Nurse Education in Practice 10 (2010) 201–204

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Nurse Education in Practice

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/nepr

Transitioning a master's of nursing course from campus to on-line delivery: Lessons learned

Frances Fothergill Bourbonnais *

School of Nursing, University of Ottawa, 451 Smyth Road, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1H 8M5

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 30 August 2009

Keywords:
Masters
Education
On-line

SUMMARY

Distance education continues to expand in nursing programs to service students in urban as well as rural areas in Canada. This article discusses the author's experience with transitioning a master's course in nursing from a traditional seminar format with 7–8 students to one that included distance students joining the classroom in real-time. The course, 'Nursing in Tertiary Health Care' which covers the fall and winter semesters addresses issues and concepts associated with advanced practice nursing for clients of all ages in tertiary care settings. The associated practicum selected by the student with the assistance of the faculty member provides an opportunity to examine the five domains of the Clinical Nurse Specialist role (consultation, education, research, leadership and practice) as one example of advanced practice nursing. The author has taught this course for 12 years in a traditional seminar format. During 2006–2007, a synchronous on-line version of this course was also offered whereby distance students joined the classroom at the same time as the other students in house at the university. This was done using personal computers from home or office, and a bridging program called 'Bridgit'. Lessons learned in making this transition will be discussed.

Introduction

Distance education is increasingly developing in university nursing programs in Canada at the graduate level**.** Many factors are contributing to this trend such as improved technology, contemporary lifestyles and the need to reach students in rural or remote areas not serviced by a university program (Baldwin and Burns, 2004). For 12 years, the author has taught a master of nursing course entitled: 'Nursing in Tertiary Heath Care' on campus to 7–8 students. The course which covers the fall and winter semesters addresses issues and concepts associated with advanced practice nursing (APN) for clients of all ages in tertiary care settings. The associated practicum provides an opportunity to examine the five domains of the Clinical Nurse Specialist (consultation, education, research, leadership and practice) as one example of advanced practice nursing. During 2006–2007, the course was offered in a synchronous (real-time) on-line version using a bridging program called 'Bridgit' whereby nine distance students using personal computers from their homes or offices joined students in the classroom in Ottawa for lectures.

This paper describes the author's experience of transitioning this master's course in nursing from a traditional face-to-face seminar format to one that also included distance students joining the classroom in real-time (synchronous). As more courses are offered to students by distance, it is prudent that their implementation be examined in terms of process and outcomes so that teaching and learning are maximized.

Review of the literature on web based learning

The review of the literature will focus on studies examining on-line courses provided to students as well as factors that affect the quality of teaching and the student experience.

The on-line experience

There is a strong trend to develop on-line courses in nursing at the graduate level. Computer technology allows for accessibility and flexibility for a student as well as access to vast amounts of information through e-journals and databases such as the Cochrane collection. However, different approaches to developing and delivering these courses may be required depending on the intent of the course, needs of students and student preferences. Some courses are offered solely on-line without face-to-face contact (asynchronous). In asynchronous mode, there may exist formats like chat rooms, whereby students share each other's opinions on various issues discussed in a course. Another mode is synchronous in which there is a group of students in a traditional classroom while a group of distance students join the classroom students

* Tel.: +1 613 562 5800x8423; fax: +1 613 562 5443.
E-mail address: fbourbon@uottawa.ca.

1471-5953/$ - see front matter © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.nepr.2009.08.006

simultaneously (real-time). In synchronous courses, students have the real experience of the teacher's voice, and general classroom atmosphere, as well as teacher and other students' reactions to issues discussed. Other web courses offer a group of students a hybrid (blended) approach that uses on-line meshed with traditional in class lectures (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Kumrow, 2007).

On-line courses have been evaluated on such parameters as student satisfaction, and ease of use of technology (Thurmond, 2002). Web based instruction also has been examined through students' pre- and post-test scores on content delivered (Pullen, 2006). Horiuchi et al. (2009) assessed the learner outcomes of web based learning compared to face-to-face using a randomized controlled trial. Seventy students were randomly allocated to web based or face-to-face lecture on a four part series on evidenced based nursing. Outcome measures were: knowledge pre-test and post-test, course evaluation of content, and satisfaction with learning modality. The post-test scores were similar, indicating knowledge attained was similar for the two groups. Students in the web based course had fewer drop outs and enjoyed the flexibility. There was no significant difference in the two groups for learning outcomes except for support from tutor in which the face-to-face group had significantly more satisfaction. Face-to-face groups appreciated the actual presence of faculty involvement as they were able to discuss issues with an expert. Horiuchi et al. (2009) indicate that further research with, for example, randomized control designs, is needed to compare the outcomes of web based learning with traditional face-to-face classroom learning.

While studies have reported student satisfaction with on-line course delivery (Oliver and Omari, 2001), others found that students reported feelings of isolation due to lack of interaction with fellow students or teachers, and having to closely monitor how they were progressing in the course to maintain time commitments for requirements such as assignments (McAlpine et al., 2002. Kumrow (2007) suggests help seeking mechanisms be built into courses so that students do not develop a sense of social isolation.

Dorrian and Wache (2009) discussed a variety of issues with the use of on-line technologies for nursing students. Their message was the need for open communication, strategies to deal with anxiety of students, different mechanisms for evaluation and ongoing development. Careful introduction of on-line learning must be considered so it does not contribute to isolation and anxiety (Levett-Jones, 2005).

Given the concerns cited regarding social isolation, the next section will examine the role of interaction in traditional versus on-line learning.

Role of interaction in web based courses

"Interaction with a teacher is often an important component of a formal learning experience" (Anderson, 2003, p. 2). Boyle and Wambach (2001) believe that interaction is essential in distance education. Anderson (2003) defines interaction as "reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interaction occurs when these objects and events mutually influence one another" (p. 8). Traditionally, there are three types of interaction that occur in a course: learner–teacher, learner–learner and learner–content (Moore, 1989). Interaction creates an environment for participation, and facilitates meaningful learning and allows learner input to influence classroom material. Interaction encourages debate and values the perspective of other's which are also essential to learning. Although e-learning encourages development of social skills, collaborative learning and development of relationships among students, Anderson (2003) cites that student–teacher interaction is perceived to be the highest in value by students. When selecting the modality for a course, there is a need to examine courses to determine the need and preference for synchronous or asynchronous modes and the amount of student–teacher activity required (Anderson, 2003).

The transition to a synchronous on-line course

The original course – Nursing in Tertiary Heath Care

Traditionally, the author delivered course content such as on advanced practice through a power-point presentation, but acted as a facilitator in helping students to reflect on the required readings. Extensive discussion ensued around issues facing APNs such as role implementation and recognition. Students reflected on their experiential base as well as the current experiences they were having as students working with an APN. Students examined multiple perspectives to deal with, as Schon (1987) states, the messy indiscriminate swamplands of everyday clinical practice.

Benchmarks to consider in choosing a synchronous form of e-learning

There is limited literature on preparing graduate nursing students on-line for an APN role.

The author knew what the desired outcomes for students should be, having developed and taught the course for 12 years, and regularly spoken with clinical advisors of students to ensure the content was relevant and that the classroom and clinical learning experiences were helping students to become APNs. The author knew the type of interaction that was required among students and between the professor and students to facilitate learning to achieve course outcomes. Therefore, the author made a decision that Nursing in Tertiary Health Care would be offered in a synchronous modality that would allow the distance students to simultaneously interact with students in classroom discussions.

Billings (2000) proposed benchmarks for assessing practices and outcomes in nursing courses offered on the web. The benchmarks were: use of technology, educational practices and outcomes. Building on Billings (2000) earlier work, Seiler and Billings (2004) conducted a study which surveyed 631 students as part of a benchmarking study for teaching and learning in web based courses in order to establish best practices. Their findings revealed an additional component, which was entitled student support. Billings (2000) and Seiler and Billings (2004) framework will be used to examine the transition to a synchronous on-line course.

Use of technology

Decisions have to be made to find, select, and use technology appropriately. Students may choose web based programs for convenience and access. However, feelings of social isolation related to, for example, not being able to access a teacher other than strictly on-line, can be a source of dissatisfaction (Billings et al., 2001).

When the School of Nursing proposed that the course, Nursing in Tertiary Health Care, would be offered to distance students, the author had great concerns about role socialization if the course was offered strictly on-line with no chance of students to interact with the professor and each other except through chat rooms. 'Bridgit' software was proposed as it offered synchronous learning (real-time) as an interactive methodology (Russell et al., 2007).

The 'Bridgit' software

'Bridgit' conferencing software is a product of SMART technologies of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The 'Bridgit' software requires