Effective Clinical Orientation Programs:
5 Ways to Improve Unit-Based Training and Onboarding

The work of nursing in clinical care settings is complex and ever changing, which means that in-house training systems must be top notch in order to keep pace with front-line need. Caring for patients safely in perioperative, critical care, or other specialized settings, requires the acquisition and maintenance of both in-depth knowledge and hands-on skills.

Traditionally, the task of onboarding training has fallen to the nurse educators. Nursing, teaching, and creating curriculum are all different skill sets, and the work of developing meaningful, accurate, timely training information can feel like an insurmountable challenge. This isn’t a new problem. Creating, validating, and maintaining large, multi-component educational programs has never been easy. But, with many training departments stretched thin, clinical education leaders have started considering a new solution for the problem of how to efficiently and meaningfully onboard clinicians into high-stakes specialized roles — online learning.
Fortunately, today’s nursing educators can choose from a range of off-the-shelf clinical orientation programs that can help. When used as the foundation for a blended clinical orientation curriculum, pre-validated online programs can strengthen your team, reduce turnover, and save your hospital precious time — and money.

But not all online training programs are the same. The best clinical orientation programs not only integrate well with your in-house, hospital-specific training, they should also provide the resources educators need to design, manage, and deliver a full curricula that supports classroom instruction, preceptorships, and self-directed learning.

Selecting and integrating a program to support the institutional knowledge of your nursing staff means that you — and your patients — get a result that’s greater than the sum of its parts. When you can rely on a solid program to deliver core, foundational knowledge, you free up staff to focus on sharing and strengthening the specific knowledge and resources that make your organization strong. This can create a more engaged clinical team, which means less turnover, greater stability, and lower costs for your institution.

The work of overhauling an orientation program can be quite significant, but the results are compelling. As a recent analysis of orientation programs for nurses made clear, turnover is a major problem in the healthcare field. But when organizations invest the time and resources to create a stronger, more efficient training program, they can significantly reduce turnover, and the costs associated with hiring and training new nurses. However, at the organizations who saw major improvements, “the orientation program was not simply ‘tweaked,’ rather, the organization embraced a new way of doing business. The reinvented orientation programs did not only teach clinical skills, but rather focused on the learning needs and work-life balance of the nurse.”

A tall order, but one that absolutely can be achieved with the help of a strong online orientation program. Ready to take the plunge? Here are five key points to consider before you make an off-the-shelf program part of your next clinical orientation training.
1. Use Resources Wisely

In a clinical setting, your greatest resources are time and personnel. When it’s time to onboard a new team or offer additional specialized training, it can be challenging to coordinate schedules to allow for meaningful instruction while minimizing disruptions on the floor. A simple shift to save time? Add online learning into the mix. Instead of pulling nurses out of their departments, your learners can study when and where it works best for them. Offering 24-7 flexibility can reduce disruptions on the floor, and the individualized approach may even encourage more nurses to pursue specialized training.

Explicit classroom instruction from clinical leaders who know your organization inside and out will always be an irreplaceable part of any training program. But online learning can lessen the burden on preceptors and allow them to focus on developing the organizational specific curricula that can only come from within your hospital’s four walls. Plus, most quality online programs will support educators with their live instruction as well.

A learning management system (LMS) can help you to schedule classes, book rooms, and track no-shows without taking away time from shift work and unexpected spikes in admissions. Relying on fewer live classes to cover foundational content can help educators spend less of their time dealing with administrative details and more of their time designing hands-on learning.

The staff at CaroMont Health agrees; their blended program has saved significant time and money. After incorporating an online program as part of their basic clinical prep, training costs were reduced by more than 38% — a savings of nearly $57,000. Employees are also able to complete basic training much faster — the time spent on Basic Life Support (BLS) training has been cut by nearly 53%, with instructor time dropping by almost 67%. That time and money has netted classroom instructors more than 500 hours each year that they can dedicate to more specialized classes that are not well suited to online instruction.
2. Don’t Reinvent the Wheel

Facing a blank page is hard — especially when you have to fill it with vital clinical training information. Customizing a program using existing tools and resources is always easier than going it alone. Without a foundational program, nurse educators have to spend precious time mapping out skills and creating training modules for various skill sets.

By prioritizing which modules can be supported through online learning and which areas require in-person, support from organizational leaders, you can build a strong program with a blend of instructional approaches. But how do you know which order to teach the modules or how much time to allow for each lesson? The best programs provide plenty of suggestions for appropriate pacing to ensure the learning will stick. Many even provide short overviews of adult learning theory, best practices for preceptors, and invaluable tips for making sure your learners acquire the key competencies your nurse managers are looking for.

Another asset of ready-to-go orientation programs is the inclusion of instructor guides. Course navigation instructions help get instructors up to speed and reduce the need for a consistent instructor. While strong retention is a goal of nearly every institution, the typically high turnover rate in nursing teams is a reality that you must face head on. Course instructors keep the training consistent, and ensure any instructor knows how to download hand-outs, study aids, and templates (which can help you create facility-specific lessons). When you use a ready-to-go online program as opposed to relying on the specific lesson planning knowledge of individuals in your organization, you lessen the stress and chaos when a new person transitions into an educational role.

In addition, most clinical orientation programs provide links to supplemental resources, such as videos, textbooks, websites, and journal articles that instructors and preceptors can assign to support key learning concepts. Having ready access to all these teaching aids and learner materials saves major time, and spares you the effort of researching and citing sources, obtaining permissions, and making sure links and content are still up to date.

The goal is simple: help your educators spend less time building content, and more time working with learners to acquire and demonstrate skills.
3. Support Different Learning Styles

No one-size-fits-all approach will help all nurses in all organizations transition to more specialized care. To meet the needs of different learners and different learning styles, look for off-the-shelf courses that offer a variety of learning templates and activities. Programs with narration, case studies, quizzes, game-like elements, and interactive exercises are designed to keep adult learners engaged and will appeal to a variety of learning preferences. And, since the core content is delivered through online courses, learners can work at their own speed and review content as often as necessary.

Considering different learning styles is more than just the icing on the cake. In fact, onboarding and ongoing training programs that offer flexibility and different modes of learning can actually have a significant impact on job satisfaction, and ultimately retention. Clinical nursing work requires constant interaction and social energy, which can energize more extroverted nurses who thrive in interactive environments. But what about nurses who crave a mix of interaction with quiet focus?

A study published in the Journal for Nurses in Staff Development pointed to the use of personality tests to determine and accommodate learning and teaching styles. One of the key findings makes a strong argument for a blend of classroom and individual instruction. The study reports that “matching/not matching of the introversion/ extraversion preference also showed the strongest correlation to overall satisfaction.”

A recent study offers support for this claim, and also makes a strong argument that paying attention to quality training programs and teaching/learning styles can make or break your bottom line. “Approximately 35-65% of new graduates will leave their workplace within the first year of employment, lending to the 55% nursing turnover rate. The cost of orientating a new nurse to the perioperative role is estimated to cost between $50,000 and $59,000. Thus, it is imperative to improve the orientation experience for both new and senior perioperative nurses. Matching preceptor/preceptee learning styles is one way to enhance job satisfaction levels.”

In other words, offering a combo platter of learning/teaching styles can help you improve retention and save money. And one of the best ways to do that? By supplementing in-house live instruction with quality online learning programs.
Orientation Programs Found in the HealthcareSource eLearning Library

The HealthcareSource eLearning Library offers many eLearning courses which can be used to build and strengthen your organization's various orientation programs. When used with HealthcareSource NetLearning®, all courses can be accessed and managed directly within NetLearning, simplifying the often arduous process for learners, preceptors, educators, managers and LMS administrators — just one transcript, one password, one learning portal, one invoice, and one contract.

Here are some of the orientation programs HealthcareSource® has to offer:

**Essentials of Critical Care Orientation**  
American Association of Critical-Care Nurses

Essentials of Critical Care Orientation (ECCO) is an interactive, care-based blended learning program for nurses new to the critical care practice environment. Both new nurse graduates and nurses transferring into critical care from other care settings will benefit from the program which uses current evidence based practices to cover the diagnostic tools, diseases and disorders, and patient management principles commonly found in the critical care environment.

**Essentials of Pediatric Critical Care Orientation**  
Children’s Hospital Association

Essentials of Pediatric Critical Care Orientation (EPCCO) is a program designed for pediatric acute and critical care nurses and those who educate them. It provides the foundational nursing education needed in pediatric critical care, while imparting valuable knowledge and tools critical for the care of these fragile patients. While ideal for nurses new to pediatrics, this program also works as great resource for more experienced nurses who may be looking for targeted refresher training.

**Essentials of Nurse Manager Orientation**  
American Association of Critical-Care Nurses

Essentials of Nurse Manager Orientation (ENMO) is a comprehensive nurse manager training program developed in partnership with the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE) to promote nursing leadership excellence, by demonstrating to both new and aspiring nurse leaders how to best carry out the complex responsibilities associated with a nursing leadership role. This comprehensive course also is an effective tool for preparing learners for the Certified Nurse Manager and Leader (CNML) exam.

**Periop 101**  
Association of periOperative Registered Nurses

Periop 101 is a blended learning educational program that includes 27 modules for perioperative nurse learners. Used by hospitals and ambulatory surgery centers nationwide to recruit, educate, and retain perioperative nurses, Periop 101 is a cost-effective solution that has been proven to turnover by as much as 25%. Specialized courses are available for RNs, OB RN Circulators, Ambulatory Surgery Centers, Physician Assistants and APRNs, education administrators, and nurse preceptors.

**Essentials of Neonatal Critical Care Orientation**  
Children’s Hospital Association

Essentials of Neonatal Critical Care Orientation (ENCCO) provides your NICU clinicians with the foundational, core topics pertinent to caring for critically-ill infants. This comprehensive program includes case scenarios and practice activities broken into individual, self-paced modules, making it the perfect program for both new clinicians and those who may be searching for some refresher training.
4. Partner with Experts

It goes without saying that not all clinical education programs are created equally. Choose a course that’s been developed by experts who are committed to keeping courses current with evidence-based practice. Leaving vital updates to your in-house clinical team can eat up precious time, and also leave your organization open to compliance issues. When you contract with an outside provider to lay the foundation for basic and specialized skills for the clinical team, your organization can rest easier in the knowledge that your learners will receive well-designed training that reflect best practices and up-to-date standards of care.

Adopting a gold-standard program from a well-respected association can help you get buy-in from learners and preceptors alike. Offering clinicians the opportunity to take such programs can also help your organization both recruit and retain highly valuable talent. That the programs carry significant credit hours is another key selling point to any staff who are working on licensure or advanced certifications. Contact hours are expensive and very time consuming to get for courses that are created in-house, but when you buy a program that work is done for you and provides you learners with added value. When your nursing team has better access to training, you may find that retention improves — and compliance rates will certainly get a boost.

5. Don’t Take Shortcuts for Implementation

Looking for another way to save time and headaches? Select courses that you know will integrate with your LMS. When you buy a course that doesn’t offer seamless integration, you’re throwing money out the window. On the flip side, when you understand how to set up and administer the program smoothly on your learning platform upfront, you’ll be better able to help others get the most from their learning experience.

Once you’re familiar with the program’s set up, consider assigning a brief recap to inform users and preceptors about the nuts and bolts of how the program works. Everyone who interfaces with the program should have a clear understanding of how long their licenses will be valid, how long they will have access to the courses, how many attempts they will have to complete the final exam, and other key logistical details.

One final note: make sure you allow the recommended time most learners will need to complete both the didactic and hands-on training components successfully. By allotting sufficient time, you can help ensure your learners both acquire and retain the desired learning objectives, and feel more confident in applying their knowledge in a busy clinical setting.
Preparing nurses to work in critical care can be a challenge. There’s a lot for new or transferring nurses to learn, and for a unit that is typically already struggling with higher turnover rates, making sure that you have everyone fully-prepared ready to care for patients (while keeping them on the floor instead of in a classroom) can seem like an impossible task.

We spoke with Jan Degulis of the Education & Professional Development office at St. Joseph Healthcare in Nashua, New Hampshire about how to ensure critical care nurses (23 on permanent staff and two per diem) are ready for the patients who await them each day.

**Q. How are you currently preparing nurses to work in the critical care unit?**

**A.** We use the Essentials of Critical Care Orientation (ECCO) program from the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN). We’ve used that for years specifically for nurses hired into the ICU without any real critical care experience. We’ve got six nurses going through the program now. We rely on it quite a bit because we’re just not able to always find experienced nurses and I know we’re not alone. So, we’ve been able to use the ECCO program with quite a bit of success.

**Q. What about your nurses with more experience. Do you put them through the program too?**

**A.** We just did a Basic Knowledge Assessment (BKAT). We have it for a variety of disciplines and found that even some of the more experienced nurses scored low in some of the critical care areas. We plan on using ECCO along with some of the other AACN courses as a way to provide remediation.

**Q. For nurses transferring into critical care, do you mandate ECCO?**

**A.** Any nurse that transfers into critical care takes it. It is mandatory for all new nurses. If someone has worked in an ICU for years and years we won’t always make them go through the program but otherwise we use it to prepare all of our critical care nurses.

**Q. How do you deliver the ECCO program?**

**A.** We use it as part of a blended learning program. Nurses have approximately four months to go through the online portion which we deliver and track via HealthcareSource NetLearning. During this time we also have them meet with their preceptor for hands-on skills work.

**Q. What did you use before you used ECCO to orient new nurses?**

**A.** Critical care orientation was delivered via a classroom-only program that one of our former critical care educators built. It was 160 hours of classroom time devoted to critical care and then the nurses would meet with a preceptor.

**Q. And why switch to ECCO?**

**A.** Time. You couldn’t get the nurses to sit in a classroom for four weeks. It’s a long time plus they’re so busy and short staffed that scheduling a class for this just wasn’t realistic. It’s much easier for them to go through the program at their own pace and still have time to take care of patients.

**Q. What kind of feedback do you get about the program?**

**A.** We don’t receive any complaints about the program. We started using it with AACN’s Preceptor program, and for ICU staff since they’re not always able to get to class for training.

St. Joseph Healthcare uses courses from the HealthcareSource eLearning Library™ which are managed, delivered, and tracked through their learning management system, HealthcareSource NetLearning®.
Conclusion

Onboarding new hires and preparing experienced clinicians to transition into more specialized roles is often best accomplished through a blend of several instructional methods. Using off-the-shelf online programs to deliver the foundational content can help facilities standardize training and drive evidence-based practice. By freeing up internal training resources to focus on delivering more and better experiential learning, online clinical orientation curricula can improve both learner engagement and training outcomes. The result? Better trained staff who are more likely to grow with your organization, and, ideally, a better clinical setting for all.

Sources


Willemsen-McBride, T. “Preceptorship planning is essential to perioperative nursing retention: matching teaching and learning styles.” Can Oper Room Nurse J. 2010 Mar;28(1):4, 10-1
About HealthcareSource

With more than 3,000 healthcare clients, HealthcareSource is the leading provider of talent management solutions for the healthcare industry. The HealthcareSource Quality Talent Suite helps healthcare organizations build a Patient-Centered Workforce by selecting, aligning, continuously developing, and retaining highly-engaged people. The company’s cloud-based platform of software, content, services and analytics includes applicant tracking, reference checking, behavioral and skills-based competency assessments, compensation analysis, performance and learning management, eLearning courseware, education and advisory services. A private company focused exclusively on the healthcare industry, HealthcareSource consistently earns high marks for client satisfaction and retention. HealthcareSource has been regularly ranked as a leader by KLAS Research for Talent Management, in addition to recognition in Healthcare Informatics 100, Modern Healthcare’s “Healthcare’s Hottest,” Inc. 500|5000, Deloitte Technology Fast 500, and Becker’s “150 Great Places to Work in Healthcare” list.