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Conversation with a Theorist: A Pedagogical Strategy for Web Based Graduate Nursing Education

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ABSTRACT

Graduate nursing students encounter a multitude of demands. To meet the educational desires of these busy practicing nurses, online graduate programs have arisen to meet the need. Pedagogical strategies that are typically very successful in the traditional classroom setting require altering to be effective in the web based format. One such strategy developed to enhance online graduate nursing education is “Conversation with a Theorist”. This approach to learning focuses on students researching, role-playing and reflecting on nursing theorists, utilizing an online course bulletin board format.

Key Words: *teaching strategy, online, web based, graduate nursing education*

Introduction

Web based learning has become a prevalent approach to graduate nursing education. The convenience for students has made online programs very desirable. Nursing students can pursue online programs of study that provide excellent flexibility in terms of time and access. Strategies to present knowledge in this format while maximizing the learning process require innovation and creativity. These strategies must be grounded in sound learning principles and motivate students to achieve course objectives. Many types of software and technology are available to enhance the quality and versatility of online courses; however, pedagogical strategies used in the traditional classroom setting may be equally effective in the online environment. One such strategy that has been extremely popular in an advanced nursing theory course has been ‘Conversation

with a Theorist.' This is an activity that involves role play and narration on the part of the student. The conversation was an assignment that was used in the traditional classroom version of the advanced nursing theory course. It was natural that faculty desired to integrate this assignment into the online course format. However, would the conversation be equally effective when used in a web-based course?

Course Format – Traditional vs. Online

In the traditional classroom nursing theory course, each student would select a theorist. Once the student had made a selection, each student would create a scenario or narrative where the student met their respective theorist. As part of the narrative the student would engage in a fabricated role play with the theorist and read the dialog between themselves and their theorist of choice to their fellow students. The purpose of this activity or strategy was for the student to highlight important and salient features of the chosen nursing theory. In the traditional classroom environment, students would often enlist one of their fellow students to act out the scenario. The author of the narrative would assume the theorist role and the other student would play the interviewer. Students were very creative and this strategy provided an excellent stimulus for class discussion. The in-class reenactment of the narrative with the related role play of each student also provided additional insight into a variety of diverse nursing theories for the remaining students in the class. Course evaluations indicated that the 'Conversation with a Theorist' was a very popular assignment with the students in the traditional classroom theory course. Faculty viewed the learning activity as highly interactive and effective in promotion knowledge acquisition by students. This was indicated by favorable feedback on the faculty and student course evaluations. This learning activity was viewed by faculty as highly interactive and judged highly effective in terms of knowledge acquisition by both course faculty and students.

In the online theory course, major philosophies, grand and middle range nursing theories are explored. Similar to the traditional classroom format, the online course is organized in the same general manner to address the specific objectives through differing pedagogical strategies. This online course is divided into 15 self contained modules where students read a textbook, and listen and/or watch presentations by the instructor. Students review related PowerPoint slides and handouts that accompany these presentations. In addition, the college subscribes to a website where the students can review actual videotaped interviews with or presentations about nursing philosophers and theorists. Students are asked to discuss various aspects of the theories and then post those responses in a section of the bulletin board designated for that module. Furthermore, there are supplemental materials in the form of links to reserved library materials and intranet websites providing additional information on each of the nursing theorists. The students are expected to read each other's bulletin board postings and are free to react to and comment on their fellow students'

analyses. The students are NOT expected to react to each student's work. They are asked to respond to those postings that are the most interesting, and those where the student requires additional clarification from the author of the posting. There are limited "real time" meetings between students and faculty within the course. Students are encouraged to complete a module each week during the academic semester. Faculty facilitates and clarifies points in the online discussion and provides individual feedback related to student responses.

"Real time" chat rooms have occasionally been scheduled in the past but due to the diverse and varied circumstances of the learner, these are kept to a minimum. Most of the students are practicing nurses who work and have families. The average age of the students is 35 years. The majority are female. Most are juggling family, job and school and have difficulty with real time assignments and discussions. By requiring real time activities students indicated that the flexibility of the online course was significantly diminished.

In addition to the weekly assignments, students are asked to complete several other major assignments, to include a paper on a theorist of their choice. Typically, students select the same theorist for the role play as discussed in their papers. Students must also complete an interview with a client and use a rural theory they studied to address health care problems and appropriate nursing interventions.

In the online course, students are also instructed to complete a one-page narrative story and role play assignment by pretending they had a conversation with a theorist. The students are free to create the scenario for the role play. In the online format, the students play themselves and also the role of the theorist. The student develops a narrative and creates the scenario in which the role play takes place, as well as the dialog between themselves and their chosen theorist. Students post their conversation scenarios utilizing a discussion forum format for other students and faculty to read and make comments. The students develop an affinity for their theorist in which the scenarios become personal as other students chime-in on the dialogues, offering clarifying questions and lively theoretical bantering. The scene descriptions are usually very creative and sometimes even amusing. Examples of scenarios included inviting their theorist home for coffee, meeting the theorist in a bowling alley, or one of the most amusing, Martha Rogers came to visit on a motorcycle.

One outstandingly creative narrative dialogue occurs on a futuristic space station with the student reflecting back on nursing in the past (referring to the 21st century). As part of the space adventure, the student "clicks on" the "Intergalactic History Channel" to have an interactive conversation with a theorist from the past, complete with catch phrases to include, "hello Earthling", "holy Europa" and a particular faculty favorite, "big galactic whoop". The student on the space station in the future questions the theorist from the distant past (1970) about nursing and her perspectives. The dialogue concludes with the student

developing a better understanding of the theorist epistemology and the on-going need to “get back to taking care of the individual and not just the celestial being”.

The conversation activity is evaluated by both students and faculty. The decisive goal for this assignment is reflected in a scoring guide that focuses on the student’s ability to understand and apply a theorist perspective in a creative dialogue. Students and faculty utilize a rubric emphasizing the following: first, the dialogue mirrors the theorist perspective; second, comprehension, noting that the content reflects the student understanding of the assignment, as well as the student ability to identify the most salient components of the theory; third, the rubric examines conventions, examining the students use of correct punctuation, correct spelling, proper capitalization, and appropriate grammar reflective of creativity and the theorist, and finally, effort is evaluated by how well the student has made an effort on the assignment to demonstrate creativity.

Rationale

The ‘Conversation with a Theorist’ had only been used previously in a traditional classroom setting with students taking turns acting out the roles. After the role play, the students would have lively classroom discussions as they explained their perceptions and reactions to the theorist’s concepts. When faculty decided to transition the role play to an online format it seemed logical to examine the literature to determine the efficacy of this method. Second, it was determined that the online role play would be piloted and faculty satisfaction with the methodology would be evaluated. Faculty were particularly concerned that the role play be a meaningful learning experience for the students. When the theory course was transitioned to an online format, the use of the theorist conversation was retained with some trepidation. Would the online role play promote the same mastery of content evident when the role play had been used in the traditional classroom setting? Would it stimulate student dialog and interaction? Third, it was critically important that students perceived the role play was a meaningful experience. Would students be satisfied with the assignment? Did they believe it should be retained and used in future courses?

In addition to these questions, course faculty wanted to ensure the narrative with role play or conversation with a theorist was an educationally sound and effective learning strategy. To determine if the narrative approach and/or role play was an effective strategy in an online environment, the literature was consulted.

Justification

In consulting the literature, practice and research articles were queried. One qualitative study examined the lived experience of Master’s in nursing students in an online course. Unexpected pedagogical findings from that study demonstrated that student valued experiences that increased interaction with other students and faculty. The students also really enjoyed relating learned concepts to their

previous experiences in life and nursing.¹ This dynamic was obviously consistent with what was observed with students involved in the online role play. The students enjoy engaging the theorist in a simulated conversation in a scenario that is consistent with the student's practice area and experiences.

Because the online role play has elements of story telling (the student creates the scenario and plays all the roles in their creation), the literature on the narrative mode of learning was reviewed to substantiate the value of role play in an online environment. Bruner² believed that the learning in the narrative mode stimulates the development of a distinct form of cognition, and of making sense of the world in a personal way. According to Zigo,³ through experiential storytelling or extended role play in relation to texts, students are better able to formulate critical questions or insights about a topic. A second strength according to Zigo³ is that role play and storytelling is generative. Storytelling or role play helps to sustain critical thinking because it engages other students and assists them in elaborating on the concepts that are described. It appears to result in higher order learning through evaluation and synthesis. In the assignment 'Conversation with a Theorist', evaluation of a theorist perspective is transformed into synthesis through a creative dialogue between the selected theorist and the student.³

Bos and Shami⁴ discuss the difficulties with adapting role play to an online format in an asynchronous environment where students are too busy to meet at specified times during a course. They describe three challenges for role play in the online environment. These challenges include: sustaining engagement, focusing collaboration, and promoting reflection. The individual role play and ensuing conversations were of great interest to the students and appeared to encourage sustained interaction. Therefore, the conversation assignment sustained engagement among the students. Studies of asynchronous, text based discussion have been found useful in bringing together diverse individuals. In fact, the conversation exercise stimulated more conversation per capita than any other assignment in the course. The conversations assignment stimulated collaboration while enhancing the quality as well as the number of interactions between students. The role play encouraged students to not only reflect on their own role play but on those of their fellow students. Since the students usually choose different theorists they are exposed to a broad number of theorists in a memorable way. The highly personal scenarios created by the students stimulate other students to learn major concepts of nursing theories different than their own chosen theorist. Through online conversation and dialog, students gain insight into each others' stories and theoretical concepts related to their theorist. Therefore, the online role play fosters collaboration and promotes reflection.

Brown⁵ highlights another reason why the online role play may be an effective strategy for online learning. This educator contends that when students can see their fellow student's works in progress, they learn strategies and thought processes different than their own. Brown⁵ refers to this as a demand-pull

educational process rather than the supply push strategy observed in the traditional classroom experiences. In the demand-pull process, faculty require the student to search and find answers, producing a product from what they have synthesized. With the push strategy, faculty push information to the student through lecture. The demand pull strategy is a more efficient method of exposing students to a wider variety of material. Students receive much more information from each other's role play than would be possible with one instructor "pushing" information to them. Again, this reinforces the positive value of the role play. It provides a demand-pull process that provides more in depth knowledge and a greater breadth and diversity of information than would be possible by other methods. Therefore, the online role play stimulates a demand-pull process that certainly does not compromise learning. The online environment may stimulate learning on a broader number of theoretical concepts.

In summary, this review of selected pertinent literature appears to reinforce that fact that role play is an effective online strategy that not only stimulates higher order cognitive thinking but also seems efficient and effective for exposing students to more information.

Faculty Perspective

Faculty observed that students' responses to each others work was quadruple the interaction noted with other topics. The learning environment was open and dynamic; students were creative and entertaining with their conversations, eager to respond to each others conversations and seemed more comfortable asking questions and requesting clarification of concepts. Additionally, faculty noted that students were more comfortable with the content in the nursing theory course, and thus better able to synthesize the large volume of complex information presented to them in the learning modules. In the opinion of the faculty, the conversation with a theorist assignment was successful, and assisted students to attain the learning outcomes for the course.

Student Perspectives

After completion of the activity, students are asked to evaluate the role play assignment. Overwhelmingly, the students view the activity as a positive learning experience; one that adds variety to the typical textbook assignments. One nursing student stated, "it will force some students (like me) to step outside their comfort zone and attempt to be creative". Another student wrote, "It was fun and allowed the creative juices to flow. I sat down blank and all of the sudden it just came to me". Student reflections on the assignment expressed enjoyment in the demanding pedagogical strategy noting, "it challenged me to use my imagination because it was different, not just another ho-hum assignment". Students also commented that it was "interesting reading each other's choice of their favorite theorist and helped me to better understand the theories". One student noted a truthful initial response to the assignment with a change of heart after completion,

"I have to admit that I dreaded the assignment in the beginning, as I am not a very creative. I admit now though that it is a greater learning opportunity and it is nice to see everyone's creative side". When asked about their satisfaction with the assignment and whether or not they thought the conversation with a theorist should be retained in the course, a vast majority of students responded with positive comments, "absolutely", "keep doing it" "I recommend that you keep the assignment", "keep it in there" and "you should definitely keep requiring it".

In summation of the students' perspective, the 'Conversation with a Theorist' assignment was an effective pedagogical strategy. Although the analysis was a component of the course evaluation, it substantiated what the professor had directly observed. In response to the conversations, students were more interactive, indicated by a three fold increases in responses. It was obvious students enjoyed the assignment by virtue of their increased spontaneous interaction and their feedback within the course and on evaluations. When asked, students reported that they learned more about other theorists than they would have by just completing the regular course assignments. On the surface this would appear to indicate that students achieved more abstract levels of thought, and could develop more eclectic approaches to nursing theory and practice than they could from course materials without the conversation activity. Qualitative data from the course evaluation indicates all the students found this to be a positive strategy. No one in the class indicated they were dissatisfied with this activity. It should be noted the students did not hesitate to express dissatisfaction with other course material. Another finding by the faculty was that students seemed to socialize more in relation to this activity often commenting about similarities between the student author's narrative and their own personal work situation. In almost, every instance students would address the author and provide a statement of support i.e. "I really thought you did a good job" or "I really understand what the theorist is trying to achieve because of what you wrote." Therefore, not only was the amount of interaction increased but the interaction seemed more personal and supportive.

Discussion

'Conversation with a Theorist' is an innovative online activity that forces all parties involved to step out of their comfort zones. Because online education is a relatively new field for many educators, this activity provides a way for faculty to learn a more personal side to their students that they may never meet face to face. The creativity involved in 'Conversation with a Theorist' provides students a format to represent their constructed knowledge in a way that allows them to apply knowledge to nursing as they understand it. This assignment is a teaching strategy that allows educators to evaluate knowledge synthesis of a higher cognitive level than the typical textbook examination. This assignment also provides the occasion for students with varying learning styles a way express their identity without repercussions. It is an assignment opening the doors to content retention long after the completion of the course. Furthermore,

'Conversation with a Theorist' reminds us, as nursing educators to be flexible with both teaching and learning styles for the ultimate purpose of scholarship and improving the future of healthcare.

Recommendations

The pedagogical strategy addressed in this paper is an innovative and valuable way for nursing educators to address a common theme in educating future nurses. A recommendation for nursing educators is to continue to step out of their comfort zone and try new pedagogical strategies that will address the various needs of the learner. Recommendations also include adapting this strategy to individual teaching styles and learning environments. Be flexible and encourage students to think independently. Allow students to grow personally, as well as cognitively. Strive to find ways to present content that will influence students.

It is also recommended that this activity / teaching strategy be analyzed more completely through formal research. Research should focus on a more detailed analysis of learning outcomes through follow-up interviews, student and faculty surveys or a cross-case analysis of learning outcomes per student. Research opportunities also included a comparison of online learning outcomes vs. traditional classroom learning outcomes.

This evaluation really investigated the literature and used expedient methods of evaluation to determine whether or not this 'conversation' strategy was effective online.

Certainly, this evaluative process will continue and qualitative analysis examining common themes or shared meaning will provide more definitive data. More aggressive and rigorous evaluation of whether or not this activity enhances abstract thought and enhances learning outcomes needs to be more thoroughly investigated.

Conclusions

Substantively, the 'Conversations with a Theorist' strategy or activity in an online format seems to produce high faculty and student satisfaction, increased interaction between students, and a more in-depth knowledge of nursing theory. For the present, this preliminary review of the strategy would appear to support its continued use within the online theory course.

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