

LEARNING STYLES OF REGISTERED NURSES ENROLLED IN AN ONLINE NURSING PROGRAM

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Technological advances assist in the proliferation of online nursing programs which meet the needs of the working nurse. Understanding online learning styles permits universities to adequately address the educational needs of the professional nurse returning for an advanced degree. The purpose of this study was to describe the learning styles of registered nurses (RNs) enrolled in an online master's nursing program or RN–bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) program. A descriptive, cross-sectional design was used. Kolb's learning style inventory (Version 3.1) was completed by 217 RNs enrolled in online courses at a Southeastern university. Descriptive statistical procedures were used for analysis. Thirty-one percent of the nurses were accommodators, 20% were assimilators, 19% were convergers, and 20% were divergers. Accommodators desire hand-on experiences, carrying out plans and tasks and using an intuitive trial-and-error approach to problem solving. The learning styles of the RNs were similar to the BSN students in traditional classroom settings. Despite their learning style, nurses felt that the online program met their needs. Implementing the technological innovations in nursing education requires the understanding of the hands-on learning of the RN so that the development of the online courses will satisfactorily meet the needs of the nurses who have chosen an online program. (Index words: Learning styles; Web-based education; Graduate education) *J Prof Nurs 26:49–53, 2010. © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.*

EXPLORING THE LEARNING styles of nursing students was a popular topic explored in the literature in the 1980s and 1990s through discussions and research studies (DeCoux, 1990; Joyce-Nagata, 1996; Linares, 1999; McDonough & Osterbrink, 2005; Merritt, 1983). The goal of the research studies was to determine the learning styles of undergraduate nursing students in the traditional classroom setting to match teaching strategies with the learning styles. The samples of nursing students were predominantly traditional undergraduate nursing students and some registered nurses (RNs) returning for their bachelor's degree. A noticeable gap in the literature was the exclusion of RNs returning to school to complete a master's degree in nursing. In addition, the learning styles of students enrolled in online master's programs that have all didactic courses online is

another feature that has not been explored. Understanding the online learning styles allows universities to better meet the needs of RNs seeking advanced degrees. The purpose of this study was to describe the learning styles of RNs enrolled in an online master's program or RN-to-bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) program.

Literature Review

A review of the education and nursing empirical and theoretical literature related to online learning was conducted. There is no research describing or exploring the learning styles of RNs enrolled in online nursing programs. Research describing the learning styles of the traditional baccalaureate nursing student is prevalent. RNs return to school either to complete their bachelor's degree or to enter a master's program for an advanced practice nursing role (nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist, or nurse educator). The online nursing student, who is already an RN, is unique. This student is a practicing nurse who has the clinical skills required for practice and in most cases is working full-time while returning to school to prepare for an advanced practice role. With the didactic portion of knowledge in an online

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setting, understanding the learning styles of this population is vital. This knowledge will help colleges and schools of nursing meet the learning needs of this type of student to provide a satisfactory experience.

An online program, whether the RN-to-BSN program or the master's program, provides advantages such as convenience and flexibility. The work schedule of the RN does not interfere with learning because learning can take place anywhere and at any time. Other features of online learning include the following: (a) Dialogues between students and faculty are not restricted by the traditional class room time model, (b) the learning environment can be student centered, (c) there is greater access to a variety of quality resources, and (d) there is "a level playing field for all learners, regardless of visual or physical handicaps" (Muir, 2001, p. 9). The disadvantages of online learning are (a) accessibility to technology, (b) computer literacy, (c) limitations of technology, and (d) levels of interaction between the faculty and students (Muir, 2001).

Understanding learning styles helps faculty use teaching strategies or activities that maximize learning. Kolb's learning style inventory (LSI) is the most frequently used instrument with samples of nursing students, although the validity has been questioned in the literature (DeCoux, 1990). Kolb (1984) delineated four learning styles which include diverger, assimilator, converger, or accommodator. Each of the four types of learners falls within four quadrants created by two axes. One axis is the active experimentation/reflective observation scale, and the other is a concrete experience/abstract conceptualization scale. The diverger prefers concrete experiences and reflective observation. The assimilator prefers abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. The converger prefers abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, and the accommodator prefers concrete experiences and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Table 1 lists the characteristics of Kolb's learning styles.

The Kolb's LSI is not the only learning inventory or questionnaire used in research studies. In a recent study

delineating the learning style preferences of undergraduate nursing students in the United Kingdom, the learning style questionnaire of Honey and Mumford was used (Rassool & Rawaf, 2007). This questionnaire is based on Kolb's model, and the learning styles identified include the activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist.

DeCroux (1990) provided a review of the nursing research on learning styles and nursing students. The literature reviewed from the 1980s included (a) an examination of learning styles of generic and RN students, (b) a comparison of learning styles between baccalaureate nursing students and the associate degree and the diploma students, (c) an exploration of link between learning styles and achievement, and (d) an examination of the teacher-learner learning style match. Overall, in the research studies from the 1980s using the Kolb's LSI, nursing students were identified as divergers and accommodators. Both learning styles fall within the concrete experience (feeling) quadrant of Kolb's learning styles. The diverger learns through concrete experiences, whereas the accommodator learns through trial-and-error activities (Kelly, 1997). There were no students from online programs examined in these studies.

Joyce-Nagata (1996) conducted a study to identify learning styles of traditional baccalaureate nursing students, RN baccalaureate students, and nurse educators ($n = 334$) and found that the predominant learning style of all groups was assimilator. Kolb's LSI was used for this study. The assimilator learns through observation and reflection. Linares (1999) examined the learning style of generic nursing students ($n = 301$), RN-BSN students ($n = 188$), allied health students ($n = 110$), and faculty ($n = 30$), and the predominant learning style was the converger style. The converger incorporates abstract conceptualization. This difference in learning style as compared with that of the prior studies may be due to the use of a different learning style inventory and the inclusion of allied health students. Kolb's LSI was not used. Rassool and Rawaf (2007) administered the learning style questionnaire of Honey and Mumford to 136 undergraduate nursing students in the United Kingdom. Most of the nursing students were identified as a reflector (44%), which is similar to the diverger (concrete experiences and reflective observations). The reflector observes and analyzes things before action. The research studies after the 1980s demonstrated a variety of learning styles among nursing students.

The limitation with the research is the inconsistent use of the learning inventories. Different learning inventories were used in various research studies; thus, comparing the learning styles of generic students and RNs is difficult. Samples included RNs returning to complete their bachelor's degree but in a classroom setting, not in an online learning environment. With Kolb's LSI, most nursing students were accommodators and divergers (DeCoux, 1990). Although the reliability and validity of Kolb's LSI are questioned repeatedly in the literature (DeCoux, 1990; Joyce-Nagata, 1996), it is the predominant inventory used in research with samples of nursing

Table 1. Characteristics of Kolb's Learning Styles

Kolb's learning styles
Diverger
Feeler and watcher
Multiple viewpoints
Likes group work and brain storming sessions
Assimilator
Thinker and watcher
Likes conciseness and logic
Likes ideas and abstract concepts
Converger
Thinker and doer
Focuses on technical tasks
Less concerned with people
Accommodator
Feeler and doer
Hands-on experiences
Intuitive trial-and-error approach to problems
Carry out plans and people oriented

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