Perspectives on the Experience of the Learning Community Through Online Discussions

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the findings from a student survey that examined the role of online discussion groups in maintaining a learning community when nursing students were separated by time and place during their last practicum before graduation. The learning community was created face-to-face and then maintained and enhanced through online discussions. Students gained skills and knowledge about nursing, teaching and learning, technology, time management, and critical thinking.

Résumé

Dans cet article, je discute des résultats d'une enquête, menée auprès d'étudiants en nursing, et qui examine le rôle des groupes de discussion en ligne dans le maintien d'une communauté d'apprenants lorsque les étudiants ont été séparés dans le temps et l'espace pendant leur dernier stage avant leur graduation. La communauté d'apprenants a été créée en face à face puis elle s'est maintenue et s'est développée par le biais des discussions en ligne. Les étudiants y ont acquis des habilités et des connaissances dans le domaine du nursing, ainsi que dans les domaines de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage, des technologies, de la gestion du temps et de la pensée critique.

Introduction

Learning communities is a term that is gaining currency with practitioners and academics. In learning communities people work collaboratively to achieve important, mutually established goals. Participants learn from each other by working together with a common purpose on a common task. In an educational setting students come to the learning task with varying experiences, knowledge, and expertise, which they share with their colleagues and the instructor and in return are provided with an opportunity to learn collaboratively from each other (Bullen, 1998; Driscoll, 2000). Dialogue among participants provides regular opportunities for reflection and inquiry (Wesley & Buysse, 2001).

Some recent educational writers have stressed the importance of learning communities (Boyer, 1995; Driscoll, 2000; Larrivee, 2000; Palmer, 1998;

Sergiovanni, 1992) and others have suggested that technology is an appropriate tool to create effective learning communities (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999; Harasim, Hiltz, & Turoff, 1995; McVay Lynch, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Riel & Fulton, 2001). The literature on distance education is extensive and there is a growing body of work that addresses the topic of building communities online (Conrad, 2002; McVay Lynch, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). In this article I describe the experiences of student nurses in creating and maintaining a learning community through online discussions.

Background

The Bachelor of Science in Nursing Program at Malaspina University-College is one of 10 partners that employ a common curriculum in the Collaborative Nursing Program (CNP) of British Columbia. It is a four-year degree program comprising eight semesters of theory and practice that prepares students for nursing registration eligibility in the Province of British Columbia.

In nursing, knowledge is rarely constructed in isolation. The CNP curriculum, although based on a number of philosophical and foundational nursing concepts, embraces constructivism (Driscoll, 2000; Piaget, 1969); emancipatory learning (Freire, 1997); and adult learning theories by encouraging group work, problem-solving, and decision-making. From the first year of the program, the concept of learning communities is discussed and encouraged. Each theory course uses multiple methods of instruction, including collaborative learning, problem solving, case studies, and problem-based learning. These activities are intended to maximize learning by having students work together face to face so that they can build on the ideas and practices of the entire group. Learning goals include reasoning, critical thinking, use and understanding of nursing knowledge, and critical reflection. Nursing is a practice discipline, so each year learners leave the University-College setting to develop their nursing skills in a variety of agencies. These practice experiences, known as Consolidated Practice Experiences (CPE) are generally five to six weeks in length. They provide the learner with the opportunity to apply theory to practice and to deal with the complexity of nursing in the real world. In the final semester (Semester 8) of the program, students practice their nursing skills full time for either 12 or 16 weeks. The learners work diverse shifts in various hospitals or agencies, often in separate towns or cities. They are separated from each other by time and location. For the students who have been together for three and half years their community is suddenly disrupted.

In an effort to maintain the community, learners who were enrolled in Semester 8 in 2002 were connected online using WebCT®. Early in the semester, it became evident to the faculty that a tremendous amount of teaching and learning was going on among the students and faculty. In

addition, some students were visibly animated, e-mailing faculty or stopping them in the hallway of the hospital to share their enthusiasm for their online learning. Did all the students share these perceptions? The level of student and faculty enthusiasm prompted this research study. Like many other educational organizations, we were experimenting with how technology could improve our learning environment (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceição-Runlee, 2000). Was our experiment working? We proposed the following research question: How effective is the use of WebCT® asynchronous conferencing in maintaining and supporting a learning community for fourth-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students, distanced by time and location during their last practicum?

Description of the Class

At Malaspina University-College, the students stay in the same cohort for the entire four-year BSN program. However, in the second half of the third year (Semester 6), registered nurses (RN), both foreign-trained and domestic, who are returning to school to complete a nursing degree join the group and remain for the final two courses.

Course Design

The intent of the last practicum, known as Semester 8, is to refine and consolidate previous learning and develop proficiency in an area of practice. At the time of this study, Semester 8 participants generally took two courses concurrently, one practice course involving 12 or 16 weeks in a hospital or community agency and one self-directed theory course intended to support this practice. Some of the learners enrolled in Semester 8 already had credit for the theory course and, therefore, only took the practice course. The basic baccalaureate nursing students and the foreign-trained nurses who had come to Canada to further their education required 16 weeks of practice. The registered nurses who had returned to university for degree completion required 12 weeks of practice. The learners had varied backgrounds and varied nursing experience, and the practicum placements were as diverse as the students. All learners worked with a registered nurse preceptor. Most of the learners were placed in acute care hospitals on general medical and surgical floors, whereas some students worked in specialties such as maternal/child, psychiatry, pediatrics, and some in community placements such as First Nation communities and community mental health agencies. Consequently, the students' learning needs varied considerably.

Because of the multiple learning goals and small number of students, the theory course has always been self-directed. As a preassessment, participants completed the Canadian RN Prep Guide (Canadian Nurses' Association, 2000). This prep exam is available on CD-ROM; the software

scores the test and provides feedback on knowledge level and critical thinking. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on their previous learning and practice in order to identify their strengths and gaps. Using the knowledge gained from the RN prep exam and their self-reflections, participants created a personal learning plan. This plan, which was shared with the practice instructor, consisted of a topic of study for each week of the practicum. This proposed course of study was meant to be flexible and could be changed to address additional learning needs or opportunities as they were identified in practice.

Participants who needed credit for the theory course were required to post to an asynchronous discussion group at least twice a week, for 10 weeks. The postings, based on their personal learning plan, were to reflect any new learning and the integration of the content from previous nursing and elective courses. Participants were asked to explore curriculum philosophies, concepts, and meta-concepts; the personal and professional significance of the learning patterns or trends identified; any questions that arose; and what their future learning plans might be. It was explicitly expected that students would comment significantly on their classmates' postings. For those students taking the theory course, faculty evaluated postings based on critical-thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, and evidence of self-directed learning. These postings represented 60% of the students' marks on the theory course. Group presentations accounted for the remaining 40%.

Learners who did not need credit for the theory portion of Semester 8 were invited to participate in the online discussions instead of handing in the learning journal required in all previous practice courses in the CNP. They were asked to adhere to the same posting schedule and criteria as the other students; they would receive a designation of credit or no credit for the practice course. Synchronous discussion was not seen as an option, because the student nurses were working various shifts on various days of the week, and it was unlikely that every member of a discussion group would be available at the same time.

Course Preparation

Online learning remains in its infancy (Hanna et al., 2000) and many of the nursing students had limited experience with computer conferencing. It was critical that the students be comfortable with the software prior to the Semester 8 experience (Salmon, 2001). Therefore, during the previous semester, one of their courses was offered as a Web-enhanced course (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999) using WebCT®. The course syllabus, weekly learning activities, and notes were available online. A two-hour seminar familiarized the students with WebCT®. For 13 weeks learners were encouraged to become comfortable with the technology by using the discus-

sion groups and chat rooms. Some students seized the learning opportunity and were quite active in the discussion and chat rooms. Others chose not to participate in the technology component of the course at all. It is not surprising that the latter experienced initial struggles with the technology in Semester 8.

During this practicum, three faculty members were responsible for supervising the students in practice. In addition, each faculty member agreed to facilitate a discussion group. Students were assigned an instructor for both practice and discussion group based on faculty workload hours, geographic location of practice, and faculty expertise (i.e., acute care vs. community). Two groups had nine participants each, and the third group had seven participants. Students were able to access and read all three group discussions and often commented in other group discussions. Students were encouraged to read other group postings, but discouraged from actually posting in those discussion groups due to the sheer volume of reading.

Not all class members had Internet access at home; however, for those working in the immediate area, access was available in the computer labs on campus. Access was also available for learners at their place of work and at local libraries. According to our survey, Internet access was difficult for two of the 19 students.

According to the literature, attrition rates in online courses are often high (Atack & Rankin, 2002; Rose, 2002). This was not the case during this course, probably because there were no other options for the learners who needed the credit for the theory and practice courses in order to graduate.

Research Design

This research was designed to obtain students' perceptions of their experience in using WebCT® discussion groups to maintain learning communities while participating in nursing practicum experiences. The research participants completed a written survey (Appendix) consisting of general demographic information, 22 questions employing a Likert-type scale, and 21 employing short-answer questions. Students' e-mails and discussion between faculty were other data sources.

I designed the survey, and it was reviewed by an experienced researcher and piloted with two students, one a registered nurse who had returned for degree completion, and the other a basic baccalaureate nursing student. The survey was modified incorporating their suggestions. The analysis of the short-answer data was guided by Kirby and McKenna's (1989) methodology. I typed and compiled the data from the short answers. Living with the data in this way allowed time for reflection and an opportunity to identify general themes. Similar themes were coded using a colored highlighter. The data were shared with the other two

faculty members working in Semester 8 and the themes confirmed. The themes were supported by the survey.

Ethical Considerations

A request to complete this research was approved by the institution's ethics review board and adhered to the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (NSERC, CIHR, & SSHRC, 1998). The faculty responsible for Semester 8 distributed the surveys. In order to avoid influencing the responses or being seen to be coercive by the participants, a third party collected the anonymously completed questionnaires. The surveys were not made available to the researcher until all grades had been submitted and all students had graduated. Although participants were invited to a meeting to discuss findings, none responded to this request, so findings were e-mailed to the participants.

Population

All 25 students enrolled in the fourth year of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program were surveyed. Nineteen of the 25 students completed the survey. Twenty-three of the 25 students (92%) enrolled in Semester 8 participated in online discussions.

Findings

Survey responses to the 19 questionnaires were compiled. An analysis of the data indicated that all but two learners were very pleased with their experience of using asynchronous communication. Four of the five respondents who spoke English as a second language found the experience valuable. The ESL learner who believed online discussions were not valuable felt that she "did not have enough time to learn the technology."

Other information collected using a Likert type scale follows.

Table 1
Demographics

	Numbers	Age Range	ESL	Required to post for credit
Total Number of Students	25		8	17
Total Number of Respondents	19	24-47 years	5	16
Domestic Registered Nurse Respondents	4	24-47 years	1	3
Foreign Trained Nurse Respondents	2	29-32 years	2	1

- Students described their comfort with the technology. Many (58%) increased their comfort level, and 79% would take other online courses. The activity itself was generally considered engaging (74%) and increased learners' ability to learn from others (79%), and especially from their peers (89%). Over half (53%) felt they built on the strengths of other students, and 68% helped others learn. In a choice between students and faculty, students (68%) rather than faculty (47%) were more often the sources of inspiration, as might be expected in a peer-led discussion group.
- Some students also saw the experience as helping them develop their intellectual skills (74%), develop a sense of competence (74%), and construct a shared meaning of nursing (79%). Only six students saw it as assisting them in preparing for the Canadian Registered Nurses examination.
- About half (53%) the students thought they would participate even if their postings were not being marked, but 26% expected that they should be marked for their efforts, with 48% remaining neutral on this question. The remaining 26% said they should not be marked.
- Themes identified from the short-answer portion of the questionnaire and supported by the survey data fell into three broad categories: learning communities, teaching and learning, and empowerment.

Learning Community

As noted, most of the students were pleased with their experience using discussion groups to maintain a learning community while distanced by time and place. Four said that prior to this experience, they did not feel that their class was a learning community, stating that small cliques had existed in the class that prevented the sharing of information. This opinion changed with the online discussions, and at the time of the survey all these respondents felt they were members of a learning community. Even the participants who were neutral about the class being a learning community prior to the online discussions changed their views.

The participants who felt they were already part of a learning community before this experience believed that this learning community was enhanced by the discussions. All but one of the 19 respondents felt supported in their learning by their classmates. The one student found the environment to be "competitive and unfair," and she later noted that "this experience forced me to compete with other students on line; who can be more creative? who can provide the most information?"

One learner's comments reflected the sentiments of a number of the participants, "this experience greatly enhanced the community. It helped

me to see and appreciate what my fellow students know. I gained appreciation for my classmates." Another student noted that the online learning "motivated and stimulated me to participate in the learning community." One of the international students, who was not required to participate in the online discussions, stated, "WebCT communication helps me feel my class is learning community and that is why I want to contribute to other classmates by posting."

Sixty-three percent of the learners stated that their primary motivation for participating in the online discussions was because it was compulsory, whereas the other 37% indicated they were primarily motivated by interest, a desire to help other students, and a passion for nursing. It is important to note that following the 10 weeks of compulsory postings, participation in the discussion groups dropped dramatically, suggesting that the primary reason for posting was because of the compulsory nature of the activity. A handful of students continued to post on line until the end of the 16-week practicum; however, only one student continued to post following graduation. After graduation, only one of the new graduate nurses voiced interest in participating in an online discussion group.

Eighty-four percent of the respondents felt that the online discussions kept them connected with their classmates. Four students highlighted the importance of the social aspect the discussions. For example, one student wrote, "it was also a great way to stay in touch with each other." Another commented, "I do agree that it let me know where people were in practice and sometimes what they were experiencing." One of the respondents who did not think it helped the class remain connected felt it was "very impersonal."

Teaching and Learning

Students were asked to comment on their best learning during this experience. One learner wrote, "all the discussions that took place was my best learning. Each story was unique." Several described their best learning as "researching" and "composing" and "sharing" the weekly topics. Another described her best learning as "reading and trying to connect it, if it was relevant to my practice."

Others believed that the support and feedback from fellow students was their best learning. For example, "the feedback from peers, their demonstrated interest and caring nature I would read." Another wrote, "knowing that I am not alone, that others share my experiences and concerns." Another student stated that her best learning was "feeling supported by my classmates and also being able to share my knowledge. Also learned so much from my classmates' postings."

The lack of feedback from fellow students was troublesome for three of the 19 respondents. This was summed up by the remark, "I was disap-

pointed with the lack of comments/questions/feedback from other students about my postings." Another wrote that she disliked the online discussions when she "would pose a question and no one answered."

Many students noted that the shared learning was a highlight of the experience. One stated that she felt engaged in the learning community by a "desire to help stimulate critical thinking in the other students."

Nursing Knowledge

All the learners who participated in the survey felt that the online discussions enhanced their knowledge. One student reflected many of the other students' sentiments when she wrote, "the other students were working in such a variety of practice settings. This experience enabled me to learn about different areas of practice … I can compare and add to my learning through learning about their experiences." A student who was working in a specialty area felt that her basic medical-surgical knowledge was enhanced by the other students' postings. She wrote, "without online learning I would have been greatly lacking in this area." Another noted that this provided an opportunity to "learn about new topics," and another said, "everybody's input broadened my perspective in areas that I'm not working in."

The online discussions reinforced nursing knowledge. One student opined that, "this process did clarify my knowledge on the topic and enhanced my knowledge by writing and summarizing it." Another stated, "It reinforced learning on those topics with which I was already familiar." Yet another wrote,

> I was able to attain vast insight, knowledge from reading other students' postings … [it] expanded my knowledge." An additional learner wrote, "I am the first to admit how much I dislike journaling. I found it a waste of time. But through WebCT I loved posting. I knew others would gain from my postings and also reading others' postings, I felt I had a chance to know their passion for nursing. It is a great forum for supporting one another, too. I wish I had WebCT from year one.

Another student stated, "I think this is the most learning that has occurred in the past four years."

Computer/Technology Skills

In addition to enhancing nursing knowledge, the online discussion allowed students to practice using an e-learning platform. Fifteen of the 19 learners (79%) felt prepared to take other online courses, whereas two (11%) indicated that they would not take another online course. One learner noted that the experience "enhanced [my] computer skills." A second student noted that she liked "being connected and the use of

technology." Another learner felt she was motivated to participate in the online discussions because of "a need to know, course requirements, learning about technology in nursing, informatics."

Time Management

Juggling working full time, researching, and posting twice a week was described as stressful by a three of the 19 (16%) students. When asked about the barriers to participation in the online discussions, one student stated, "time limitations. It was difficult and the workload heavy because I was also working full-time shift work with my practice placement." A second learner noted that she enjoyed the discussions, but "found it hard to make time limitations and assignment deadlines due to my practice environment."

Some students got behind in their weekly postings and would put in an extra effort all at once to catch up. This caused difficulties for the other students who were managing the workload each week. One student said that a barrier to her participation was "sometimes just the time involved in reading multiple postings at once especially if the student was behind in reading postings and needed to catch up." A student commented that what she disliked about this learning activity was "placing 2 postings within a designated time as I always had to plan ahead a week for my postings."

Five learners stated that a number of the postings were overly long. One student felt "frustrated wading through some of the lengthy and incredibly detailed patho[physiology] … [this was] time consuming for my already incredibly busy life." Another wrote, "sometimes students post incredibly lengthy discussions—much of which seemed to be info taken directly from textbooks (e.g., more about a lesson in pathology than about the individual's experience)."

Critical Thinking

The learners' perceptions were that their intellectual skills and critical thinking skills were improved with the online postings. Fourteen of the respondents (74%) felt that the online experience enabled them to develop intellectual skills. Comments by those who believed they had increased this capacity included, "[it] forced me to be accurate, succinct and responsible for my own words" and "reading others' postings, questions and reflections made me think and reflect—drawing my own conclusions and stimulating new learning." Another learner added, "[I could talk] about my experiences in relation to the current literature/research and reflect on my practice." One student commented that her best learning occurred when, "[I] compiled my posting each week. This allowed me to think critically about my learning and patient care. I could think about ways I

could do things different—reflection." Another student wrote, "the instructors comments/responses to my postings tended to make me consider my topic from a different perspective, or explore my topic in more depth."

Five respondents (26%) did not believe that their critical thinking skills were enhanced. One noted,

> because of the pressure to have so many postings done and spending at least two hours at the computer alone trying to read other postings, my critical thinking and learning decreased because all I wanted to do was get my homework done so I could move on to other homework or personal things.

Empowerment

When asked if they found the experience empowering, 12 (63%) learners indicated that it was, four (21%) had no opinion, and three (16%) felt it was not empowering. Learners' comments threaded throughout the short answers demonstrated that the process was empowering. One student indicated that she liked the online discussions because it "forced me to own my own ideas and thoughts and go public with them." Another indicated "[I had the] freedom to post at my own leisure." One student wrote, "Feedback and encouragement from my instructor was helpful and positive and also stimulated deeper reflection." Another indicated that this process "sparked ideas for topics I wanted to research more." A student summed it up when she said that the best learning occurred

> when other students would ask questions about my postings … this caused me to explore those topics in depth. Because I had posted on those topics in the first place, they were obviously important to me and relevant to my practice. For someone else to motivate me to learn more about my chosen topics because they also are interested is encouraging and empowering.

One student wrote, "We just seemed to pull it all together. I had no idea how intelligent my classmates are!"

Discussion

The online discussions were envisaged as a way for students to be actively involved in determining and satisfying their own learning needs. They were also used to evaluate the self-directed theory course in Semester 8. At the same time, I believed that it would be an important way for the students to remain in touch with each other while separated during their final practicum, especially for those who were working in remote placements.

Most of the class had been together for three and a half years. The RNs and foreign-trained nurses had been with the group for over one year. I

had worked closely with these students for the previous semester, and I had assumed that the class was a learning community. I was surprised to find that prior to this experience, 21% of the class did not believe this to be true. However, by end of the online postings, all respondents believed they were members of a learning community and that this learning community had been enhanced through online discussions.

Several of the learners initiated and participated in synchronous discussions in the chat room and found this to be enjoyable. A meet-and-greet discussion topic was set up in the asynchronous discussions, and the learners used this for socializing. Contrary to Conrad's (2002) findings, this feature appeared to be an important element in maintaining the "community," as it provided a place for students to discuss and plan their graduation fundraising and festivities without interfering with the learning.

Hanna et al. (2000) noted that online courses "provide 'enormous opportunities' for learners to be the teacher" (p. 20). Early on, the instructors agreed that this was evident during the online postings. In addition to the many discussions on various nursing topics, students taught other students how to use the software and solve computer problems. The students described the "sharing of knowledge" and the "richness of the information" as a highlight of the experience. However, as one of the course instructors, I felt that while the postings were being marked, the dialogue and interaction were limited between the basic baccalaureate students. Learners read their colleagues' postings, but did not always respond. I was expecting more interactive dialogue. To me the postings were like parallel play: each student concentrated on her own work and appeared to pay little attention to the other students' postings. However, the responses to the survey and the tracking system in WebCT® did not support my assumption. Although they did not respond, the students read each other's postings and said they learned from them.

In contrast, I observed that the registered nurses and the students who were not required to post for marks engaged in more dialogue. They responded, probed, and asked questions of their co-learners. Perhaps these students had more time to reflect on their cohort's postings. I wonder if the perceived difference in the two groups is a result of the students focusing on the marking criteria rather than on the learning. In this situation lengthy marking criteria may have stifled learners' creativity and collaboration. One student commented, "I was told that they [the postings] were not mini-papers but I believe that they almost had to be to get full marks."

Critical thinking was evaluated as part of the marking criteria for the weekly postings. When posting online, students demonstrated that they were able to organize their knowledge in meaningful and useful ways.

They were able to apply this knowledge to their practice. Learners were able to evaluate and discuss the quality of the materials they were reading for their postings and were able to connect this information to their practice. In at least two cases, students were able to question accepted practices in their agencies, and by presenting their research they were able to change the prevailing practice in their workplace.

The challenge of juggling full-time work in their practicum, reading textbooks and journals, managing the volume of online discussions, and studying for the RN exam could have been overwhelming and was stressful for a few. Remarkably, by the end of the 10 weeks, every student managed to complete the task successfully.

The instructors believed that the online discussion promoted self-regulated learning among the students. Learners managed their time, processed information, selected and planned their resources, and evaluated their own practice. They mastered the technology and made the transition from student nurse to graduate nurse.

The results of this study indicate that computer conferencing can be an effective tool for creating and maintaining a learning community when students are separated by time and place. In this case, the learning community was both maintained and improved through online discussions. The computer conferencing enhanced nursing knowledge and collaborative learning, especially between nursing specialties. It also provided a vehicle for learners to support one another. It was particularly important for those learners who were at a significant distance from their peers. The private e-mail aspect of WebCT® allowed learners who needed privacy because of a sensitive or ethical issue to communicate safely with faculty. The learning community enabled the students to enhance their critical thinking and employability skills such as computer literacy and time management. More important, students felt empowered to learn.

Recommendations

As a learner who had participated in a number of online courses, I was aware of some factors to consider when setting up an online course.

- Limit the size of the discussion group to 6-10 participants.
- Allow sufficient time for the learners and faculty new to computer courses to overcome their apprehensions and to become familiar with the platform.
- Give learners regular supportive feedback.
- Provide learners with a positive sense of accomplishment.
- Create a place for socializing within the course platform.
- "Expect learners to be present on-line and contribute to discussions" (Hanna et al., 2000, p. 16).

- "Expect learners to create and share knowledge and experiences" (Hanna et al., 2000, p. 17).
- Make it fun.
- Attach a mark.

As a result of this survey I will also:

- Consider limiting the length of the postings to 100-250 words.
- Consider changing the mark from a letter grade to a credit/non-credit system.
- Ensure that the marking criteria are not too cumbersome or comprehensive.
- Involve the learners in determining the marking criteria.
- Involve the students in determining ground rules for the computer conferencing (i.e., confidentiality with regard to other students' postings).

Online learning requires planning ahead and efficient use of time. At the beginning of the course, faculty must emphasize that hard work and commitment are needed for learners to be successful. However, the quality of the learning certainly warrants the extra effort by both the faculty and the learners.

As hardware prices fall, high-speed Internet access becomes more readily available, and application software increases in sophistication, technology is becoming more accessible. As a result, online continuing education courses for nurses are becoming increasingly popular. These innovations have brought major changes to educational systems and have enhanced basic and continuing education programs for nurses. The goal of any school of nursing is to prepare nurses for the future; this includes ensuring that nurses have a comfort level with the Internet and distance learning. This experiment with online conferencing has been successful in increasing students' familiarity with technology and comfort levels, which may assist in preventing attrition and enhancing learning in online courses in the future.

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Appendix
Perspectives on the Experience of the Learning Community Through Online Discussions

Research Question: How effective is technology (discussion group via WebCT® for maintaining and supporting a learning community (community of practice) for fourth year Bachelor of Science in Nursing students, distanced by time and location during their last practicum?

Questionnaire

A. My age is: _____

B. I am enrolled at Malaspina University College as a:

    Post-RN   Generic Student   International Student

C. Is English your second language?

    Yes   No

D. During the online discussions this semester, I feel that I learned the most from:

    Post-RN   Generic Student   International Student   Faculty

E. I was required to participate in online discussions for credit:

    Yes   No

F. I voluntarily participated in online discussions although I was not required to do so for credit:

    Yes   No

G. If yes to question F, what was your motivation?

H. Did you use the chat rooms (synchronous discussions)?

I. If yes, how many times. _____

J. If yes, What was your motivation?

    1—Agree, 2—Neutral, 3—Disagree

                               1   2   3

1 Posting each week to online discussions increased by comfort with technology.

2 Online discussions increased my ability to learn from others.

3 I felt engaged by this learning activity (online discussions).

4 Online discussions enabled me to develop communication skills.

5 Online discussions enabled me to develop intellectual skills.

6 This experience enabled me to construct a shared understanding of nursing with my classmates.

7 I felt recognized for what I know.

8 I felt recognized for what I need to learn.

9 I felt inspired by other students during the process of online discussions.

10 I felt inspired by faculty during this process of online discussions.

11 I was able to build on other students' strengths.

12 This experience allowed me to develop a sense of competence.

13 This experience was empowering.

14 I helped my classmates learn through my postings.

15 I learned from my classmates postings?

16 I should be marked on my contributions to the online dis-
     cussions.
17 I am frustrated by this experience with technology.
18 Access to a computer was easy.
19 Use of the technology was easy.
20 I contribute more to class discussions on line than I do in
     the classroom.
21 I contribute less to class discussions on line than I do in the
     classroom.
22 I contribute about the same in online discussions as I do in
     the classroom.
23 During Semester 7 students were given the opportunity to
     "practice" using discussion groups. This practice was
     beneficial.
24 I would participate in the online discussions even if there
     is not a mark attached to the postings.
25 This online discussion has assisted me in preparing for the
     Registered Nurses Exam.
26 I feel prepared to take other online courses should the op-
     portunity or need arise.

Please answer the following questions.

 1. Prior to Semester 8, did you feel that your class was a learning community?
 2. If you answered yes to the first question. Did this experience assist you in
    maintaining that community of learning? Describe how this experience as-
    sisted you.
 3. If you answered no to the first question. Did this experience assist you in
    building a community of learning? Describe how this experience assisted
    you.
 4. Did you feel supported in your learning by your classmates?
 5. What did you like about the online discussions of your learning?
 6. What did you dislike about the online discussions of your learning?
 7. What helped you get/be engaged with your learning community?
 8. What motivated you to participate in the online discussions?
 9. What were the barriers to your participation in the online discussions?
10. Do you feel that this experience of online discussions kept you connected
    with your classmates?
11. Do you feel that this experience of online discussion enhanced your know-
    ledge? Explain.
12. Do you feel that this experience of online discussion enhanced your critical
    thinking skills? Explain.
13. Was this experience valuable to you? Why?
14. Was this experience a waste of time? Why?
15. What was your best learning during this experience?
16. What was the worst learning experience during this experience?

17. What frustrations did you experience during this experience?

18. Should the Bachelor of Science Nursing Program continue to use online discussions during practice in Semester 8 even if there will be no theory course and therefore no marks attached. Why or Why not?

19. Should the Bachelor of Science Nursing Program use online discussions when students are completing their Consolidated Nursing Practice experiences. Why or Why not?

20. How did the online discussion assist you in preparing for the Canadian Registered Nurse Examination ?

21. Please share any additional comments about the experience of sharing your weekly learning on line with your classmates and faculty.