

Online Instruction as a Caring Endeavor

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INTRODUCTION

Online instruction in a nursing program strikes fear into the most dedicated and compassionate nursing instructor. Concerns range from unfamiliarity with online pedagogy to the potential for decreased student connectedness. Being unfamiliar with the online format can be overcome through a series of self-training, taking courses online, and dedication to the process. Student connectedness is basic to the caring and compassionate professions, and some assume the online format will create an atmosphere of disconnectedness and isolation. To combat this disconnectedness and isolation, an attitude of caring and an atmosphere of mentoring are required in the online classroom. This article considers the basics of both the concepts of caring and online instruction.

Caring is the essence of nursing and is central to online instruction. A case will be made for online instruction and how, when done properly, it creates an atmosphere of care and growth for student nurses. Grounding this notion will be a brief discussion of various nursing theories on caring and how the key elements of some of these theories relate directly to the outcomes of online instruction. In addition to the concept of caring and relating this to online instruction, a connection to the supporting concepts of trust and professional nurse autonomy are intimately connected to caring and online instruction. This connection illustrates the foundational results of online instruction and how these are indeed the same elements of the concept of caring.

Caring Theory and Concept

Caring is the very essence of nursing (Watson, 1999). A caring atmosphere should be foundational in all nursing courses. In the meta-analysis of theories of caring in nursing McCance, McKenna and Boore (1999) overview Leininger, Watson, Roach, and Boykin and Schoenhofer; they conclude that a human element is present in all of these theories.

Roach focuses on the five Cs of caring; compassion, competence, confidence, conscience, and commitment (McCance et al., 1999). Boykin and Schoenhofer stress the importance of truly knowing another, as well as identifying unique forms of caring (McCance et al., 1999). It is the contention of this author that the concepts outlined by Boykin and Schoenhofer as well as Roach connect nicely with online instruction.

In addition to the theories of caring, studies of how students learn and perceive caring in nursing have been studied. The students identified caring as a process and as a connection through lived experiences (Wilkin & Slevin, 2003). Watson and Lea (1997) quantitatively define caring with their Caring Dimensions Inventory (CDI), and specifically found a high level of validity and reliability to items that relate to the connectedness achieved in patient-nurse relationships; these coincide with the online faculty-student, student-student relationships. These items were “listening to the patient,” “getting to know the patient as a person,” “involving the patient with his or her care,” and “explaining a clinical procedure” (Watson & Lea, 1997, pp. 88, 91). These are all items that are important aspects to caring in nursing and can translate well to the online instructional environment.

Connection to Online Instruction

Translating from the caring concept in nursing to the online instructional environment involves first outlining the elements of an online classroom. In a longitudinal qualitative study, McShane (2004) interviews online instructors to determine emerging themes of their experiences in the online instruction realm. A predominate theme was “enhanced relationships with students”; this was made possible through first introductions of faculty and students, then with further discussion postings and the ability to go back and recall the autobiographical information that student had provided. This ability to have permanent information on students alleviates the

need for faculty to recall, on the spot (in face-to-face courses), the information that students provide as introductions to themselves. Additionally, there is the removal of the face-to-face bias between ages; in written communication everyone is taken at “face” value. “[Computer Mediated Communication] makes it easier to, I suppose, relate to the whole person” (McShane, 2004, p. 8). Glahn and Gen (2002) support this communication theme in online instruction and identify asynchronous communication as the hallmark of online instruction. In addition to the communication improvement of online instruction, there is a sense of mentorship that online instructors adopt as a form of instruction (Glahn & Gen, 2002; McShane, 2004). This mentorship requires frequent interaction with students and solid, comprehensive feedback on assignments. This respectful form of instruction allows students to learn from other students, as well as the traditional student from instructor model. Additionally, the students and instructors can “recall” interactions and information by going back to see the interaction. Communication and relationship are the very foundation of online instruction; similarly they are also the foundation of caring.

The foundations of caring in nursing according to Roach involve the five “Cs”: compassion, competence, confidence, conscience, and commitment (McCance et al., 1999). One of the qualities of compassion is “a quality of presence which allows one to share with and make room for the other” (McCance et al., 1999, p. 1391). The use of discussion, sharing of ideas, and support through group work in online courses encourages the compassion that is described by Roach. Competence is another quality that focuses on knowledge, skills, experience, and judgment; these are all supported by the interplay that is foundational to a well-constructed and administered discussion in the online course. Another of the “Cs” in Roach’s conceptualization of caring is confidence. This focuses on the building of trusting relationships; trust is identified as a supporting concept of caring and is focused on later in this discussion (McCance et al., 1999). Considering another nursing conceptualization of caring, Boykin and Schoenhofer specifically outline the importance of a quality relationship and truly knowing another, and identifying unique forms of caring in care providers as important characteristics (McCance et al.,

1999). As supported by McShane (2004), the relationship between instructor and student can be enhanced with online instruction; removing age biases that are evident in face-to-face interaction; improving access between instructor and student for questions, notifications, and feedback; and thereby enhancing a mentor-type relationship. As online instruction becomes more and more common, this unique form of care, trust, mentorship, and professional autonomy will be better accepted and considered mainstream.

Supporting Concepts

Trust and professional autonomy are two of the main supporting concepts for caring. These supporting concepts emerge as byproducts of a well-constructed online course. The connections between caring, trust, professional autonomy, and online instruction are remarkably synchronous.

Trust supports a caring atmosphere and requires those involved in the relationship to give of themselves to create and sustain this relationship. Hupcey, Penrod, Morse, and Mitcham (2001) identify the attributes of trust as:

Dependency on another individual to have a need met; choice or willingness to take some risk; an expectation that the trusted individual will behave in a certain way; limited focus to the area or behavior related to the need; and testing of the trustworthiness of the individual. (p. 290)

Online instructors establish a trusting relationship with the students, and students reciprocate with their responsiveness and interactivity with both the instructor and other students. This relationship includes providing direction and outcomes to the course, and how this content is developed and the interaction that occurs involves the students, their interests, the exploration of their interests, as well as the mentoring and focusing of the instructor during discussion and evaluation exercises.

This relationship involves an initial risk taken by the instructor, then risks taken by students. These risks include the information shared online. Instructors have communicated the risks they take by putting themselves and the information they develop “out there” on the Internet for all to scrutinize and

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