

When Help Feels Risky: Psychological Safety, Trust Formation, and the Clinical Nurse Educator's Role at the Point of Care

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ABSTRACT

Background: Clinical nurse educators frequently round on inpatient units to assess learning needs and provide real-time support. However, frontline nurses may decline assistance despite observable workload strain. Limited literature examines the micro-dynamics of trust formation between bedside nurses and educators during routine rounding.

Purpose: This reflective analysis examines frontline nurse responses to educator rounding through the lens of psychological safety and related organizational behavior theories. An enhanced SAFE Psychological Safety Rounding Framework™ is proposed to guide trust-building at the point of care.

Methods: Using practice-based observation and structured reflective analysis across acute care environments, patterns of nurse engagement during educator rounding were examined. Observations were interpreted using psychological safety theory, impression management theory, cognitive load science, and organizational sense-making literature.

Results: Six recurring patterns emerged: (1) polite refusal of support despite workload indicators, (2) guarded or suspicious nonverbal responses, (3) peer sense-making following educator departure, (4) impression management behaviors, (5) cognitive load shielding, and (6) high-performer help-seeking paradox. These findings suggest educator visibility alone may initially activate evaluative threat perceptions.

Conclusions: Effective educator rounding requires intentional threat-reduction strategies, explicit role clarity, and staged trust-building. The enhanced SAFE Psychological Safety Rounding Framework™ provides a practical, equity-informed model to close the visibility–trust gap and strengthen learning cultures in acute care settings.

Keywords

Psychological safety, clinical nurse educator, Help-seeking, Cognitive load, Sense-making, Nursing professional development, SAFE Learning Framework™.

Background

Clinical nurse educators are central to advancing competency, safety, and workforce development in complex health systems. Increasingly, organizations promote educator rounding to enhance point-of-care support and educational responsiveness. Yet frontline

engagement during rounding is variable and not fully explained in the nursing professional development literature [1-3].

Psychological safety—defined as a shared belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson)—is foundational to help-seeking and learning behaviors. In high-acuity nursing cultures, however, help-seeking may be constrained by professional identity norms that equate independence with competence.

Organizational behavior research further suggests that when individuals encounter unfamiliar support roles, they engage in rapid sense-making processes to determine intent and risk. These dynamics may contribute to the guarded responses educators sometimes encounter during routine rounding [4,5].

Practice Context and Observations

During routine rounding across multiple acute care units, several consistent interaction patterns were observed when the clinical nurse educator offered support to bedside nurses. These patterns were notable for their consistency across unit types and experience levels [6].

Polite Refusal Despite Observable Strain

Frontline nurses frequently responded to support inquiries with brief assurances such as “I’m good,” even when workload indicators suggested high cognitive demand. This pattern aligns with impression management theory, in which professionals engage in self-protective behaviors to preserve perceived competence. Rather than indicating absence of need, these responses may reflect adaptive professional self-regulation within performance-oriented clinical cultures.

Guarded Nonverbal Responses

Subtle guarded behaviors were observed upon educator approach, including closed body posture, task refocusing, and brief or cautious engagement. These responses are consistent with evaluative threat activation described in psychological safety literature.

In high-reliability environments, clinicians are particularly sensitive to cues that may signal surveillance, remediation, or performance evaluation.

Peer Sense-Making Following Educator Departure

Informal peer dialogue following educator interactions suggested active staff efforts to interpret the educator’s role and intent (e.g., comparing the educator to known personnel or noting increased presence). This phenomenon aligns with organizational sense-making theory (Weick), in which teams collectively interpret ambiguous role signals [7-10].

This pattern is especially likely when:

- Multiple educators serve the same unit
- Reporting structures are unclear
- Educator visibility increases suddenly
- Role messaging has been inconsistent

Impression Management Behaviors

Consistent with Goffman’s impression management framework, nurses demonstrated behaviors aimed at maintaining professional credibility in the presence of a perceived authority figure.

These included:

- Minimizing expressed uncertainty
- Rapid task immersion

- Concise or deflective responses
- Public displays of task control

Such behaviors are well documented in high-stakes professional environments and should not be misinterpreted as resistance to learning.

Cognitive Load Shielding

An important emerging observation was the influence of cognitive load saturation on engagement. Nurses operating under high workload conditions appeared to conserve attentional resources by limiting non-essential dialogue, even when supportive.

This “cognitive load shielding” behavior is supported by cognitive load theory and nursing interruption literature.

In cognitively saturated environments, clinicians may:

- Shorten responses
- Defer non-urgent interactions
- Prioritize task completion
- Avoid additional conversational demands

Importantly, this pattern can mimic disengagement while actually representing adaptive workload management.

The High-Performer Help-Seeking Paradox

The literature suggests that highly competent clinicians may be less likely to request help publicly, particularly in unit cultures that reward autonomy and efficiency. This paradox was reflected in interactions where experienced nurses declined support despite visible workload intensity.

Drivers identified in prior research include:

- Professional identity protection
- Peer comparison pressures
- Prior punitive learning experiences
- Time constraints
- Cultural norms of independence

This finding reinforces the need for psychologically informed educator approaches that normalize support-seeking.

Interpreting the Visibility–Trust Gap

Collectively, these patterns suggest the presence of a visibility–trust gap, in which educator presence increases faster than relational familiarity. Early educator rounding may inadvertently activate evaluative threat schemas, particularly in environments where education has historically been associated with remediation or compliance monitoring.

Historical institutional memory of “gotcha education” may further amplify initial guarded responses. Importantly, these reactions appear to represent normal early-stage trust formation, not resistance to educator partnership.

The trust trajectory observed is consistent with staged engagement models:

1. Observation
2. Cautious testing
3. Selective engagement
4. Voluntary partnership

Educators entering new or expanded unit presence should expect to encounter Stage 1 behaviors initially.

The Enhanced SAFE Psychological Safety Rounding Framework™

To operationalize psychologically informed rounding, the SAFE Learning Framework™ was adapted for point-of-care educator practice (see Figure 1).

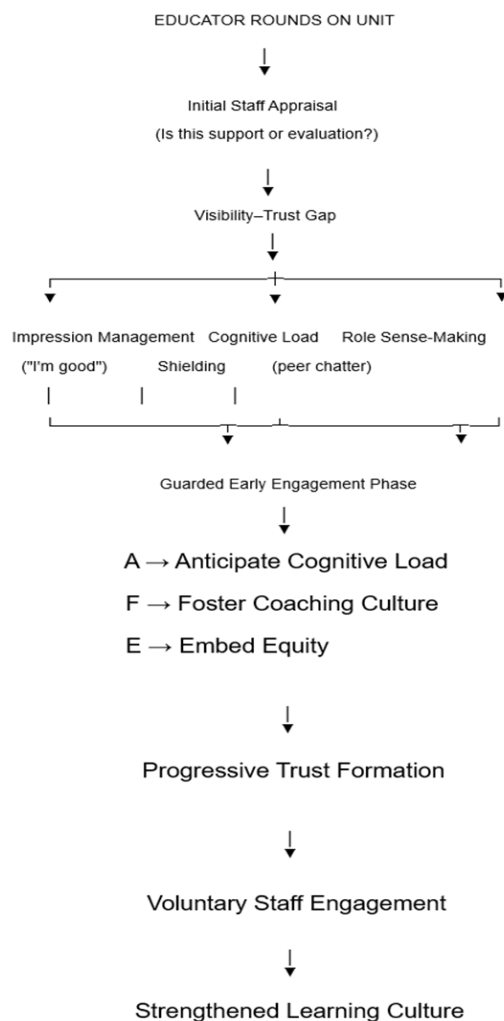


Figure 1: The SAFE Psychological Safety Rounding Model™
Conceptual Pathway: Closing the Visibility-Trust Gap

Figure Notes:

The SAFE Psychological Safety Rounding Model™ illustrates how frontline nurses initially appraise educator presence through a threat-support lens. Without intentional psychological safety strategies, a visibility-trust gap may persist. Application of the SAFE framework

supports staged trust formation and voluntary engagement over time.

S - Safety Anchors Learning

Educators intentionally reduce perceived evaluative threat through warm introductions, brief presence, and explicit role clarification. Early encounters prioritize relational safety over needs assessment.

Practice implications

- Lead with purpose and partnership language
- Avoid competence-testing questions early
- Maintain approachable body posture
- Keep initial interactions brief

A - Anticipate Cognitive Load

Educators account for the high cognitive burden of bedside nursing by minimizing interruption burden and offering asynchronous support options.

Practice implications

- Keep interactions under 20 seconds initially
- Avoid interrupting high-risk workflow moments
- Provide one-page resources or follow-up options
- Time rounding strategically

F-Foster Coaching Culture

The educator is positioned as a systems partner who removes barriers rather than evaluates individual performance.

Practice implications

- Use workflow and barrier-focused language
- Give value before requesting needs
- Follow through consistently
- Build micro-credibility over time

E - Embed Equity

Educator support is intentionally distributed across roles, experience levels, and shifts to ensure equitable access and avoid perceptions of surveillance or favoritism.

Practice implication

- Engage novice and experienced nurses
- Maintain consistent tone across staff
- Monitor who is and is not being reached
- Incorporate culturally responsive communication

Implications for Nursing Professional Development

Health systems expanding educator rounding should evaluate not only educator visibility but also **progressive trust indicators**, including:

- Increased informal staff questions
- Unit-initiated educator consultation
- Reduced guarded interaction patterns
- Manager engagement with educator resources
- Cross-shift educator recognition

Organizations should also provide proactive role clarification at the unit level to reduce ambiguity when multiple educators are present.

Recommendations for Practice

1. Replace competence-focused opening questions with barrier-focused language.
2. Expect and normalize early guarded responses during trust formation.
3. Provide micro-value before conducting needs assessment.
4. Align rounding behaviors with cognitive load realities.
5. Monitor unit culture signals and adapt approach dynamically.
6. Track trust formation longitudinally rather than expecting immediate engagement.
7. Provide unit-level messaging to clarify educator roles.

Conclusion

Educator rounding remains a powerful strategy for supporting frontline nurses, but visibility alone does not ensure psychological safety. Guarded early responses from staff often reflect impression management, cognitive load protection, and normal role sense-making processes rather than resistance.

By intentionally applying psychologically informed, equity-centered rounding strategies, clinical nurse educators can close the visibility–trust gap and foster stronger learning cultures at the point of care. The enhanced SAFE Psychological Safety Rounding Framework™ offers a practical model to guide this work and advance supportive professional development environments in acute care settings.

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