Refuse to Say “I’m Just a Nurse”: Professional Advocacy, Communication, and Career Agency

Course Description

This intermediate-level course examines how nurses can counter inaccurate public narratives, communicate professionally during workplace conflict, and use nursing expertise across evolving career paths. Drawing on Kelley Johnson’s advocacy experience and reflections on early-practice nursing, the course connects professional identity with patient safety, team trust, direct communication, boundaries, and career sustainability.

Author Bio

Kelley Johnson, RN, FNP, is a nurse, family nurse practitioner, speaker, and nursing advocate. Her public advocacy has focused on accurate representation of nursing, professional respect, and the value nurses bring to patient care. Her clinical and professional experience includes ICU nursing, family nurse practitioner preparation and practice, public speaking, media work, and healthcare-related communications.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this activity, learners will be able to:

1. **Analyze** how media portrayals, professional language, and public assumptions can shape perceptions of nursing practice and professional identity.
2. **Evaluate** a public or workplace communication scenario and **select** an advocacy response that advances accurate, respectful representation of nursing without escalating conflict.
3. **Apply** direct, patient-centered communication strategies to address an interpersonal concern with a colleague and preserve team trust.
4. **Develop** a feasible career-sustainability plan that links a nurse’s values, practice interests, and well-being needs to at least two potential professional pathways.
5. **Justify** the use of consultation and question-asking in an unfamiliar clinical situation as a patient-safety and trust-building practice.

Introduction

Nursing is a complex, knowledge-intensive profession practiced in settings that range from acute care to community, education, policy, media, and business. Yet public messages about nurses do not always reflect the assessment, clinical judgment, coordination, advocacy, and relational work involved in safe patient care. Professional identity is shaped both by external portrayals and by the language nurses use about themselves.

This course uses advocacy as a practical professional skill. Advocacy is not limited to public campaigns or formal leadership roles. It can include correcting inaccurate assumptions, describing nursing work precisely, maintaining boundaries, communicating directly during conflict, and making career choices that support sustained, competent practice.

Professional Identity and Public Representation

How narratives influence nursing

A narrative is a repeated story or image that influences how people understand a role. For nursing, narratives can minimize clinical expertise, sexualize the profession, or present nursing as subordinate rather than collaborative. These messages can affect how patients, families, colleagues, and the public interpret a nurse's authority and contributions.

A nurse can assess a narrative by asking:

- What role does the message assign to nurses?
- What nursing knowledge, responsibilities, or outcomes does it omit?
- Does it reinforce stereotypes about gender, appearance, or professional hierarchy?
- How could the message affect trust, respect, or willingness to include nurses in decisions?

Language also matters. Phrases such as "just a nurse" can unintentionally diminish expertise and normalize a limited view of nursing. Reframing language does not require disparaging other professionals. It means describing nursing accurately: nurses assess, intervene, educate, coordinate, advocate, monitor changes, and contribute to safe, effective care within their scope and setting.

Advocacy without escalation

When nurses encounter inaccurate or disrespectful portrayals, an effective response begins with the intended outcome. The goal may be education, correction, boundary-setting, or support for colleagues—not winning an argument.

A structured approach is:

6. **Pause and assess.** Identify the statement, audience, setting, and potential impact.
7. **State the concern specifically.** Describe what is inaccurate or harmful without attacking the speaker.
8. **Provide accurate information.** Use concise, profession-centered language.
9. **Set a boundary when needed.** Clarify what communication is not acceptable.
10. **Choose the next step.** Redirect, document, seek support, use institutional channels, or disengage if the setting is unsafe or unproductive.

For example, if a public comment characterizes a nurse's stethoscope as belonging only to a physician, a nurse might say: "Nurses use assessment tools, including stethoscopes, as part of their clinical practice. Our assessments help identify changes and support safe patient care." This response corrects the misconception and centers patient care.

> **Consideration:** Advocacy does not require a nurse to accept harassment or inappropriate comments. Professional boundaries, organizational reporting processes, and personal safety remain essential.

Communication, Trust, and Team Culture

Asking questions as a safety practice

Early-career nurses may fear that asking questions signals weakness. In reality, thoughtful consultation can demonstrate clinical judgment. Recognizing uncertainty, seeking the appropriate resource, and acting on reliable guidance can reduce preventable errors and strengthen trust.

Question-asking is most effective when it is specific and timely. A nurse can frame a request using the situation, relevant assessment findings, what has already been reviewed or attempted, and the decision needed. This helps the consulted colleague understand both the clinical context and the nurse's reasoning.

Experienced nurses, preceptors, charge nurses, providers, pharmacists, and organizational policies can be important resources. The appropriate resource depends on the clinical issue, scope of practice, urgency, and workplace procedures.

Direct communication during conflict

Conflict can arise when people work closely under time pressure. Avoiding a concern may allow misunderstandings to spread, reduce trust, and distract from patient care. Direct communication does not mean confrontation; it means speaking with the involved person in a respectful, timely, and private manner whenever appropriate.

A useful framework is:

- **Describe** the observable situation without labels or assumptions.
- **Explain** the impact on work, communication, or patient care.
- **Invite** the colleague's perspective.
- **Agree** on a specific next step and follow-up plan.

For example: "During handoff today, I wasn't able to clarify the medication timing before you left. I'm concerned this could delay care. Can we review what happened and agree on how we'll confirm time-sensitive medications during handoff?"

This approach keeps the discussion focused on behavior and impact rather than personality. If the concern involves safety, harassment, discrimination, threats, or a power imbalance, nurses should use the organization's escalation and reporting pathways rather than relying only on informal discussion.

Career Agency and Sustainable Practice

Nursing is not a single pathway

A nursing license can support many roles: direct care, ambulatory practice, education, leadership, quality improvement, care coordination, case management, informatics, public health, consulting, research, advocacy, communications, and entrepreneurship. A career change does not necessarily mean leaving nursing; it can mean adapting nursing knowledge to a different population, pace, setting, or responsibility.

Career agency begins with a realistic self-assessment. Nurses can consider:

- Which activities provide energy and meaning?
- Which clinical settings, schedules, or stressors are sustainable?
- What knowledge, credentials, mentorship, or experience is needed for a desired pathway?
- Is the issue the profession itself, a particular unit culture, workload, role, or life circumstance?
- What short-term experiment could provide information before a major decision?

Integrating professional and personal identity

Sustainable practice includes professional commitment and a life beyond work. Hobbies, relationships, movement, creative interests, rest, and community can support resilience and perspective. These interests do not reduce professional dedication; they can help nurses avoid defining their entire identity through one demanding role.

A practical career-sustainability plan should include immediate supports, a medium-term learning goal, and a longer-term option. For example, a nurse experiencing strain in a high-acuity setting might explore internal transfer opportunities, schedule informational interviews with ambulatory or education colleagues, complete a targeted course, and maintain a restorative activity each week. The plan should be revisited as needs, opportunities, and career goals change.

Integrating Advocacy Into Daily Practice

Professional advocacy is most effective when it is consistent with patient-centered care, ethical communication, and scope of practice. Nurses can advocate daily by using accurate language,

seeking help when needed, communicating concerns directly, setting boundaries, supporting colleagues, and sharing nursing expertise in decision-making.

Small actions can shape culture. A nurse who corrects minimizing language, thanks a colleague for consulting before acting, or addresses a handoff concern respectfully helps make safety, trust, and professional dignity visible in everyday practice.

Conclusion

Nursing advocacy is both public and interpersonal. It includes challenging inaccurate portrayals, communicating with clarity, seeking consultation to protect patients, and making career choices that support continued growth. Nurses strengthen the profession when they describe their work accurately, address concerns constructively, and recognize that a nursing career can evolve without losing its professional foundation.

Glossary of Terms

Advocacy: Actions that promote accurate understanding, equitable treatment, safety, and professional or patient interests.

Professional identity: How an individual understands and expresses their role, values, expertise, and responsibilities within a profession.

Direct communication: Respectful communication with the person involved in an issue, focused on observable behavior, impact, and next steps.

Career sustainability: The ability to maintain a meaningful and workable professional path over time while attending to competence, well-being, and changing circumstances.

Additional Resources

- American Nurses Association. *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements.*
- American Nurses Association. *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice.*
- National Council of State Boards of Nursing. Resources on nursing regulation and scope of practice.

References

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