlighted as one of the recommendation themes, beyond the professor's need for developing the capacity of reaching other markets, in training areas that may become axes of development of the institution itself.

Planning continuous professional development was another suggestion made by the participants. Its definition, properly framed within faculty professional development, implies training plans adjusted to faculty collective training needs⁽¹⁴⁾ appreciation of spaces for reflection and sharing experiences, ideas and learning, and participation in the dynamics of collaborative work. It is worth mentioning that according to Imbernón⁽¹¹⁾, planning activities that promote learning, besides focusing on reflection and analysis of problematic situations, presupposes the development of research projects aimed at and conceived for clinical practice.

Regarding "*factors involved in training*", these nursing professors called attention for encouraging individual motivations, time availability, funding, example set by leaders, institutional recognition, mandatory professional update and the institution strategic plan.

Encouraging individual motivations of each professor is a factor that should not be ignored. Continuous professional development should consider each professor motivations and fit the institution development needs, in defense of the school training quality⁽¹⁴⁾.

Being a professor implies continuous training and the learning processes demand time availability⁽²²⁾, besides the necessary time management indispensable for professors to be able to reconcile training processes and their professional activities⁽¹⁹⁾. Time availability is associated with organizational conditions or workload.

Similarly to Murta⁽¹⁹⁾, continuous training funding concerns these professors and hinders their participation in these processes, notwithstanding professor's involvement in training being dynamic and truly motivated, and, therefore, including some kind of incentive^(11,14).

Example set by leaders is equally mentioned as a factor that intervenes in continuous training. Leaders, in these nursing professors opinion, should be a reference in the search for knowledge and professional development, encouraging other professors to seek training, especially if we consider that the role of leaders is to establish harmony between the professors' individual needs and the institution needs.

Institutional recognition is mentioned as one of the factors that affect faculty continuous training, considering that training in addition to professional development should contribute to the growth of the professor within the institution⁽¹⁴⁾.

Participants considered mandatory professional update a factor that affects training, and puts us in a dilemma in the face of the voluntary character of training and personal commitment of each professor⁽¹⁴⁾.

The institution strategic plan as an organizational development strategy is considered a factor that affects faculty continuous training.

CONCLUSION

Continuous training is essential for faculty professional development and, in this case, for nursing professors to develop their professional skills and become facilitators of student learning.

As a synthesis and assuming the centrality of these findings, we put some recommendations under perspective for continuous training in higher education institutions.

- i.** Assuming that teaching implies a solid and proper training, it is important that institutions and professors, individual and collectively, may value and emphasize their pedagogical training and those associated with contents of their field of action⁽¹⁴⁾.
- ii.** We propose using training models that would withdraw from individual training practices. It is essential to use models that rely on individual or group reflection, sharing experiences, arranged in a collaborative culture that enables a properly contextualized approach^(2,5-9,16-19). These training strategies are essential to knowledge mobilization and development.
- iii.** In line with participant recommendations we highlight the need to use research as a continuous training strategy, which leads to understanding and transformation of their practices^(2,8-10).
- iv.** We recommend that professors maintain a connection with practice, with companies and with the world of work to guarantee they have a connection with professional knowledge^(15,20) and keep themselves updated. It is important for professors to maintain their connection to the community⁽⁵⁾ in their training and professional update.
- v.** We recommend, based on factors involved in training, the encouragement of each professor motivations, in balance with needs strategically defined by the institution⁽¹⁴⁾, over and above professor's need of time availability⁽²²⁾ and funding to accomplish it.

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