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Cohesive Integration of E-Learning in Nursing Leadership Reality

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Abstract There is a constant challenge to develop and implement courses in a manner that leads to direct translation of principles and skills to the workplace. As health care is an ever-changing field, nursing faculty are faced with a constant state of flux that leads to research, review and re-creation of course materials. Most students in graduate nursing programs are nontraditional students. These students need to apply their newly learned skills in order to remain motivated and see the immediate value from course work. Problem-based learning is a way to meet the needs of nursing students. Creating unique opportunities through the combination of distance learning, virtual face to face interaction, and local practica experiences not only leads to student success, but profound student satisfaction. It is the value-added hybrid intervention that leads to the development of work-ready students and nurse leaders.

Introduction

As health care is an ever-changing field, nursing faculty are faced with a constant state of flux that leads to research, review, and recreation of course materials. Most students in graduate programs are nontraditional students. These adult learners balance jobs, home, family, and personal obligations. Returning to school can lead to frustration if the rationale for learning is not clear. One unique university combined the strategic planning and healthcare economics courses with a precepted nurse executive experience in order to facilitate immediate implementation of concepts in the work environment. As adult learners return to school for advanced degrees, there is a need to create courses that challenge and stimulate the learner. In order to do this, course development that leads to direct translation of principles and skills into the work environment leads to increased student engagement and success.

Course Development and Concept Integration

Historically, nurse leaders did not receive training in traditional health care leadership concepts, such as strategic planning and health care economics. In recent years, the educational preparation for nurse executives has evolved into a more business-focused curriculum. This change has been supported and guided by the development of Nurse Executive Competencies published by American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE) in 2005. These guiding principles have served as curricular threads to create and enhance national graduate nurse executive programs. Further, nursing faculty have collaborated with educators outside of the specialty area of nursing, such as accounting and business. This partnership has gained momentum as it is recognized that the skill sets of various professionals enhance the learning for the individual student and further enhance the nursing profession overall.

Creating elearning courses that embrace adult learning concepts leads to success and satisfaction for adult learners. Specifically, adult learners are focused on task-oriented assignments. Learning activities must be focused

on common tasks to be performed, while acknowledging diverse backgrounds, previous experiences, and different learning styles. Moreover, adult learners must be given an opportunity to explore and discover independently, with a mentor providing guidance and feedback as indicated (Knowles, 1984a).

A five-unit strategic planning course was developed and is being offered to interprofessional healthcare students. The focus of the course is leadership development, collaboration, communication, and ultimately the creation and management of a strategic plan and balanced scorecard for an imaginary healthcare organization. The students work with peers asynchronously using various elearning platforms. Students have the option to compress the length of the course by attending a face to face virtual immersion weekend. The signature assignment for this course is a formal virtual strategic plan presentation to a board of directors made up of national health care leaders.

The strategic planning course is paired with a healthcare economics course. The class is designed to emphasize financial implications in the healthcare world. The course learning outcomes require proficiency in financial decision-making with the influence of operational and long-term capital expenditure budgets, using basic accounting principles and applying fundamental concepts of economics to assess the effectiveness of contract negotiations. The course guides the student through the evaluation and implementation of a health care budget. Students become imaginary financial officers and ascertain net present values, internal rates of return, and breakeven points. Participants engage in asynchronous dialogue and use many elearning financial tools in order to complete deliverables. Each course was designed to provide the students relevant information in an elearning environment. Recognizing adult learning styles, content was provided via several means to allow learners to interact in the manner that supported personal growth and concept acquisition (Knowles, 1984b).

While students complete the previously mentioned courses through distance learning formats, they simultaneously complete a precepted leadership experience in their home community. During this experience, the students work with nurse executives and share their experiential learning in weekly reflective journals that are virtually submitted. The submitted journals require the students to actively engage in their precepted environments by taking detailed notes about the practicum setting. Experiences could include, but are not limited to, critical discussions with key stakeholders involved with strategic planning projects, inspiring a shared vision with staff members, and attending specialty leadership didactic training courses. Journaling also drives the students to reflect upon the learning experience, identify personal strengths and weaknesses and describe the emotional impact of the experience. In addition, the students engage in online course discussions about executive learning concepts.

The Student Experience

Adherence to the curriculum is easy, although outlining the learning outcomes, meeting deadlines, and applying the knowledge can feel regimented and routine. However, getting the opportunity to blend the objectives of an elearning course with a hybrid distance learning and practicum course is an educationally gratifying experience. The impact of the education pushed beyond the introductory level of competence and innocuously intertwined with the precepted experience. It was a symbiotic relationship between courses that was not scripted, nevertheless, added a heightened sense of value to the experience.

The application of course principles occurred while students simultaneously enrolled in distance learning courses and engaged in nursing preceptorship led by nursing faculty. Practica site guidance was provided by nurse executive preceptors at two unique health care organizations. During the preceptorships, students had various experiences. Each student became a member of a health care leadership team responsible for driving innovative care delivery models. One example is an immersion in the strategic planning of a new maternal-child nursing unit which required thorough evaluation of the business plan. Another student created a new staffing plan to patient outcomes and staff satisfaction. The students were challenged with quality, safety and economic outcome failures. This necessitated the use of critical thinking skills to navigate best actions. Also, as a part of this process, involvement in evaluating the financial impact of the change, engaging key stakeholders, evaluating internal and external forces, and forecasting trends within the market to establish goals and benchmarks was key to understanding the concepts practiced in the elearning course. It became clear that course learning outcomes driving the elearning model were immediately used during the preceptorship. Reflective journals required the development of action plans with short-term and long-term goals. The benefits of aligning the elearning courses with practicum were identified throughout the curriculum. The concepts from courses came to life and led to a feeling of accomplishment as well as a perception of being work-ready and able to tackle the financial challenges that come with strategic planning in healthcare.

Preparing students to apply the course learning outcomes immediately in the practice setting can serve as an innovative differentiator for other distance learning programs. One educational element that provided a

significant impact was offering a virtual on-screen, interactive simulation program embedded with scripted real-life scenarios related to financial planning. Students were required to virtually speak to stakeholders and select from a number of responses to progress through the simulation. At the end, students were tested on the key points reviewed. Students noted that it was as if the assignments completed at home on the computer were coming to life in the practica setting. Attending a virtual meeting with a simulated healthcare organization's Chief Financial Officer (CFO) prepared the student to interact with their own organization's CFO who asked similar pressing questions about the budget whilst firmly reminded others about the organization's fiscal responsibility. This added value to the elearning experience and validated the importance of the course work.

An additional component of the experience was monitoring student progress and defining the course of the practica experience. The faculty, preceptor and student met via virtual video for discussion throughout the term to set goals, evaluate outcomes of the experience, and provide direction for the term long experience. Precepted hours were logged and approved via an electronic format. These added layers of instruction and dialogue allowed the faculty to ensure that course learning outcomes were being met in the clinical setting and provide support and direction as needed.

Problem-Based Learning

When reflecting on the elearning course-practica relationship, immediately one relates this design to the theory of problem-based learning (PBL). John Dewey's theory of problem-based learning was identified as a progressive movement. It is rooted in the belief that teachers should instruct by appealing to students' natural instincts to investigate and create. (Delisle, 1997). Students, especially adult learners, continue to learn best by doing. PBL drives students to demonstrate comprehension through application of information (Delisle, 1997). The focus is not on memorization of concepts and terms but on using the new knowledge in the clinical setting. (Delisle, 1997). First used in medical schools, this technique was found to a way to challenge students and increase engagement and accomplishment (Delisle, 1997). Application of these student-centered strategies in the discussed model led to the development of critical thinking and reasoning skills, furthering students' creativity and independent work, and leading to the development of ownership in the learning process. This led to student excitement and passion and the hunger to learn more.

Gewurtz, et. al. (2016) found that there were eight key concepts associated with PBL. These concepts were also found to be evident in the experience of students that completed online nurse executive course work while completing the nurse executive practica with preceptors in the hospital (1).

Table 1
Problem-based Learning and the Didactic- Practica Experience

Concepts found in Problem-Based Learning Gewurtz, et. al., (2016)	**Student Experience**
Adult learners are independent and self-directed	Each student independently completed course work as designed by faculty. While due dates and criteria were established for submission of assignments, students worked independently to read, research, prepare and submit work while balancing work, life, and school responsibilities.
Adult learners are goal oriented and internally motivated	Students sought to complete a doctoral nursing program. These courses were components of achieving that goal.
Learning is most effective when it is applicable to practice	The experience of combining course work with direct application of principles in the practica setting allowed students to problem solve, act, make mistakes and solve problems with the support of a nurse executive expert and faculty.
Cognitive process support learning	Through application of course principles, the students were able to build upon simple ideas and appreciation of complex theories emerged. They began to learn how to sort through concepts to focus on more critical

	information as they completed tasks and assignments in the practica setting.
Learning is active and requires active engagement	Pulling the concepts directly into the clinical setting and building upon the experience daily and weekly allowed the students to become part of the solution. Students began to work on tasks outside of the practica experience as they learned new concepts in class and wanted to immediately apply the information. Deliverables were created and provided to preceptors upon return to the practica setting. Passion for the experience developed and grew throughout the course.
Interaction between learners supports learning	Student colleagues interacted in the elearning environment through asynchronous discussion to share experiences, ideas and scholarly works. These interactions allowed the students to challenge each other to think about topics differently and share new concepts learned.
Activation of prior knowledge supports learning	As graduate nursing students and practicing nurses, each student brought previous experiences with them to the courses and practica setting. Bias was addressed while new experiences helped to transform previous beliefs about the role of the nurse executive. Additionally, students integrated the "bedside" nursing perspective into the multifaceted world of health care and collaborated with nursing experts and executive leadership to establish best practices. This bi-directional information sharing/gathering opportunity provided a venue to drive and accept change driven by the executive teams.
Elaboration and reflections support learning	Students used reflective journaling to describe the practica experience and explored thoughts, feelings, fears and lessons learned. They created plans on how to grow professionally and addressed errors or failures that had occurred with each practica experience.

Conclusion

Creating unique opportunities through the combination of distance learning, virtual face to face interaction, and local practica experiences not only leads to student success, but profound student satisfaction. It is the value-added hybrid intervention that leads to the development of work-ready students and nurse leaders. These concepts are not unique to nursing but have a place in educational programming for other disciplines. While many concepts are best addressed in solely elearning settings or with virtual face to face interactions, there remain times that a hybrid model can be used to motivate the learner and drive synthesis and application of principles. Adult learning programs, hand-in-hand with elearning advances, must design innovative ways to structure classrooms, drive discussion, stimulate thinking, and allow for immediate application of new ideas.

This presentation explored an innovative way to combine didactic elearning courses with an onsite preceptorship which led to immediate application of principles and supported adult learning theories This is a clear example of problem-based learning. While the focus was on the graduate nursing student experience, these ideas are applicable to other professions as well.

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