

Chapter 7

Online Applied Learning in Nursing Education

Beth Oyarzun

University of North Carolina – Wilmington, USA

Elizabeth A. Gazza

University of North Carolina – Wilmington, USA

ABSTRACT

The instructional design process, Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate (ADDIE), along with a pedagogical approach was applied to the design and implementation of an online applied learning activity. The activity was delivered in an accelerated nursing leadership asynchronous online course within the fully online RN-BSN program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW). Research associated with online applied and experiential learning, particularly in the area of nursing education, that guided the design is presented. The design process and the evaluation results are discussed with future implications.

INTRODUCTION

Enrollments in online programs offered by institutions of higher education continue to increase across the United States. In fall 2014, 5.8 million students enrolled in at least one online course with 1.85 million of those students completing all of their classes at a distance (Allen & Seamen, 2016). Enrollment in online nursing education programs also have increased. Undergraduate and graduate levels nursing programs are delivered online and a large number are degree completion programs, or registered nurse to Bachelor of Science in nursing (RN-BSN) programs. RN-BSN programs are of interest to registered nurses who initially completed an associate degree in nursing or diploma nursing program and now wish to earn a baccalaureate degree in nursing. From 2012 to 2013, enrollment in all types of RN-BSN programs increased by 15.2%, which marks the 11th year of enrollment increases (American Association of College Nursing [AACN], 2014). In 2014, a majority (59%; n=400) of the 679 RN-BSN programs in the US were delivered online (AACN, 2015). Other health-related disciplines, including social work (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2016), occupational therapy (The American

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Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. [AOTA], 2016], physical therapy (American Physical Therapy Association [APTA], 2015), and medicine (American Medical Association [AMA], 2016), also utilize online instructional strategies to varying degrees for didactic instruction in undergraduate, graduate, and/or continuing education programs.

Preparing nurses and other healthcare professionals for clinical practice includes a combination of didactic instruction and clinical experiences where students safely apply what they are learning in various healthcare settings. This poses a persistent challenge in online learning where students in health-related educational programs often engage in online coursework at locations distant from faculty who facilitate learning. Smith, Passmore, and Faught (2009) interviewed online nursing instructors regarding the challenges and found that instructors are mainly concerned with authentic assessments that allow them to be able to judge the learner's ability to apply new skills in real world settings.

This chapter proposes an answer to the question, how can students apply what they are learning when faculty are not physically present to assess application of skills in various healthcare settings and in settings where patient safety is paramount? Using a case study approach, the chapter includes a description of a theory-based pedagogical approach and the instructional design process that integrated applied learning experiences into an accelerated online asynchronous course in an RN-BSN program. While the case is based in nursing education, the approach and process can be used by any online educational programs for health professionals.

BACKGROUND

Problem

Nursing education programs, along with other programs that prepare professionals in other health-related disciplines, require experiences where students apply concepts in practice settings. Practitioners cannot simply learn the theory of nursing or medicine, graduate, and safely care for patients; they need to have opportunities to apply concepts in practice under the watchful eye of faculty or other experienced professionals who can guide them while learning. This is particularly important when health care agencies need graduates who are work-ready and can safely and competently provide care. This is especially true given the shortage of quality health care professionals in the United States.

Nursing has used online education as a way to prepare nurses for advanced levels of practice. RN-BSN and graduate programs are online and serve as ways to prepare nurses for higher level positions such as leadership and management, nursing education, or Nurse Practitioner (NP). These education programs require skill development. As programs become more widely available to nurses, separated by geography where faculty cannot directly supervise but other qualified professionals can facilitate learning, there is a need to identify ways to include applied learning.

Applied Learning

Applied learning is a broad term that involves “principles and practices associated with engaged scholarship, communities of practice, civic engagement, experiential education, and critical pedagogy” (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009, pp. 4-5). While there are many learning theories associated with applied learning such as, service learning, project based learning, active learning, authentic learning, context-

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