



Cultivating Community in an Online Environment

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BACKGROUND/SUPPORT

Graduate learners receiving their DNP degree within an online learning program not only require information from their studies, but also critical interpersonal strategies for interacting with colleagues, peers, and patients/clients. It is integral to create an environment using a critically reflective stance in online teaching in order to better engage and evaluate these learners on both of these important aspects of their education.

Prospective learners in advanced practice nursing are evaluated for admission using specific criteria examining readiness for graduate school involving a combination of academic and personal characteristics. These include things such as the prospective learner's background and training in the specific content area, their interpersonal skills relative to the area of specialization in which they seek to earn a degree, and other key behaviors or indicators central to training in their specialization. In addition, they are evaluated for their specific readiness to do an online degree program because such programs require familiarity with Internet-based technologies.

LITERATURE SUPPORT

Higher education online learning needs to reflect what we know about learning in general, what we understand about learning in higher-education contexts, and our emerging knowledge of learning in largely asynchronous online environments. Components of this model include a focus on learner roles, knowledge building, assessment, community, and various forms of "presence."

Anecdotally, online graduate learners in nursing are very accepting of using the web as a resource. This is typically used for research or to locate online learning institutions through the Internet, and the audience tends to be professionals with clinical experience who are able to multitask. Those that are successful typically work, have active lives, tend to be highly independent, and self-driven. Many are independent practitioners, have professional positions of leadership, or are faculty at smaller or more junior educational institutions seeking to upgrade their training. Some are even professionals who are abroad or in rural areas where they would otherwise be unable to seek graduate training. Overall, these learners bring professional experiences to their classes and contribute practical issues for discussion, enhancing the overall educational process they create and experience. It is also important to note that these are individuals who choose to be in an electronic environment where they are interacting with others from around the world. As such, ideas brought to the table for discussion in the electronic course rooms tend to be highly diverse and compelling. Views tend to be global, and learners are afforded the opportunity to dialogue and have ideas explained in detail when requested from sometimes very divergent points of view and experience. Thus this environment tends to be conducive to retaining learners who are reflective and accepting of perspectives and beliefs different than their own.

METHODS/APPLICATION

The culture of an educational community is a must to enhance these experiences. This can be accomplished through engaging dialogues and discussions within the course room, multi person topics for partnership and collaboration, and a student lounge where learners can have a more casual experience. Video chats using Skype, Go to Meeting or another form of visual collaboration allows the learners to connect on a more personal level with the instructor and fellow learners. Having town hall meetings in "real time" can provide a form of connection in addition to disseminating information. Providing mandatory meetings (at least one per term) with the instructor supports learner and teacher interaction, and this also removes the question by the learner of, "Does my instructor really want me to connect with her?". In addition, enveloping a peer mentoring program normalizes the experiences for learners by hearing from and having the support of someone who just went through what the learner may be experiencing.

It is more important than ever that students receive feedback as quickly as possible in the course room. Weekly engagement with the faculty through a response to discussions, asking a question, etc. will allow the learner to see the faculty care and have a commitment to their education. Otherwise it is easy for a learner to get lost in the virtual world of education.

Both the content and process of a learner's work must be assessed. This entails assessing work products, as well as in-course behavior and relevant extra-class behavior. Work products might include evaluation of tests, take-home exams, written papers or reports, or other projects to be graded, much as in a traditional face-to-face teaching environment. With in-course behavior, this includes written contributions to interactions with peers and the instructor.

Technology in the course room:

Wiki: A web page that can be viewed and modified by those accessing it. It is open ended and collaborative. It offers asynchronous communication and group collaboration. It serves as a discussion, repository, mail system, and tool for collaboration.

Blogs: a discussion or informational site in a course room. They include features and links. They are used to communicate and interact.

YouTube: Allows individuals to discover watch and share originally created videos.

Prezi: a cloud based presentation software based on a software service model. It is a presentation tool that can be used as an alternative to traditional slide making of programs such as PowerPoint.

Snapshot: a tool that enables you to take pictures of yourself with your webcam, edit them and save them. You can use video snapshot to take pictures of other people during video calls.

CONCLUSION

Online education holds great promise for community college students, but there remains work to be done before it offers an optimal alternative to the face-to-face experience. Through comprehensive improvement efforts, administrators can create an environment in which online faculty and students have the supports that will help them succeed.

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