



## The challenges of online nursing education

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### ABSTRACT

To meet the current critical need for qualified nurses, many colleges have initiated online programs, primarily aimed towards registered nurse (RN) to BS students. Despite the growing number of online nursing programs, there is little research on instructor views of online learning. This study used interviews to investigate nursing instructor experiences in online learning. Results revealed instructor concerns with identifying the most effective assessment methods to judge students' ability to apply their lessons in real-world settings. Online nursing exhibits unique challenges, such as providing nursing students with online authentic learning experiences that relate to real-world nursing situations, which comprise both high-stake medical and interpersonal elements. Results also indicated that providing support and ensuring that the faculty have sufficient time to develop effective courses, with adequate assessment for the students, is necessary to ensure the quality of online nursing education.

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### 1. Introduction

Currently, there is a healthcare crisis in the United States due to the shortage of qualified, professional nurses (Stotts, Smith, Edwards-Schafer, Schmidt, & Smith, 2002). Nurses with Bachelor's and Master's degrees on average have better critical thinking skills than their peers with Associate's degrees and hospitals that employ more nurses with higher level degrees tend to have lower mortality rates (Aiken, Clarke, Cheung, Sloane, & Silber, 2003). Therefore, hospitals strongly encourage their RNs to return to school to obtain Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Online programs provide a cost effective option for both institutions and students, enabling registered nurses (RNs) who may not have access to traditional academic settings to pursue a baccalaureate degree (Bolan, 2003; McAlpine, Lockerbie, Ramsay, & Beaman, 2002; Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005). However, despite the growth of online programs, there is little research on the discipline-specific challenges that online nursing instructors face in the delivery of their courses. The purpose of this study was to identify particular challenges and issues that the online nursing faculty might face in the delivery of their particular discipline online.

#### 1.1. Review of literature

It is simplistic to point out that teaching online and teaching face-to-face are different. They obviously have different platforms of delivery, but the depth of the difference is surprisingly broad and

deep. Teaching online demands not only an understanding of the content, but also an understanding of how to present the content, provide a learning environment using technology (Conceição, 2006), and take advantage of the unique learning affordances of online learning environments. O'Neil and Fisher (2008) described differences in experiences for nursing students who were taking an online course versus a traditional face-to-face course, despite both courses being taught by the same professor. Students in the online class felt that they worked harder, but also felt like they were more part of a group. Although the technology presented a barrier and was sometimes challenging, they were able to revisit lessons online at any time and felt the asynchronous nature of the course was beneficial. These students were often placed in small groups for discussion online, helping to promote the social interaction of the course. This is particularly interesting since students often talk about feeling alone or lost when they are in an online environment (Trenholm, 2007). Assessment can also provide certain challenges in online learning. Challenges include verifying identity (e.g., is the person taking the test the person signed up for the course?) (Trenholm, 2007), the use of non-allowed outside materials, and alignment of the assessment with the learning outcome (e.g., the tendency online to assess at a lower level than the learning outcome). Many of the methods used by professors in face-to-face classes cannot be employed in an online class.

Teachers in online situations cannot think exclusively of themselves and their students, as they are also interdependent on other agencies and individuals, including instructional design and technical support and faculty peers who have also created online courses. These changes have also increased the workload of many faculty who were not expecting technology to be central to their careers (Hartman, Dziuban, & Brophy-Ellison, 2007; Passmore, 2000). The differences

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between online classes and face-to-face classes are real and must be considered. However, different disciplines lend themselves better or worse to online learning, an important consideration in the instructional design of online learning. Each discipline has unique demands, which may require unique online learning solutions.

There is a voluminous body of research about online learning. However, the vast majority of such research tacitly assumes homogeneity between disciplines. For example, common theoretical constructs, such as community of inquiry (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999) and social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Rourke et al., 1999) are typically discussed without regard to disciplinary differences. Social presence in online courses has been strongly correlated with satisfaction with online distance learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), and is thus often suggested in the design of online courses. One might wonder whether feeling socially connected would matter in an online physics class as much as in an education course.

A small but growing number of scholars have started to research online learning through the disciplines paradigm, exploring the disciplinary effects in online learning. Instructors of mathematics and mathematics-related courses are significantly less satisfied with online learning and course management tools than are their peers teaching non-mathematics-related courses (Smith, Ferguson, & Gupta, 2004; Trenholm, 2006; Trenholm, 2007). Online mathematics instructors often create their own technical solutions to overcome the failure of online course management systems to meet the unique needs of mathematics (Smith et al., 2004). Attrition is significantly higher in mathematics-related online courses than in non-mathematics-related courses (Smith & Ferguson, 2005), a difference that does not exist in equivalent face-to-face courses. Since assessment of online courses is problematic, some experts recommend proctored examinations (Trenholm, 2007). Arbaugh (2005) has also researched similar disciplinary questions in the context of online business education, as have Hornik, Saunders, Li, Moskal, and Dzuiban (2008), who have shown that student grades are significantly higher and withdrawal rates lower for courses with high paradigm (hard discipline) development (e.g., Biology, Computer Science) than for courses with low paradigm (soft discipline) development (e.g., Sociology, English) (Smith et al., 2008).

Despite these disciplinary differences, it is important to understand that there are many salient features of the online learning experience that are common across disciplines, while there are also important differences between disciplines (Smith, Heindel, & Torres-Ayala, 2008). The differences have important implications for instructional design of online learning. The challenge of the discipline-specific online learning research paradigm is to differentiate what is common to all online learning, and what is unique to specific disciplines. Since participants in studies of online learning may have only been involved in one discipline, they may have no idea about what is unique to their discipline, nor how these differences may interact with the online modality (Smith et al., 2008). Differences between online and the traditional face-to-face modes of learning may be much more salient to people immersed in one discipline. Therefore, it is important to conduct research about online learning across disciplines, sorting out what is unique to specific disciplines and how the unique challenges of disciplines interact with online learning (Fig. 1).

One way to understand the differences in the different disciplines relevant to online learning is Biglan's taxonomy, which divides up academic disciplines along two dimensions: hard versus soft and pure versus applied. Hard disciplines, such as chemistry, have an agreed-upon, ordered, seemingly objective knowledge base, while soft disciplines, such as sociology, have knowledge bases relatively more open to interpretation and different schools of thought (Neumann, Perry, & Becher, 2002). The pure versus applied dimension is based on whether the discipline implicitly involves real-world application of the

Domains	Pure	Applied
Hard	Mathematics, Natural Sciences: physics, chemistry, biology botany, etc.	Engineering, Applied mathematics
Soft	Social Sciences, Humanities: sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.	Nursing, Education

Fig. 1. Biglan's taxonomy of academic disciplines. (Smith et al., 2008).

knowledge (Neumann et al., 2002). Engineering, an applied field, is the application of pure knowledge bases such as mathematics and physics. Biglan's taxonomy provides a useful lens for analyzing disciplinary differences in online courses. For example, a study spanning five years that analyzed Blackboard tool-usage patterns, student attrition rates, and student course evaluations suggests that online learning in pure disciplines has become more commoditized, while online learning in applied disciplines has become more oriented to community practice and more diversified (Smith et al., 2008).

The lead author of the current publication has written publications on the discipline-specific effects of mathematics, a hard-pure discipline, in online learning. In Nursing, a soft-applied discipline, the lead author has made a deliberate choice of a discipline that is opposite along both dimensions of Biglan's taxonomy. Online nursing education delivers applied information in a human interactive environment. This means that the knowledge learned in the discipline is applied to people and is therefore unpredictable and requires critical thinking skills to be used by the students. Nursing is a high-demand field with highly specific needs for the students. The issues of nursing are in many ways different than the issues of other disciplines and thus require the online delivery to be modified in unique ways. By understanding the issues within the domain, the online education of nursing can be more productive.

Beyond the content, Frith and Kee (2003) contend that withdrawal due to technical issues can be devastating to online nursing programs. It is vital that online curriculum is supported by sound instructional design to foster critical thinking and clinical decision-making paramount to nursing education and practice (Bolan, 2003). Providing nursing students with a well-constructed online course that targets their needs is part of a coordinated curriculum. This, plus responsive technical support, allows assessment to be provided in a timely manner, thereby creating a course with higher completion rates (Frith & Kee, 2003). Successful online courses for nurses provide frequent, short assignments and discussion forums centered around thought-provoking questions that integrate course content as well as illustrate the student's individual experience (Spangle, Hodne, & Schierling, 2002). An online nursing course should create an environment that fosters reflection and increases critical thinking about practice by allowing time for the students to develop cohesive written responses (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004). By doing this, the students can share their personal experiences supported by research, helping not only to solidify their own learning, but also to bring more experiences to their fellow students who may face similar situations once they are in the field.

## 1.2. Gaps in the research literature

More research on a soft-applied discipline would be helpful for this research paradigm, discipline-specific effects on e-learning. With its real-world consequences for practitioners, nursing is an appropriate choice. Further, with the rising demand for nursing associated with the aging of the U.S. population and the rapid growth of online nursing

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