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Transitioning a bachelor of science in nursing program to blended learning: Successes, challenges & outcomes

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ABSTRACT

To help address the challenges of providing undergraduate nursing education in an accelerated time frame, the Teaching and Transforming through Technology (T3) project was funded to transition a second-degree ABSN program to a blended learning format. The project has explored the use of blended learning to: enable flexible solutions to support teaching goals and address course challenges; provide students with new types of independent learning activities outside of the traditional classroom; increase opportunities for active learning in the classroom; and improve students' digital literacy and lifelong learning skills. Program evaluation included quality reviews of the redesigned courses, surveys of student perceptions, pre- and post-program assessment of students' digital literacy and interviews with faculty about their experiences with the new teaching methods. Adopting an established quality framework to guide course design and evaluation for quality contributed to the efficient and effective development of a high-quality undergraduate blended nursing program. Program outcomes and lessons learned are presented to inform future teaching innovation and research related to blended learning in undergraduate nursing education.

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Students enrolled in Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (ABSN) programs complete a challenging curriculum within a compressed time frame. Instructors must make optimal use of teaching and learning time to equip students with a broad base of nursing knowledge and the clinical reasoning skills needed to provide safe, effective care to people with diverse healthcare needs. Blended teaching methods, which combine online and face-to-face instruction with classroom and clinical experiences, expand the nursing instructor's toolkit of teaching strategies and give them flexibility to address curricular objectives in more innovative and effective ways.

The Teaching and Transforming through Technology (T3) project was funded to transition a second-degree ABSN program to blended learning. The project explored the use of blended learning to: (1) enable flexible solutions to address course goals and challenges; (2) provide students with new independent learning activities outside of the traditional classroom; (3) increase opportunities for active learning and critical thinking in the classroom; and (4) improve students' digital literacy and lifelong learning skills. The nursing faculty took the lead in redesigning their courses, with guidance from instructional design and multimedia staff. The resulting program includes ten blended and five fully online courses. This paper shares the outcomes of a program evaluation that examined the quality of the blended courses, students' digital literacy skills before and after participating in the program, and student and faculty perceptions of the blended learning experience.

1. Background

Blended learning is emerging as a popular teaching approach in nursing education. A comprehensive literature search revealed forty-six papers published between 2004 and 2014 specifically focused on blended learning in undergraduate nursing education. The majority of these studies examined students' perceptions and/or performance related to the introduction of blended learning strategies within individual courses. Only three studies reported outcomes of blended learning implementation at the program level (Davidson et al., 2011; Robinia et al., 2012; Houldson, 2009). Thus, although many nursing educators have explored the effectiveness of blended learning strategies, the number of fully blended nursing programs appears to be limited.

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There is evidence to support broader adoption of blended approaches throughout the nursing curriculum. At the program level, Davidson et al. (2011) found improved graduation rates after transitioning a BSN program to a blended format. Graduates' critical thinking scores were comparable to traditional students at the same school and higher than the national average. Seventy-five percent of graduates rated their experience as very good or excellent. Robinia et al. (2012) demonstrated improved satisfaction and attrition rates, with no significant difference in certification pass rates, after transitioning an undergraduate nursing certificate program to a blended format. Similarly, Houldson (2009) compared the final examination scores, certifying exam scores, and satisfaction of students graduating from traditional and blended nursing programs and found no significant differences.

When compared to traditional approaches, blended learning appears to be equally and in some cases more effective that traditional methods in improving student learning and performance. For example, nursing students in a blended group had significantly higher levels of medication administration knowledge than nurses in a face-to-face group, with no significant difference found in medication administration self-efficacy and ability (Sung et al., 2008). Several other studies have compared blended learning interventions to traditional approaches and found no significant differences in learner performance (Mehrdad et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2009; Parker et al., 2011). Research has also demonstrated significant increases in learners' knowledge scores after completing blended courses (Cho and Shin, 2014; Jang et al., 2006). In addition, Hsu and Hseih (2011a) found that nursing students' demonstrated significantly higher self-reported reasoning, decision-making and metacognition after completing a blended course.

Across the studies reviewed, student perceptions and satisfaction with blended learning were positive (Donato et al., 2010; Hsu, 2012; Jang et al., 2006; Koch et al., 2010; Green et al., 2006; Lyons and Evans, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2005; Salamanson and Lantz, 2005). For example, Mahoney et al. (2005) introduced online discussion activities into a traditional, face-to-face psychiatric nursing course. When surveyed, a majority of students expressed a preference for blended learning. In a similar study, 81% of 123 undergraduate nursing students believed the web-based portions of a blended learning course enhanced their learning and 72% expressed a desire for web-based components in all of their courses (Koch et al., 2010).

The most commonly noted benefit of blended learning is flexibility. Students appreciate convenient, on-demand access to online materials and discussions, and the ability to study at their own pace (Donato et al., 2010; Drozd & O'Donoghue, 2007; Ireland et al., 2009; Koch et al., 2010). They also view supplemental online materials as helpful in preparing for class and for review purposes (Green et al., 2006). These findings lend support for Hsu and Hseih's (2011a) observation that blended learning contributes to learners' metacognitive and self-regulatory development. Notably, the need for independent learning has been identified as a concern among students who also placed high value on instructors' facilitation of learning (Rigby et al., 2012). Blended learning places more responsibility on the student, which can contribute to a perception of increased workload (Hsu, 2012).

Students have also reported that online activities such as asynchronous discussions are beneficial in fostering deeper reflection, critical thinking, active learning and problem-solving skills (Donato et al., 2010; Hsu and Hseih 2011a). This is supported by a study of learner activity within the online portions of a blended course that demonstrated a link between active participation and learner performance (Ransdell and Gaillard-Kenney, 2009). Similarly, Hsu and Hseih (2011b) found frequency of online dialogue and time spent on Internet to be predictors of learning outcomes. In contrast, Green et al. (2006) did not find a relationship between student performance and frequency of online module use.

Although many students value the online components of blended learning, some have also expressed a desire to maintain traditional, face-to-face lectures (Koch et al., 2010). Mehrdad et al. (2011) compared nursing students' views of online and lecture methods within the same course, and found that student ratings for the online approach were significantly higher for "capability" (i.e., the ability to use the tools and learn using the method) and "independency" (i.e., the ability to self-direct their learning); and significantly lower for "effectiveness" (i.e., degree to which the method fostered learning) and "motivation" (i.e., eagerness to learn). The authors noted that students were in their third semester and had become accustomed to the lecture method, and recommended careful design of online components to enhance learner engagement and motivation. In another study, student ratings of preference for hybrid vs. traditional formats were mixed, with some students indicating a preference for both formats (Salamonson and Lantz, 2005).

There is good evidence to support continued adoption of new teaching approaches that combine online and face-to-face modalities to augment lecture-style teaching, promote learner self-direction, and increase opportunities for active learning in undergraduate nursing education. Successful implementation of high quality blended learning courses and programs requires careful planning and instructional design to ensure learning effectiveness and support students' transition to new approaches to teaching and learning. Sharing outcomes and lessons learned from the evaluation of a newly transitioned blended nursing program can inform future teaching innovations and research.

2. Research methods

In order to determine whether the T3 project led to program improvements, the evaluation consisted of four components: quality ratings by peer reviewers of the blended and online courses according to Quality Matters (QM) standards (Quality Matters Program, 2011); pre- and post-program assessment of students' digital literacy skills using the iSkills™ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy assessment (Educational Testing Service, 2005); assessment of student perceptions of the blended learning experience; and interviews with faculty to obtain their perceptions about teaching in a blended format. All components of the study involving human subjects were approved as exempt by the University Institutional Review Board.

2.1. QM reviews

Peer reviews of the blended and online courses were conducted using QM, a well-established rubric and process for assessing the quality of the online and blended course design. The QM standards were developed by Maryland Online, a consortium of post-secondary institutions in the state of Maryland, U.S., through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education. The standards were derived from the literature, with input from experienced practitioners. The reviews were conducted using the 2011–2013 edition of the QM rubric, which included 41 standards organized in eight categories: Course Overview and Introduction, Learning Objectives, Assessment and Measurement, Instructional Materials, Learner Interaction & Engagement, Course Technology, Learner Support and Accessibility. Of the 41 specific standards, 21 were considered essential and required in order for the course to achieve QM certification.

The QM peer reviews were part of the overall program planning

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