

**MASTER TEACHER NOMINEE**  
**ADELWISA (ADEL) VIDAL BLANCO, B.S. M.S., R.N. - BC**

It was more than two years ago that I received a call from Adel Blanco expressing a desire to join our faculty. During my first meeting with Adel, I knew that she was the person we needed on board as soon as possible.

Her expressive facial and manual gestures, speech with unbounded enthusiasm, ability to make immediate connection with the audience that would hang on to her every word with rapt attention practically melting into her hands were the qualities of an accomplished teacher. When you combine these formidable personal traits with superb knowledge of the subject matter and teaching techniques honed over 20 years as an academic and clinical nursing instructor, you were looking at a person who could turn an indifferent and nearly somnolent student into a cheerful class participant.

So, while writing this Master Teacher nominating letter, I interviewed Adel Blanco and asked her to articulate her teaching philosophy and specific techniques that she uses to implement this philosophy in a classroom. According to Adel, her teaching philosophy rests on two pillars: Critical thinking and test-taking strategies. Add to this her uncanny and thoroughly innovative ability to use digital media to promote learning beyond the four walls of a classroom. Let's start with that.

**LEARNING THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA**

Every brilliant teacher possesses vast and deep knowledge of the subject matter, unmatched skills at human interaction, expertise in engaging attention of fleeting minds even for brief periods and tactile manipulation of face and arms that bring all eyes to converge upon that person in the front. There's yet one more ingredient that goes into the mix that make a teacher par excellence: Tools.

Tools will never outshine a brilliant teacher, but over the past fifteen years many tools, services, and platforms have become easier to adapt for learning purposes, to help command and hold the attention of learners. Adel brings this entire repertoire to the classroom.

For many teachers digital media is outside of their comfort zone, but master teachers master the new technology and elevate routine learning to a new level.

Facebook is the most formidable digital media tool available to a teacher. "Teaching with Facebook is a way for me to engage my students," says Adel. "Facebook allows me to build a bridge between my classroom curriculum and what my students are doing outside the classroom." If used properly, Facebook becomes a functional tool and a critical resource.

Nursing is all about healing, but healing cannot take place in the absence of effective communication as was shown in the recent tragic case of Ebola patient in Dallas who

went to the emergency department of the hospital, told his story to the nurses which, alas, was never communicated to the attending physicians.

Here's how Ms. Blanco brings home the critical importance of accurate communication. "I ask the students to play a game which we all have played at some time called 'broken telephone.' The classroom is divided in half by a center aisle, like team left and team right. I walk to one back corner of the hall and whisper a sentence into the ear of the student sitting in the last row. Then I whisper the same sentence into the ear of the student sitting in the other back corner. These students are told that their job is to pass the message to their neighbors. When the message gets to the last student, he or she writes the final sentence on the interactive white board. Of course, during this 'game' my lecture does not stop. At the end of the game, it is clear that entropy has entered the game and the original sentence and its meaning are completely lost by both teams."

Teaching about and through Facebook demonstrates a method for creating a learning context that invites students to increase knowledge and critical thinking while building a love of learning based on connectivity, engagement, creativity, curiosity, and collaboration.

Right behind Facebook in the digital media lineup is Twitter. According to Ms. Adel, "I find it to be one of the social media tools with the highest pedagogical return, fostering discussion and expanding both the content and means through which students engage with classroom material."

Instructors frequently use Twitter as a means to notify students by sending reminders and updates in between class sessions. Twitter is best suited as a means to expand classroom conversation outside of the classroom, enabling students to ask questions of the instructor. The experience of attending class and then continuing the conversation outside of the classroom significantly enhances the learning process. When done well, with a group of students who are invested in the learning process, this can create an atmosphere whereby students start to understand that the issues being discussed go beyond the confines of the classroom.

Another digital medium used extensively is Wiki. A Wiki allows a community of people to edit and create – simultaneously, in real time – as many pages as they want. "I have been using Wikis as course learning environment for some years. I find them to be more open or flexible than the traditional Learning Management systems, such as Blackboard or Moodle," says Ms. Blanco. "I not only use the Wiki to publish course materials like the syllabus and the schedule, but students use it to publish their assignments, review each other's work, and collaborate on group projects. Specifically, I discuss the class assignment, which involves summarizing and discussing the assigned readings before we meet in class."

## CRITICAL THINKING

Becoming a professional nurse requires that you learn to think like a nurse. Critical thinking is essential to skilled nursing and is therefore essential to nursing education. Intuitive nursing practice (which is still the norm in nursing), when performed automatically, without care, vigilance, and routine critique, can result in many significant negative implications.

Critical thinking skills are essential in nursing because they are the basis for learning to prioritize and make decisions. Because nurses provide care for patients 24/7, a nurse's critical thinking skills can literally mean the difference between life and death. These skills are necessary not only to provide bedside care, but to make policy decisions.

Critical thinkers strive to be clear, accurate, precise, logical, complete, and fair when they listen, speak and act. As nurses we want to eliminate irrelevant, inconsistent and illogical thoughts as we reason about patient care. Nurses use language to clearly communicate in-depth information that is significant to nursing care. Nurses are not focused on the trivial or the irrelevant.

Certain skills are important for effective critical thinking. The skills that are needed are:

1. **Interpretation** – The ability to understand and explain the meaning of information or an event.
2. **Analysis** – The investigation of a course of action based on objective and subjective data.
3. **Evaluation** – The process of assessing the value of the information obtained. Is it credible, reliable, and relevant? This skill is also applied in determining if desired outcomes have been reached.

## TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

The second pillar of Adel's teaching success is her emphasis on test-taking strategies. At Homestead Schools we prepare our graduates to become competent, knowledgeable and caring nurses, and we want them to pass the NCLEX on their first attempt.

Sometimes pure hard work and mental preparedness is not enough; you need to be able to answer questions correctly within the time allotted. This is just an extension of critical thinking skill. In clinical practice nurses are routinely called upon to make critical decisions after quickly sifting through a maze of data, discarding the irrelevant, trivial and mundane distracters.

I sat through one of Adel's classes and in just a short time I came away with several test-taking tips she dispensed that could make the difference between a pass and fail for a student.

- ✓ Read the question before you look at the answer.
- ✓ Come up with the answer in your head before looking at the possible answers; this way the choices given on the test won't throw you off or trick you.
- ✓ Eliminate answers you know aren't right.
- ✓ Read all the choices before choosing your answer.
- ✓ If there is no guessing penalty, always take an educated guess and select an answer.
- ✓ Don't keep on changing your answer; usually your first choice is the right one, unless you've misread the question.
- ✓ In "All of the above" and "None of the above" choices, if you are certain one of the statements is true don't choose "None of the above" or if one of the statements is false don't choose "All of the above".
- ✓ In a question with an "All of the above" choice, if you see at least two correct statements, then "All of the above" is probably the answer.
- ✓ A positive choice is more likely to be true than a negative one.
- ✓ Usually the correct answer is the choice with the most information.

### **THE BARSCH LEARNING STYLE INVENTORY**

So, I asked Adel, how do you get each and every student in the class to listen to you and benefit from your lectures? We all know that not everyone in the group swims at the same pace: some will finish ahead of others, some will be laggards, and a few will even drown.

Individuals learn best when the teacher is presenting the material that fits their particular style of learning. Some students find they learn best from a lecture when the professor presents key points in a visual manner either on the board, on an overhead, or with a handout. Others find they have a much easier time hearing someone talk about a subject rather than reading the same ideas on paper. These two examples present the two key learning styles: visual and auditory. But learning styles are not limited to the senses of sight and hearing; there are as many different ways of learning as there are learners.

Adel starts out by identifying each student's preferred style of learning. The Barsch Learning Style Inventory is a short diagnostic test that assesses individual learning styles. She groups students who learn best through *seeing* things (visual), *hearing* them (auditory), or through the sense of *touch* or *body movement* (tactile/kinesthetic).

Once she has identified each student's learning style she goes on to build on the strengths and address the weaknesses. The visual or auditory style, whichever scores the highest, is considered the primary preferred learning style. The tactile/kinesthetic is considered secondary, even if the score is higher than the other two. This is because we do most of our learning through our eyes and ears, and use the senses of touch, feeling and motion to enhance our primary learning.



To make the exercise fun and participatory Adel asks the students to paste eyes, ears or hand as their dominant learning style may be on an index card and paste it on the desk for her to see. Now she's able to fashion her lecture to meet the learning styles of individual students.

I walked into one of her classes to observe the process at first hand. It was like watching James Levine conduct the Metropolitan Opera where every member of the orchestra is focused on the conductor as the maestro swings his arms to emphasize the score, nods his head toward the players and sways his body back and forth, all in a continuous, fluid motion. Adel does not need PowerPoint presentation or flashy computer app; it's all about communication and attention.

### **OTHER TEACHING TACTICS**

There are a few other seemingly small but very effective teaching tactics Adel uses to ensure full class participation.

- ◆ At the beginning of session each day, she plays William Tell overture music to teach new students the importance of being on time in the classroom and when they're considered tardy.
- ◆ Each student is given a large green or red lollipop. If the topic of discussion is clear, students raise the green lollipop; if it needs further elucidation, up goes the red. This way no one is left behind.

- ◆ Some students are afraid to ask “dumb” questions in front of their classmates. So, Adel urges them to write their questions on post-it notes and stick them on the blackboard before the class starts. Students get their questions answered without feeling the glare of their classmates.
- ◆ Fifteen minutes before the end of each class session she summarizes the salient points of the day’s lecture, gets feedback from the students, clarifies instructions, and sets the stage for the next day’s assignment. Students have one more chance to raise their lollipops.
- ◆ Here’s the final gesture of the day. She asks students to stand facing the teacher, then each student taps the right shoulder of the student in front of him or her and says “You did a good job today.”

### **ACCOLADES FROM ACOLYTES**

Students are the final arbiters of a teacher’s performance. I completed the circle by interviewing the students. Here’s what they had to say:

*Ms. Adel is the best! The information that she prepared us with is priceless. She is very skillful and she teaches with love. I would recommend Ms. Adel to anyone. She is so magnificent that she could teach a blind and deaf person and they would pass the NCLEX on the first try. She is outstanding. I learned so much from her. I know that I will pass.*

*She is the best! Awesome! Amazing! I’m so very glad that I had the opportunity to attend Ms. Adel Blanco’s review! She has definitely enhanced my test taking strategies! I will definitely recommend her to future nursing students! Oh, did I mention super duper fabulous, kind hearted, and nice?*

*She is so awesome! Not boring at all. Makes lessons easy to understand. She also explains everything and teaches strategies to answer questions, making it easy for us. I really learned a lot from her and now I understand things more than when I was in school. GREAT INSTRUCTOR!*