

# Ten Things I Wish I Knew Before Changing to a **CONCEPT-BASED CURRICULUM**

Conceptual-learning expert, Kristy Baron, PhD, RN, shares her personal insights about what she would have liked to have known before beginning the process of moving to a CBC.



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In my career, I've worked at two institutions that changed from a traditional to a concept-based curriculum. During these moves, I interviewed many other nursing educators about their experiences with developing and implementing a new curriculum. **This led me to identify ten important things I think all educators should know before changing to a CBC.**

- 1 Comparison of Traditional Curriculum and Concept-Based Curriculum**  
Initially, my teacher-centered approach guided students to memorize material and recall lists of information, that in retrospect, did not prepare them adequately for the real world of nursing practice. In contrast, teaching in a concept-based curriculum focuses on students' ability to learn through interactive activities that reflect current nursing practice. Understanding essential concepts, providing opportunities to transfer learning, and practice with critical thinking effectively prepares students for today's complex, constantly changing healthcare system.

**Since vast amounts of information is instantly available, the challenge is to make sense of it all. One way to do so is through concepts.**

- 2 The Value of Learning by Concepts**  
A concept gives meaning to facts and connects them together in order to foster understanding – it is the teaching [of] the building blocks from which all of our decisions are made. At its core, learning conceptually helps nurses transfer information to effectively problem-solve while caring for their patients.
- 3 Become Proactive About Learning the Processes of a Concept-Based Curriculum**  
Each educator needs to become proficient with the processes of a concept-based curriculum – designing conceptual curricular structures, teaching conceptually, and understanding the teaching-learning process through a conceptual lens – to implement the curriculum successfully. Some ways I learned to become more proficient with these processes included educational experiences such as talking to experts, reading literature, attending workshops, and self-teaching.

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“Adopting a conceptual curricular structure alone does not translate to conceptual teaching and learning. Faculty must also replace teacher-centered, content-focused practices with student-centered conceptual learning strategies.” (Baron, 2014, p. 200)

- 4 Collaboration Promotes Better Outcomes**  
Even though time is limited, it's best if faculty members collaborate in order to develop sound curricular structures. If this doesn't happen on the front end, you may end up duplicating efforts in order to fix what isn't working.
- 5 Student Preparation Remains Essential**  
In a concept-based curriculum, teaching focuses on learning, and instruction requires student participation; consequently, student preparation remains essential. Faculty can promote student preparation in curriculum design through pre-class online activities, voice-recordings with PowerPoints, and pre-readings that covered concepts with pathophysiology.
- 6 Teaching Conceptually**  
Teaching in the classroom traditionally consisted of transmitting large amounts of information to passive students with minimal time to problem-solve. In contrast, conceptual learning **promotes understanding** which allows students to transfer knowledge from experiences in the classroom to new experiences in practice; subsequently, students require time in the classroom to practice critical thinking skills.  

When moving to a CBC, existing content may not be transferrable. Even if you're teaching the same points, you may have to restructure the way it's presented.
- 7 Content-Laden Courses Do Not Fit in Conceptual Curricular Structures**  
I discovered difficulties in promoting conceptual learning when the course lacked a conceptual design. In addition, I noticed trying to teach multiple concepts in a unit forced the teaching-learning process – neglecting the deep understanding necessary to transfer critical thinking to various situations.
- 8 Facilitate the Practice of Critical Thinking Skills and Transfer Them to New Situations**  
Because it is impossible for a teacher to cover all content, only small portions of learning can occur in the classroom; consequently, students are responsible to learn some on their own. Students experience more effective self-directed learning when they understand concepts, since that allows them to transfer learning to other situations and problems.

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## Finding Satisfaction in Teaching

The majority of educators enjoy teaching because of the influence on others. A concept-based curriculum reinforces this idea since it benefits educators by requiring them to interact with students to facilitate the learning process.

“I love teaching because I feel like I make a difference.  
[How] you teach them will affect the way they practice  
professionally forever.” (Baron, 2014)

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## Use Change Strategy to Guide the Process

Supporting faculty's change from traditional curriculum to concept-based curriculum requires change of attitudes, skills, and behaviors. Change management includes evidenced-base strategies to guide faculty through the maze of change. For example, *Kotter's Eight-Stage Change Process* (2012) outlines stages to lead change effectively. Proven change strategies can support faculty to implement a successful change to concept-based curriculum.



I hope the 10 things I shared will benefit you as you make the adventurous change to a concept-based curriculum.  
Good Luck! – Kristy

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### References

Baron, K.A. (2014). *Changing to a concept-based curricula: The process for nurse educators*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Rocky Mountain University of Health Professionals. Utah. Kotter, J. P. (2012). *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.