Nurse Educator Perceptions of the Importance of Relationship in Online Teaching and Learning

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The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of teaching nursing students in online environments as experienced by nursing educators who have been teaching online for a minimum of 2 years. The study used an interview-based qualitative descriptive design. Semistructured interviews with 10 full-time nurse educators were conducted. The participants represented a range of ranks and teaching experience. Analysis involved a constant comparative process of initial and focused coding. Relationships were important to these nurse educators, and there was an interconnected nature among (a) student engagement and learning, (b) "knowing students," and (c) helping students meet their needs. Although different in how they experienced these elements, they seemed to share a sense that you have to know your students to help them meet their needs, and that you have to help them meet their needs so that they can learn, and building relationships within the online environment is key to all if this. Relationships are the heart of nursing and, for these nurse educators, a key aspect of nursing education. Having a strong relationship between nurse educators and nursing students supports student engagement in learning online. With continually increasing online nurse education, understanding these relationships is important to improve nursing education and consequently improve nursing practice. (Index words: Distance education; Nurse educator; Nursing education; Online teaching and learning; Relationships; Perceptions) J Prof Nurs 0:1–9, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

WITH MUCH EDUCATION occurring online (Allen & Seaman, 2015), a deeper understanding of teaching and learning practices is needed. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001) has provided online educators with an important way to conceptualize their teaching. The CoI Framework highlights three presences that are essential to high-quality online learning experiences: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Although this body of work is robust including a well-established Web site (https://coi.athabascau.ca/) and many articles (e.g., Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010; Shea et al., 2010; Traver, Volchok, Bidjerano, & Shea, 2014) and provides online educators guidance to consider student experience, however, we found limited research about faculty perceptions of online teaching and learning in nursing. What exists gives us some insight but is generally narrow in scope, for example, examining one group of students or one strategy (Smith, 2014).

We do know that faculty members who teach online report feeling disconnected from colleagues and from the students they are teaching (Andrusyszyn, Iwasin, & Goldenbert, 1999; Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Henning, 2012; Ironside, 2001; LeBlanc, Pruchnicki, Rohdieck, Khurma, & Dasta, 2007). This sense of disconnection from students arises from a loss of the familiar cues experienced in face-to-face classroom settings (Diekelmann, Schuster, & Nosek, 1998; Huang & Hsiao, 2012). In this research, we further explored nursing educators' perceptions of their experiences to deepen the literature about teaching online.

Background

Most studies of nurse educator perceptions focus for example on the amount of work required for teaching online, preparation needed for teaching online, or the measurement of success of particular online tools or

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activities rather than deeper insight into the act of teaching. There are some exceptions. Diekelmann et al. (1998) published an early exploration of faculty perceptions of online teaching. Although not focused on nursing educators, some were included in the overall sample. Diekelmann et al. (1998) identified five themes across all faculty:

> (a) losing familiar landmarks and touchstones: rethinking schooling, learning, and teaching; (b) challenging conventional pedagogies: questioning reliance on the visual and physical presence; (c) reawakening new roles: creating new partnerships; (d) learning from experience: developing expertise and practical knowledge; (e) creating new pedagogies: revisioning schooling, learning, and teaching (p. 5).

Their study provided a foundation for additional studies of faculty perceptions. Smith, Passmore, and Faught (2009) explored faculty perceptions of challenges of teaching online. They found that faculty and instructional designers who participated had concerns about the quality of assessments, their ability to meet the diverse needs of students, and the course management system.

In another study, Ali et al. (2005) asked faculty to rate their own expertise in online teaching based on Benner's Novice to Expert Model. Sixty-five faculty participated, some of whom were nurse educators. Participants who did not teach online chose the novice or advanced beginner rating. Those who taught online rated themselves as advanced beginners or competent. Interestingly, no participants chose the proficient or expert rating.

One study focused solely on nurse educators. Johnson's (2008) phenomenological study of 12 graduate nursing faculty members highlighted the transition to online teaching. Key to the study, participants experienced a need to "rethink the processes of teaching and learning" (p. 21) as they moved to online teaching and identified a key concern around the lack of face-to-face interaction from a traditional setting.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions nurse educators have about teaching nursing students in an online environment. The study was guided by the research question: What are full-time nursing educators' perceptions of teaching online nursing courses in baccalaureate and higher programs?

Research Design

Approach

An interview-based qualitative descriptive design was used to explore faculty perceptions. Descriptive qualitative studies are interpretive and can add rich details about the topic under investigation (Sandelowski, 2010). Engaging in this form of inquiry allows us to get closer to individual's experiences and provide interpretations that better represent the nuanced perceptions of faculty.

Participants

A survey was used to find a variety of participants. To invite nurse educator participation, publically available e-mail addresses of individual educators were obtained from the Web sites of public colleges of nursing accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. A survey was nationally distributed ($n = 6823$) to access faculty from across the country. There was no way to limit the survey to only those who taught online because the Web sites did not contain this information. In the end, 503 responded. The survey included 35 questions. Skip logic was used, so faculty answered 26–35 questions depending on their responses to key questions. Questions focused on demographic information, nursing experience, teaching experience, percentage of teaching online, numbers of students in courses, teaching environment preferences, and professional development or preparation for teaching online. From this group, a list of potential interviewees was generated via purposive sampling. First, faculty were eliminated if they were part time, taught online less than 2 years, did not complete the survey, and did not agree to an interview. This reduced the pool to 240 faculty members. To be included, respondents needed to have a minimum of 75% of their annual assignment allocated to teaching and at least 50% of their teaching assigned to online courses. Respondents were then grouped by range of years teaching online, academic rank, geographic location, and preference for teaching online or face-to-face. This grouping included 51 nurse educators. Eighteen were chosen to represent a cross-section of nursing faculty across the United States (for example, if 7 were from one institution, 1 was included in the 18). Each were contacted; 10 agreed to participate.

Study participants represented a variety of types of faculty from across the country. All participants taught nursing courses at the undergraduate or graduate level, and at least 50% of their teaching assignment was online. Their experience in teaching ranged from 4 to 35 years with experience in teaching online from 3 to 13 years. Four participants were already tenured, three on tenure track, and three were nontenure track. Faculty participants' teaching preferences varied as well. See Table 1 for an overview of participant characteristics.

Procedures

After Kent State University Institutional Review Board approval, participants were sought through an e-mail invitation. Consent was obtained for audio recording. Each participated in semistructured interviews via telephone or Skype™ lasting 31–68 minutes. Interviews began with discussion of what participants shared on the survey. Then, questions moved to discussion of three topic areas: experiences teaching online, preparation to teach online, and advice for faculty new to teaching online. For example, some questions related to the experiences teaching online asked participants to describe their experiences with online teaching, to describe positive or rewarding aspects, to discuss challenges they experienced, and to share a story from their experience that held particular significance for them. Follow-up questions such as "can you elaborate on that" or "tell me