



## Use of a blog in an undergraduate nursing leadership course



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### ABSTRACT

In this study, the use of a blog in a senior leadership clinical nursing course was analyzed qualitatively through two means; focus group interviews of those using the blog, and analysis of blog content. Initial feelings expressed by students were annoyance and intimidation concerning the blogging assignment. These feelings quickly dissipated, with students verbalizing many positive aspects related to the blog, including having a place to reflect, feeling connected as a group, valuing feedback provided by their peers, and learning from theirs and others' experiences. The mechanics of having to synthesize their thoughts in written form, in a shared venue was also identified by students to be helpful for their learning. Blog posts were primarily related to student experiences, with students identifying a "lesson learned" in most posts. Student comments were geared to providing support of fellow students, through words of encouragement or through sharing similar experiences. Instructors felt the blog, in addition to helping students to synthesize their thoughts, helped to monitor how students were learning and progressing throughout the semester, and helped them to transition from nursing student to practicing professional. The researchers concluded that blogging in a senior leadership clinical nursing course promotes reflection is an effective way to enhance student learning.

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### Introduction

The purpose of this research is to describe and analyze the use of blogging as an alternative method of for debriefing and reflection in the last semester of clinical coursework in an undergraduate baccalaureate nursing program in the western United States.

Traditional clinical rotations in nursing education consist of one instructor with 8–10 students working in the same unit at the same time. Clinical shifts include a preconference for preparation and a post-conference for the purpose of synthesis of clinical learning and debriefing. Students have the opportunity to share successes, challenges, and new insights with the instructor as facilitator. The instructor and students meet together at the conclusion of the clinical shift for the discussion (O'Conner, 2006).

Many baccalaureate programs include a senior leadership clinical course in the curriculum. In contrast to clinical in earlier semesters, this final clinical rotation places students with preceptors working a variety of shifts in different facilities without the instructor and usual group of fellow students present. The preceptor model aims to

increase student's independence and enhance self-directed learning (Omer et al., 2013). However, at the conclusion of the shift, the preceptor may not have the time for a debriefing session or may provide an inadequate debriefing. The student may have had an experience he or she needs to process. Feedback is essential for students to learn effectively, and more likely to be accepted and result in improved practice if the information is appropriately presented to the student. For feedback given apart from the practice setting, the provision of sufficient time and space is necessary to ensure all aspects of practice can be discussed (Clynes and Raftery, 2008).

### Background

#### Millennial learners and technology

Demographics and the learning needs of students should be considered when exploring options for sharing clinical experiences. Generational diversity has been identified as impacting teaching and learning for today's learners. Teaching strategies should be tailored to generational values and learning culture to facilitate student learning. Millennial generation learners (those born between 1980 and 1992) have grown up with technology and prefer active participation, immediate feedback, and positive reinforcement (Montenery et al., 2013).

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Online clinical conferencing has been found to be beneficial for nursing students. Students in online conferencing groups compared with face-to-face groups rated their experiences higher. Students reported that descriptions of other student's experiences facilitated their learning. Convenience, more opportunities to participate, and more time to think were also identified as beneficial (Cooper et al., 2004). Instructors must be able to connect and support students in an online environment for the communication to be successful. It can be challenging for instructors to shift from nonverbal bodily expressions to relying on written dialogue. Attention needs to be paid to words and phrases that put students at ease and preserve openness for learning (Diekelmann and Mendias, 2005).

### Debriefing

Debriefing is an essential component of experiential learning. Instructional design should incorporate deliberate use of sufficient time, resources, and strategies that move the student from an experiential activity into a reflective learning situation (Brackenreg, 2004). Through structured debriefing, learning can be enhanced and critical thinking developed as well as other skills, such as clinical decision making, clinical reasoning, and clinical judgment (Dreifuerst, 2009). Debriefing should provide a communication process between student and teacher that enables students to develop strategies that improve future performance. It should be structured to set the stage for dialogue and closure (Cant and Cooper, 2011).

### Narrative pedagogy

A blog can serve as a place for students to tell their clinical stories and read the stories of others sprinkled with instructor feedback. The value of narrative pedagogies is well-documented in the literature and is observed to be among the best teaching strategies (Benner et al., 2010). Learning to think like a nurse is enhanced by reflective journaling, helping students to develop clinical reasoning and judgment. Narrative pedagogies, in conjunction with course content, have been identified as providing many benefits for today's learners. These benefits include teaching, learning, interpreting, critically thinking, and analyzing concepts, ideas, and situations. Personal narratives and stories create the capacity for students to develop ethical knowledge, caring, and culture. A narrative framework allows for special access to the human experience. The benefits of one narrative pedagogy, reflective journaling, include personal growth and development, use of intuition and self-expression, problem solving, stress reduction, and health benefits (Brown et al., 2008). Epp (2008) had similar conclusions; reflection activities contribute to critical thinking, invite students to be true to nursing, and build self-actualization.

## Method

### Design

The design of the study was a mixed methods (QUAL + qual) descriptive study design. The blending of multiple points of view was utilized to provide a stronger understanding of the research problem or question at hand as compared to single-method research (Creswell, 2009, 2014). As research approaches are combined in a single study, the strengths of one method helps to compensate for the weaknesses of another, improving reliability and validity of data by overcoming bias associated with single-method studies (Streubert and Carpenter, 2011). The primary

qualitative portion of this study (QUAL) consisted of focus group interviews to describe senior nursing students' perceptions of the usefulness of a blog in a clinical leadership course. The second additional qualitative component (qual) consisted of thematic analysis of blog posts and comments. Synthesis of these multiple points of view was utilized to provide a unified account of the effect of blogging for the senior nursing students; providing a 'big picture' for the research (Richards, 2009).

### Sample

The sample for this study was a convenience sample (N = 15) of senior clinical nursing students attending a private, faith-based university in the western United States. Students were from clinical groups in two separate semesters, and with two separate clinical instructors. All participants (100%) were female, including the instructors.

### Blogging

Blogging was accomplished by using a private blog, set up through Blogger® (Google®), with a patterned background, which was changed dependent on the season. For example, the background in January consisted of a snow scene, while the end of semester background contained a print of graduation caps. A picture of the clinical group was placed across the top of the blog. The blog also contained features such as a list of posts, and a calendar feature at the bottom which allowed students and the instructor to post their clinical schedule and class activities in a weekly format. Permission was required to access the private blog; the investigators sent an invitation by e-mail to the students, and the students had to accept this invitation to access the blog. Through privacy controls, access for the blog was limited to the participants, the facilitator, and the investigators; in addition, the blog was also restricted from search engines. Expectations for blogging were that students should post on the blog once a week, and comment on another students' post once a week. Aside from not using patient or staff names and other identifying information, students were not given any other instructions for blogging.

Other reflective activities in the course included a weekly bridging, where students would meet with their individual clinical sections for discussion of clinical activities and leadership topics. Bridging had a 90 min time allotment, and followed a didactic course for the 64 students in the entire nursing class.

### Data collection and analysis

Ethical permission from the university Institutional Review Board was obtained for this study, with informed consent obtained for the focus group interviews and use of blog content for analysis. The two clinical groups were invited to attend focus group interviews at the end of the semester, with all students (seven out of seven) attending the interview the first semester, and five out of eight students attending the focus group interview the second semester. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Both focus interview transcripts and blog posts and comments were analyzed by first reducing data through coding, then using the codes to identify themes. The researchers then compared and analyzed themes until a consensus was reached. For the instructors' perspective, utility of the blog was described.

## Results

All of the 15 students in both clinical groups were female, with seven in one semester, and eight in the second. The age of the

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