

USING A STRENGTHS MODEL TO BUILD AN ON-LINE NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAM

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The on-line environment is the new frontier for academia struggling to define its place in the evolving economy. A concern is how to engage students who maximize their on-line experience and graduate in a timely manner. A strengths model was used as the basis for development of an on-line doctoral nursing program. Upon entering the program, students were given a strengths assessment that focused both students and faculty on the positive attributes students were bringing to their doctoral studies. A positive feedback methodology using on-line discussions in each course was used to support the identified strengths. The optimal picture of a successful entering doctoral student appears to be a person whose top five strengths are learner, achiever, input, connectedness and responsibility. A strengths model promotes a positive learning environment and supports a teacher–learner dynamic where faculty members are encouraged to focus on the students' strengths rather than their challenges. (Index words: Strengths model; On-line education; Doctoral education; Faculty/student relationship) *J Prof Nurs* 30:233–242, 2014. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

INNOVATION INVOLVES RISK. An innate aversion to risk has led many nurses with truly creative solutions to hold back from presenting their ideas to the profession at large. Some seasoned nurses cling to their traditions and practices like an old pair of comfortable slippers, reluctant to part with them even though they are past their prime and better models are available. Although acknowledging the importance of historical perspective, the fact remains that the technology boom has drastically changed the ways we get information, share ideas, and educate our children. Those who resist growing technology are destined to be left behind in the comfort of their obsolescence. The emergence of health information technology in the

clinical setting and efforts to encourage nurses to adopt the technology have shown us the importance of creating a positive environment when promoting innovative approaches (Giebert, 2006). The reality that today's nurses are the beneficiaries and purveyors of the technology explosion has led to the realization that ignoring on-line education is no longer an option. Although on-line teaching has limitations, on-line course delivery also has inherent strengths that may result in a rigorous, individualized program of study. Nursing literature is replete with articles about adoption of simulation and on-line learning methods, but little is known about how to build in a positive environment to promote adoption of innovation by faculty and utilization of an on-line environment to promote the inherent strength of students to succeed. This article describes how a faculty used a strengths model to design and build an on-line nursing doctoral education program.

Strengths Model

The benefits of excelling in strength have been evident throughout time as the stronger have seized power, riches, influence, and control. Strength has come to be admired as long as it is tempered with compassion. The strengths model (Saleebey, 1992) was first applied in the field of social work as a means to empower individuals,

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families, and communities to focus on their strengths, instead of the pathology of life, as they used personal and social resources to meet life goals. Saleebey (2008) later described the core beliefs as depicted by what he called the CPR model: competence, capacities, courage; promise, possibility, positive expectations; and resilience, reserves, resources. The model has been used as an approach for case management for people with severe mental illness (Saleebey, 1996; Sullivan & Rapp, 1994). The idea of strengths coaching has been discussed in terms of managing children and families in the child welfare system to optimize their potential to manage their life situations (Noble, Perkins, & Fatout, 2000). However, MacArthur, Rawana, and Brownlee (2011) point out that associating strength only with difficult situations is self-limiting and negates expansion into other contexts.

Past efforts to use a strengths approach in academia at the undergraduate level (Hovland, et al., 1997) have not been widely embraced, as most university retention programs still aim at remediation of students to shore up educational deficits. Expanding the strengths model into the graduate academic context allows faculty to make the student scholar the focus of the educational endeavor rather than the teacher or the individual course. Saleebey (1992) noted that “the strengths perspective is powered by a...faith: you can build little of lasting value on pathology and problem, but you may build an enduring edifice out of strength and possibility inherent in each individual” (p. 7). Actualizing the inherent possibility in each student was the goal of the on-line doctoral program.

The principles of the strengths model as offered by Mueser, Bond, Drake and Resnick (1998) were used to formulate the philosophical basis for the proposed on-line doctoral program. Using a consensus model, a faculty panel adjusted each principle to apply to an educational setting rather than a social work context. These adaptations were then brought to the entire faculty where they were accepted before implementation. They are presented here for consideration by the greater nursing community. The six original principles (Barry, Zerber, Blow, & Valenstein, 2003, p. 269) were adapted for doctoral education and are listed with the original principles in italics.

1. *Focus is on the student's strengths, not barriers or deficits. (Originally: The focus is on individual strengths rather than on pathology.)* The strengths approach focuses on why relationships succeed rather than why they fail (Olson & Defrain, 2003). The focus became the student's potential to succeed within an experiential context of innate strengths, such as fluency in more than one language or personal comfort with multicultural contexts and digital technology. Instead of concerns about distance from campus or work interference with class times, the students were able to concentrate on achieving the educational outcomes. Dissertation topics studying military

nurse experiences of caring for enemy insurgents (Thompson & Mastel-Smith, 2012) and a nursing model for parental support during incidents of fetal fatality (Wool & Northam, 2011) support the notion of capitalizing on student experiential strengths. The on-line environment complemented the work schedule commitments of students enabling an optimal blended situation of career advancement and educational achievement.

2. *The key student/faculty relationship is primary and essential. (Originally: The case manager-patient relationship is primary and essential.)* The student/faculty relationship was promoted as a key element of student success. Relationships are a source of stability allowing the student to adapt to changing priorities (Nordstrom, 2003). This approach exchanged the idea that scholarly learning can only happen in large cities or complex medical centers for the belief that learning can occur anywhere and is best absorbed when it can be practically applied to the targeted destination of the student's interest. Research and practice expertise to address the challenges of rural health are best learned and practiced in rural health settings. Student dissertation topics evidencing this principle include an analysis of disaster preparedness in the “Tornado Alley” area of Texas (Baack & Alfred, 2013) and empowerment of hypertensive African American women toward health promoting behaviors (Simon-Campbell, 2011).
3. *Specific deliverables to meet course objectives are based on the principle of the person's self-determinism. (Originally: Interventions are based on patient self-determinism.)* Keeping the focus in the student's domain of access and accountability allowed course work throughout the doctoral program to contribute to dissertation study completion and success. Students identified their projected research path early in the program. Although they were not locked into this decision, they were encouraged to use course work to support their final product. Having a clear structure that supports the course objectives has been linked to graduate student satisfaction (Stein, 2004). Dissertation projects were greatly facilitated by having a solid and continuing base for such topics as the effect of a Total Girls Wellness Program on adolescent females (Chilton, Haas, & Gosselin, 2013) and methods to facilitate acculturation of international students (Vardaman, 2011).
4. *The learner's community is viewed as an oasis of resources, not as an obstacle to expanding educational horizons. (Originally: The community is viewed as an oasis of resources, not as an obstacle.)* Today's students want personal atten-

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