A faculty's approach to distance learning standardization

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Distance learning
Higher education
Professional development
Nursing education

ABSTRACT

A nursing faculty workshop on distance learning highlighted several areas that needed review and revision of the existing approach toward distance education. Nursing educators, especially those responsible for providing distance education, need to possess the necessary digital wisdom in order to navigate the technological jungle of nursing distance education and better prepare nursing students of the 21st century. The ability to use technology effectively by both faculty and student is critical for participation in distance learning. A literature review and exploration of distance learning programs in institutions of higher learning was performed by a distance education sub-committee guided by the distance learning nursing standards and guidelines recommended by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing. Following exploration by the distance education sub-committee, recommendations included faculty attendance in a prepatory workshop for faculty instruction in distance learning, an established definition of distance learning, a standardized Web site template, a student readiness quiz, and faculty peer evaluation and faculty student evaluation for distance learning courses.

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Introduction

In the article *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, Prensky (2001) coined the terms *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*. To borrow the metaphor, nursing distance education, at first glance, might seem as if it is a technological jungle in which the topography—foliage, predators, and prey—look like desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones, servers and, even, virtual (or on-line) programs and management systems. It might also appear as though there are digital natives that feel at home there and digital immigrants who are uncomfortable traveling there.

Digital natives, mainly millennials and future generations, are those born into a world that was not without computers, smartphones, and the like. *Digital immigrants*, a group which includes many of today's university and college professors, were born before such a digital age existed but now live in it. For some, the traditional image of education might include knowledgeable and skilled instructors guiding student learners. Others might view—and have viewed and misinterpreted—Prensky's metaphor as identifying a role reversal when it comes to technology, whereby so-called *digital natives*, today's and tomorrow's students, are the ones who are knowledgeable and skilled. The metaphor has not gone without controversy because of the terminology (Prensky, 2011).

Nevertheless, despite the geographic origin and time of one's birth, one cannot assume that digital natives can navigate the technological jungle of distance education in academia, and one cannot assume that professors today, many of them so-called *digital immigrants*, already have the know-how to steer and provide an efficient and relevant distance education for today's and tomorrow's nursing students. Prensky (2011) has since discussed the significance of digital wisdom, as it applies to one's ability to utilize technology appropriately and effectively, regardless of date of birth. It is this type of digital wisdom that is essential for nursing educators, especially those responsible for providing distance education, to possess in order to meet both the needs of current and future nursing students and the individuals whom they will serve and for whom they will care tomorrow. What follows is one educational community's recent journey to acquire the necessary digital wisdom in order to navigate the technological jungle of nursing distance education and better prepare nursing students of the 21st century.

In the spring of 2013, in one of the senior colleges in a city university, the nursing department held a faculty development day workshop focused on distance education. Faculty representative of all three curricula (associate degree, baccalaureate degree, and master's degree) were in attendance. Prior to this period, there was no formal training for the nursing faculty at large who were teaching on-line courses. All three degree programs were currently utilizing technology in the form of Blackboard as their learning systems management. The baccalaureate program, although not advertised as an on-line

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learning program, offered all but two of their courses on-line and in a classroom setting. Preparation for student instruction for on-line learning and/or formal student evaluation of on-line courses offered was not in place at this time. A student could opt to take an on-line course without any experience or knowledge of distance learning. There was no specific definition of distance learning in either the college or nursing department Web sites.

At the workshop held via teleconference, consultation by the guest speaker, who is a well-established educator and who served on the distance education national committee at the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, revealed that the institution and the faculty had several issues related to their distance learning courses that needed investigation and solution, in order to meet with current standards and guidelines. These issues included a definition of on-line learning for both the institution and the department, student readiness for on-line learning, faculty preparation for teaching on-line courses, evaluation of both the on-line faculty and the on-line course by students, and peer evaluation of faculty engaged in on-line teaching. It was recommended by the consultant that the faculty embark on providing a solution to these issues, most especially before their joint accreditation visit for all three programs by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), formerly known as *The National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission*, and review by the State Board of Nursing.

A better understanding and education of faculty in preparing how to teach on-line, rather than just uploading the same classroom lectures and notes to an on-line course is needed. There are numerous opportunities for faculty to explore in order to engage students in on-line learning. Now more than ever new technology is available to assist both faculty and students in providing and receiving quality education. Faculties need to be transparent in their efforts and diligent in how they comply with these internal and external issues in order to insure that any existing or future standards and guidelines of governing agencies are met (Kentnor, 2015; Gormley and Glazer, 2012; Pu-Shih, Amber, & Guidry, 2010; Scull, Kendrick, Shearer, & Offerman, 2011). "Distance education when utilized is congruent with the governing organization and the mission and philosophy of the nursing education unit" (Standard 1.11, ACEN, 2013).

As our population is rapidly growing and advancing in age, so too are our technology systems. We have witnessed how a watch can serve as an avenue of communication that encompasses social media, the corporate world, and the world of academia. Today's eclectic student population is very informed and immersed in modern technology. Our student population having technology at their fingertips are privy to this broad spectrum of communication. Individuals can continue with their daily lives that may include work, child care, family responsibilities, community involvement and spiritual needs and still complete their education wherever and whenever possible. There are some disadvantages to on-line education for those students who need that face-to-face connection to remain focused and disciplined in their studies. But for some, the ability to advance their degree while continuing in the workforce is necessary, not only for the advantage this provides for the student but also for the rapid changes occurring in health care that warrant nurses with advanced education (Institute of Medicine, 2010). Distance education may impact both minority and part-time student retention and satisfaction (Pu-Shih et al., 2010).

Navigation of multimedia, knowledge of computer-based technology, and explicit guidelines for students are essential. The literature demonstrates the need for both faculty preparedness and student readiness for success in on-line learning. Successful orientation to the course, communication, and clear expectations by both instructor and learner are needed for academic success (Frith & Clark, 2013; O'Neil & Fisher, 2009; Britt, 2006; Bozarth, Chapman, & La Monica, 2004). Students and faculty need to know exactly what workload is required in their courses and what the expected outcomes are. Faculty who teach on-line also have a responsibility to meet certain standards (Standard 1.10, ACEN, 2013; Axley, 2008; Britt, 2006; Frith & Clark, 2013; Lowery & Spector, 2014; O'Neill & Fisher, 2009).

Distance Education Sub-Committee

In order to increase the knowledge of the faculty, a distance education sub-committee (DESC) was formed. Three full-time and one part-time faculty member volunteered to spearhead the DESC. All but one of the DESC members had experience teaching an on-line course. At their initial meeting, the DESC outlined what their strategy would be in finding a solution to any deficiency in the department and/or college related to on-line (distance) learning. The committee began their investigation by creating a timeline, where each committee member would investigate both the literature and other institutions' methods for standards and guidelines of distance learning and report back to the DESC with their findings. The DESC members agreed to divide the tasks, and each committee member would be responsible for two or three specific standards and guidelines.

Faculty Readiness for On-Line Teaching

The DESC committee instituted a survey of all full-time faculty to determine who taught an on-line course and what type of preparation for distance education these faculty members had received, if any. The following: Chart 1. Timeline of Faculty Standardization Process, presents a timeline of the DESC committee and faculty's journey in this process of standardization of distance learning.

Definition of Distance Learning

After approval by the nursing department, the following definition was sent to the administrative stakeholders, the director of the office of technology, the director of faculty development, and the director of the office of institutional research:

Distance education is defined as a planned teaching–learning process that uses one or more technologies as a conduit for learning when students are separated from the instructor, requiring regular, substantive, and supportive instructor–student and student–student interactions. Interactions may be in real-time (synchronous) or delayed (asynchronous). The technologies may include but are not limited to the Internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or DVDs and CD-ROMs, if they are used in conjunction with any of the prior technologies.

Prior to this, the nursing department lacked a clear definition of distance learning. There was no formal definition in the college, of what constituted an on-line course; however, the following parameters for on-line learning were revised in fall 2013 by the college and are presently followed by the nursing department.

See Chart 2. Parameters for distance (on-line) learning.

These set parameters, the definition of distance learning, and a standardized Blackboard format provided clarity to the distance learning courses offered by the nursing department.

Standardization of Course Design

A standardized template on Blackboard for all courses would present easier navigation for students, faculty, and visitors to the individual course Web sites (Standard 3.9, ACEN, 2013). A student needs to know