

Chapter 7

Online Synchronous Activities to Promote Community of Inquiry in Two Nursing Courses

Jennifer Roye

The University of Texas at Arlington, USA

Denise M. Cauble

The University of Texas at Arlington, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents specific teaching strategies to enhance the learner experience in two online nursing courses through the use of synchronous learning activities. Online instruction often leaves the learner feeling disconnected and void of a sense of community. The community of inquiry (CoI) theory will be discussed, offering methods to increase the sense of community in the online learner. Specific exemplars will include the use of online synchronous case-based learning using pre-designed case studies and the inclusion of peer learning activities performed within a video conferencing platform.

INTRODUCTION

With the current national nursing shortage, there is a need to increase nursing enrollment and graduation rates from nursing programs (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2017). Further recommendations from the Institute of Medicine, 2010, included that 80% of nurses obtain baccalaureate degrees by 2020. Current factors, such as lack of classroom space and limited access to clinical sites have made it necessary to look to other methods for delivering nursing content to achieve this goal. Not surprising, the increase of online prelicensure nursing programs has created regulatory implications for state boards of nursing regarding curriculum equivalency of face to face (F2F) and online nursing programs (Lowery & Spector, 2014).

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The online environment provides a robust avenue for delivery of that didactic content. While clinical experiences remain a part of the nursing program providing hands on training for the nursing learner, online content delivery in nursing courses provide access to learners who desire a flexible learning environment not possible in the classroom setting. Online learning has become increasingly more popular in recent years (“5 Reasons Why Online Learning is More Effective,” 2017). It provides a convenient and effective mode of instruction that appeals to many learners. In a report compiled for the Department of Education, it was shown that those receiving online instruction outperformed those receiving face to face instruction (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009; Billings, Dickerson, Greenberg, Wu, & Talley, 2013). Online instruction in nursing education also increases accessibility for remote learners, particularly in areas with no academic campuses with nursing programs (Frith, 2013). Learners can now engage in learning anywhere a computer and internet are available.

Online instruction can be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronous instruction allows learners to interact with the instructor and each other in real time, allowing for questions and clarification of the material presented. Asynchronous delivery of content may provide learners with flexibility to interact with the content at their convenience, becoming an attractive attribute for those with less flexible schedules. This chapter will address activities that employ the synchronous approach to online instruction in the nursing curriculum.

BACKGROUND

A challenge in online courses is the lack of community that may be experienced by the online learner. Online learners miss out on the opportunity to make connections with their fellow learners. Often, these learners feel isolated or disconnected from the institution providing the instruction. Learners receiving a greater amount of social presence and group interactive activities were more likely to report a higher quality of learning and persist in online courses. Additionally, online learners who participated in group activities were more motivated and prepared for assignments (MacNeill, Telner, & Sparaggis-Agaliotis, 2014). Gazza and Hunker (2014) identified several online learning best practices including: 1) relationship building and maintaining a social presence between learner, faculty and staff, 2) designing activities to appeal to a variety of learning styles; and 3) clear and frequent learner feedback. Learners value faculty-peer interaction in the online classroom and identify teacher behaviors and practices necessary to enhance learning: communication, visibility, and delivery of quality course content (Young, 2006). Learner-centered teaching is a way to achieve these behaviors through active learning activities. Active learning encourages interactive, hands-on application of content, important in the development of critical thinking skills and transference of knowledge to real world situations. Teacher responsiveness through prompt feedback as well as exhibiting caring behaviors throughout the online course experience are also essential faculty competencies. Additionally, faculty’s technological competence and use of multimedia technologies associated with best practices must be supported (Bigatel, Ragan, Kennan, May, & Redmond, 2012). However, the proliferation of available digital technologies for online learners may give the false impression that faculty is present at anytime of the day or night (Seckman, 2018). Response times, realistic or not, can lead to frustration for both the learner and faculty.

The Community of Inquiry theory addresses these three concepts in online education: Social, Cognitive, and Teaching presence, all of which contribute to the overall educational experience of the learner (Chen, deNoyelles, Patton, & Zydney, 2017; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Online educators

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