

## Research

# Identifying students' perceptions of community within and need for an online veterinary pharmacotherapy course

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Veterinary pharmacy is an emerging industry, yet its place within pharmacy curricula is limited. This article describes a newly formed online veterinary pharmacotherapy course, and reports on student perceptions of classroom community and perceived need for this course.

**Design:** Veterinary pharmacotherapy was a two-credit elective offered to third and fourth year pharmacy students, delivered solely online through a Learning Management System. Evaluation of the course was completed through an optional standard course evaluation at the end of the semester, with added questions regarding key components integrated to foster community within the course.

**Results:** Out of 34 students, 14 completed the course evaluation. All students reported they would recommend this course to a classmate. The online nature of the course was viewed favorably with most students indicating it was the reason they were able to take this course. Two main reasons students reported enrolling in the course were a strong interest in animals and a belief that pharmacists should be educated on this important patient population. Weekly topic discussions and e-mails were viewed to have contributed to the sense of community within the course.

**Conclusion:** Veterinary pharmacotherapy course was well received by pharmacy students with weekly e-mails and topic discussions identified as contributing to community within the course. Additionally, students felt that animals were an important patient population for pharmacists to learn about. This particular feedback could be a catalyst for colleges and schools of pharmacy to offer more opportunities for students to learn about this patient population.

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## Background

The veterinary and pet care industry has been a steadily rising sector in the United States. In 2014, \$58.04 billion was spent on pet care, including \$15.04 billion on veterinary care (routine veterinary care and prescription medications).<sup>1</sup> The total spent on pet care is estimated to rise to \$60.59 billion in 2015, with \$15.73 billion expected to be

attributed to veterinary care.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics projected a 12% veterinarian job growth between 2012 and 2022.<sup>2</sup> While pet owners may purchase medications directly from the veterinarian, many choose to purchase pet prescriptions from retail community pharmacists. Despite this role, the teaching of veterinary pharmacy has an unclear home within pharmacy education. The Accreditation Council for Pharmaceutical Education's (ACPE) current Accreditation Standards and Guidelines for Pharmacy Education do not address the place of veterinary pharmacotherapy within the core curriculum requirements.<sup>3</sup> This is disconcerting, as the

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2014 American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACCP) Graduating Student Survey reported that over half of all graduating students foresee themselves working in a retail community setting.<sup>4</sup> Recently, the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) weighed in on the topic of veterinary pharmacy. During their Annual Meeting, resolution number 110-5-14 was passed on the subject, which acknowledges a substantial area of growth in veterinary pharmacy. The resolution encourages colleges and schools of pharmacy to collaboratively develop veterinary pharmacology courses with schools of veterinary medicine.<sup>5</sup>

In order to bridge the gap in knowledge around veterinary pharmacy, the University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy developed and implemented a course titled “veterinary pharmacotherapy,” delivered entirely online. Online learning provides many advantages, including flexibility for both the student and educator, but establishing a sense of community can be difficult. Gusfield<sup>6</sup> first hypothesized that the term community could be described in two ways: (1) geographical location or (2) relational (i.e., a shared sense of purpose). Classroom-based courses often find success because there is an inherent sense of community within them as they include both a geographical location and a shared sense of purpose.<sup>7</sup> Rovai<sup>8</sup> described seven areas of focus in order to achieve a sense of community within an online setting. These include transactional distance, social presence, social equity, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size.<sup>8</sup> The course presented here focused on four of these seven areas. The first was transactional distance, or the psychological space between instructor and learner. This is often unique and has a different interpretation according to each learner. Rovai<sup>8</sup> stated that transactional distance is decreased by student dialog but increased by structure imposed by the instructor. The second area of focus was that of social presence.<sup>8</sup> This is the idea that once an online course begins, the course director or instructor must continue to have a presence and interaction within the course. A third concept Rovai<sup>8</sup> proposed, and this course focused on, was social equity. This is an understanding that all students will have an equal chance to participate in discussion without the threat of attack from other participants. Finally, the fourth concept is that of community size.<sup>8</sup> Rovai<sup>8</sup> postulated that 20–30 students are the maximum number that one instructor could manage if the class contained active discussions.

The purpose of this article is to describe the online veterinary pharmacotherapy course, and to report on student perceptions of community within the course and its impact on learning and perceived need for such a course.

### Course design

Veterinary pharmacotherapy was a two-credit elective course originally offered during the spring 2013 semester as

an interprofessional course between veterinary medicine and pharmacy. For the spring 2014 offering, it underwent significant design changes and was offered solely to pharmacy students in order to focus on pharmacy learning. It was offered only to third and fourth year pharmacy students, as it was determined that students should have a sufficient knowledge of human pharmacotherapy in order to understand veterinary pharmacotherapy.

The course was delivered exclusively online through a Learning Management System (Moodle<sup>®</sup>, Perth, Australia). The course was divided into three, four-week modules with a non-cumulative examination at the end of each module. Each module was divided into weekly topics based on body systems or disease groups. For example, the ophthalmology section contained information regarding uveitis, corneal ulcers, glaucoma, and cataracts, while the infectious disease section contained information regarding pneumonia, kennel cough, feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), feline leukemia virus (FeLV), Lyme disease, and feline viral rhinotracheitis. Table 1 contains an overview of the course content. Each weekly topic consisted of one to four video and audio-linked slide presentations, one to three required primary literature readings, and one to two handouts. Presentations were published using Camtasia Studio<sup>®</sup> (TechSmith<sup>®</sup>, Okemos, MI) and ranged in length from 6 to 60 minutes. This platform was chosen because of its ability to record audio and video that can be viewed on all devices, including computers, laptops, tablets, and phones. All presentations with the exception of two presentations were developed and recorded by the course director, who had a four-year history of practicing in a veterinary pharmacy setting. Preventative care was developed and recorded by a general practice faculty member at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine and the pain management presentation was developed by an anesthesia faculty member at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, but recorded by the course director.

To foster community, and to encourage students to keep up with content, students were required to reply to posted questions in weekly, class-wide, topic discussions, as well as comment on another student’s post at least once for points toward their final grade. Additional assignments included completing pre- and post-course reflection articles (one each), a calorie counting worksheet, and preparing a client education document for a veterinary drug product.

### Fostering of sense of community

As mentioned previously, four areas from the theories of Rovai<sup>8</sup> were focused upon to facilitate community within this course: transactional distance, social presence, social equity, and community size. For the first concept, transactional distance, structure was limited as the only deadlines in this course were assignments, topic discussions, and exams. While students were encouraged to keep upon

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