

THE CREATION OF A SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT A STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM FOR NURSING MAJORS AT A TRADITIONAL LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY



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In response to an increased need for Spanish-speaking and culturally competent nurses, a small private undergraduate-only liberal arts university implemented a semester-long study abroad program for nursing majors in Barcelona, Spain. Prior to the creation of this program, study abroad for nursing students was limited because of prelicensure requirements and limitations of a traditional nursing curriculum. Students studying in Spain enroll in four courses—including two core nursing courses delivered using Polycom hardware and telepresence software by nursing faculty who remain in the United States, a Spanish language course, and one general education course taught either by the University's Spain Director or by an experienced Spanish professor. Participants live with host families and participate in clinical and community observational experiences in Spanish health care agencies. Students then complete direct patient care requirements upon return to the United States. To our knowledge, no other undergraduate-only institution offers a semester-long study abroad experience for nursing majors embedded within the curriculum using synchronous learning; we believe our Spain program, which is in its fourth year being open to nursing majors, is truly an innovative approach to establish cultural competence for undergraduate nursing majors that could serve as a model for other schools of nursing and health disciplines. (Index words: Synchronous learning; Study abroad; Technology; Innovation; Cultural competence) J Prof Nurs 31:233–241, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE BENEFITS OF study abroad experiences (SAEs) for nursing students have been well documented and include personal, professional, and intellectual growth, as well as cultural sensitivity and language competence (Edmonds, 2012; Kelleher, 2013). Barriers to study abroad programs for nursing majors, particularly at undergraduate liberal arts universities with traditional curricula constraints, necessitate innovative approaches to assure academic rigor and sufficient duration of the cultural immersion experience. The use of technology

like Polycom hardware and telepresence software to provide a synchronous learning environment expands opportunities for nursing majors to complete a 4-year sequential nursing curriculum taught by core faculty while immersed in a semester-long SAE.

Explosive growth in digital technology and sophisticated software now empowers university professors to expand student learning opportunities. On-line courses offered as *asynchronous* distance learning without the real-time presence of the instructor have dominated the expansion of course offerings. These experiences open education to many students, including those holding full-time employment and those in remote, rural, or underserved areas. *Synchronous* experiences allow the student and instructor to observe, communicate, and interact in real time to facilitate an active learning

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environment (Kliger & Pfeiffer, 2011). The use of synchronous learning technology at universities in which pedagogy is deliberately restricted to face-to-face faculty–student instruction opens doors for innovation and holds particular promise for traditional undergraduate teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Synchronous Learning

The innovative use of blended asynchronous and synchronous pedagogical strategies for on-line courses has appeared in the nursing literature for decades (Edwards, 1995). However, synchronous instruction within the health sciences predominantly includes one-time videoconferencing and Web conferencing to augment existing on-line courses. A few reports address complete face-to-face classes as part of a course, but no published studies specific to the synchronous delivery of semester-long core undergraduate nursing courses were identified.

Real-time videoconferencing connects students or clinicians from a distance site to a main campus for defined sessions. Studies specific to nursing delivering synchronous parts of courses are limited. In the UK, university nursing students experienced synchronous learning to observe and interact with a specialist nurse, patients, and caregivers in a diabetes clinic (Rush, Walsh, Guy, & Wharrad, 2010). A Pacific Northwest U.S. site used two-way video/audio communication as a hybrid strategy to integrate classroom and on-line distance learning for continuing education modules for occupational health nurses (Ward, Beaton, Bruck, & de Castro, 2011).

Additional studies (e.g., Jones, Maramba, Boulous, & Alexander, 2009) highlight the use of synchronous learning via videoconferencing in interprofessional fields. International medical education, physical therapy, and dental programs cite numerous examples of video conferencing to support education and clinical practice in remote locations. Augestad and Lindsetmo (2009), for example, include telementoring of surgical procedures, provide clinical direction in trauma and emergency medicine, and offer follow-up of post-surgical patients. A Pennsylvania physical therapy program implemented video conferencing to deliver a training session to remote clinicians at three other sites across the United States (Kuo, Buckley, & Wang, 2012).

Several published reports describe the addition of synchronous Web conferencing software to enhance existing on-line distance courses. Synchronous video conferencing aimed to increase social presence and visibility of the speaker found social presence enhanced students' scores in perceived learning and satisfaction with the instructor (Richardson & Swan, 2003). A Florida nursing program increased social presence in its distance education on-line courses by using voice-over Internet communication and multimedia sessions (Little, Passmore, & Schullo, 2006). A similar virtual classroom used in on-line education courses was described by McBrien, Jones, and Cheng (2009), whereas a Master of

Social Work program added synchronous on-line meetings to enhance existing on-line courses (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011).

To date, disciplines that report the synchronous delivery of a complete face-to-face course in two or more locations with minimal or no on-line component are limited to medicine and pharmacy. A synchronous classroom conferencing system taught basic science courses between two medical schools in Turkey that were 1500 miles apart (Oz, 2005). The “classference” was a two-way videoconference, including synchronous sharing of the electronic chalkboards, document camera, PowerPoint presenter PC, and multiple videostreams of instructors and students in both locations. This system allowed spontaneous interaction between students in both classrooms and simultaneous delivery of final examinations. A Florida Doctor of Pharmacy program used two-way interactive videoconferencing to deliver a course to their home campus, two distant sites, and an international site (Ward, Garrett, & Marsh, 2006). Although instructor presence in the classroom had no effect on examination scores, 77% of students perceived they performed better on examinations when they heard the content from a live lecturer rather than the interactive videoconferencing (Ward et al., 2006).

Study Abroad

Empirical studies of international experiences in nursing were reviewed, and most were one-way immersions of varying lengths of stay with a host university (Kulbok, Mitchell, Glick, & Greiner, 2012). For example, Boston College offers study abroad for a full semester in any approved location (Read, 2011). Their home program is large enough to afford two nursing curricular tracks: Plan A for those not studying abroad and Plan B for the travelers who start the clinical nursing sequence one semester earlier than Plan A students. A collaborative exchange program is offered by the University of Virginia and involves Danish and U.S. students trading spaces while still registered in their university of origin (Baernholdt, Drake, Maron, & Neymark, 2013). Although the SAE is a commonly held value by many U.S. university nursing programs, reports describe observational programs of varying length of stay or the study of core or elective courses abroad by schools large enough to offer clinical core courses twice during a given year at home (see Table 1). Our undergraduate-only program, described as the last entry in Table 1, is distinctive in that it delivers synchronous learning of core nursing courses in real time to a simultaneous cohort at the school of origin and in Spain.

Innovative Study Abroad Program for Nursing Majors Overview

The mission, philosophy, and goals of our Midwestern undergraduate-only School of Nursing (SON) are consistent with that of the University's emphasis on preparing students for democratic citizenship and life in a global society. Specifically, the SON “extends the

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