

Personal experiences and lessons learned from building a blended nursing pharmacology course

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KEYWORDS:

Blended learning;
Best practices;
Nursing curriculum

Abstract Blended learning, combining online and face-to-face instruction, has been in the spotlight as a method to teach nursing students effectively using fewer resources. This article is a review of what was found were best practices in creating a blended nursing pharmacology course, the elements that were useful, and those activities that were not successful. A review of the literature determines evidence-based methods to design, implement, and evaluate a blended course and how to incorporate it into nursing curriculum.

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1. Introduction

In an effort to find new ways to train more nursing students and in anticipation of future nursing shortages, educators are constantly looking for ways to make learning more effective and convenient. One method of enhancing a course and possibly lowering education costs is through blended (or hybrid) learning. This is defined as blending online coursework with face-to-face class time in an effort to improve learning outcome (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). This project looks at how an elective nursing pharmacology course was changed to a required prerequisite course for entrance into an associate degree nursing program. The course was also changed from a traditional 3-hour lecture course meeting weekly to a blended format that met for 3 hours once every 3 weeks, with the remainder of the coursework completed online. It will review what the instructors found as best practices and those methods that did not work well for the course.

The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT, 2005) stated that blended learning reduces face-to-face meetings and replaces activities with out-of-class, online, interactive learning activities and makes considerable

changes in remaining face-to-face classes to improve learning outcomes. Because pharmacology is a course that lends itself to self-study commitments, it was deemed an appropriate nursing course to begin with a blended approach.

This course was previously taught in a rural Arizona community college in a blended format, but with students concurrently enrolled in an associate degree nursing program with small class sizes (generally less than 20 students). These students had some familiarity with the course management software, assignment expectations, and grading guidelines. When the curriculum was changed to a required prerequisite, the cohort was modified to students who may have not had any experience with nursing language and concepts. It also grew the class size to four sections with more than 100 students. There were also nursing students enrolled in the course as an elective to further their understanding of pharmacology, causing a diverse blend of knowledge and abilities.

Because the course had been successfully delivered in a blended format in previous semesters, it was thought that few modifications were needed for the new cohort. Unfortunately, it was found that because many of the students were less familiar with the nursing concepts and jargon, many modifications needed to be made to facilitate understanding. This report is a review of what was deemed successful and those strategies that were not useful.

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2. Key terms

2.1. Blended learning or hybrid learning

For the purposes of this article, blended learning (sometimes called *hybrid learning*) will be viewed as a replacement model (NCAT, 2005). This is where the number of lectures was reduced from one 3-hour session per week to one 3-hour session every third week, reducing face-to-face classes to one third of the course, and the remaining two thirds were completed through self-study and online activities. Learning “tools” or readiness assessment tests were given during each face-to-face encounter for approximately 40% of the total grade. Students were encouraged to prepare outside of class by reading the text, completing online assignments and discussions, and linking Internet resources. The online component had multimedia resources available to enhance learning, such as chapter presentations, assignments from the text’s study guide, and audio and video resources.

2.2. Constructivist learning

Often termed a *problem-solving approach to learning*, Fosnot (1996) explained this type of learning as development through assimilation, accommodation, and construction of information and building of understanding through reorganization of the information and formulation of meaning. This is a form of cognitive development seen in adult learners. According to the Educational Broadcast Organization (2004), constructivist learning encourages students to use active learning methods to enhance knowledge and reflect on what they are learning and how their understanding is improved.

2.3. Adult education theory (andragogy)

Knowles (1980) stated that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for learning decisions. Adult learning programs must accommodate this. In designing courses for adult learners, the following is true: Adults need to know why they need to learn specific materials, adults need to learn experientially, adults approach learning as problem-solving endeavor, and adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value. Andragogy shapes the learning focus more on the process and less on the content. Strategies such as case studies, role-playing, simulations, and self-evaluation are most useful. Instructors adopt a role of facilitator or resource rather than lecturer, which lends itself well to blended learning.

2.4. Asynchronous discourse

Literally, *asynchronous* means “apart from time.” This type of communication is used when students do not participate at the same time. Electronic mail and discussion

boards are examples of asynchronous technologies (National Council for State Boards of Nursing, 2009).

2.5. Course management system (CMS)

Sometimes called a *virtual learning environment*, CMS is a software system that helps instructors to facilitate the administrative aspects of a course online. This system helps with tracking students’ progress. This is a platform that holds the course documents, grades, discussion forums, e-mail, course exercises, and examinations (Farlex Inc., 2009).

3. Conceptual framework

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) have established a framework for blended learning called the *community of inquiry framework*. This framework incorporates a collaborative constructivist process that encourages social interaction and collaboration to form meaning. Within this framework, a community of learners is formed to support the learning process and use problem identification and problem-solving approaches to facilitate meaning. This approach has been found effective to assist adult learning. The following model shows how the community of inquiry framework is used to design blended learning.

As Fig. 1 shows, there are three types of presence needed for blended learning to be successful; these are social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. When

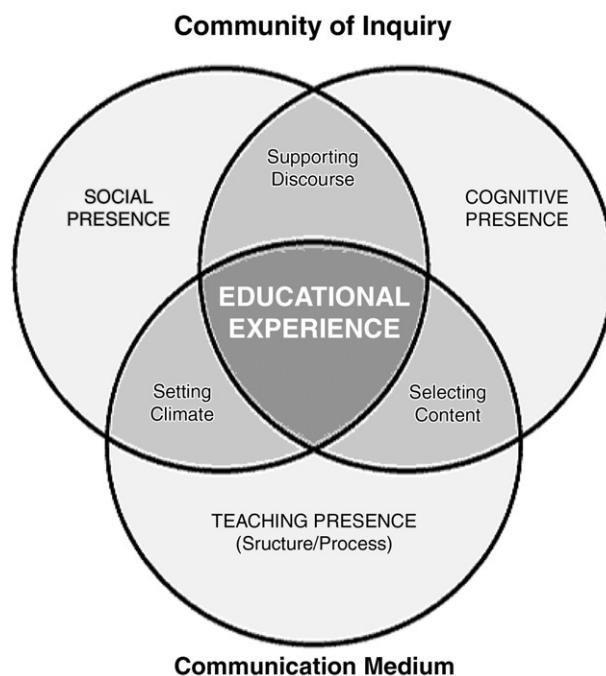


Fig. 1 Community of inquiry framework for blended learning from <http://communitiesofinquiry.com/model> (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008).

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