

Chapter XII

Strategies for Creating Virtual Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

Teaching nursing online requires teachers to purposefully use strategies that facilitate the development of virtual learning communities. The chapter proposes answers to the question, "How can educators effectively teach the very social discipline of nursing in virtual classrooms?" Specific online teaching strategies including Photovoice, Virtual Reflective Centers, and Conceptual Quilting are explored. The social and socio-technical implications of teaching nursing online are considered. A final section in the chapter describes how these developments in online nursing education are changing the social and pedagogical perspectives of distance learning. Research questions that arise from this exploration are presented.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has changed how nursing is taught. Now many universities offer nursing programs, or selected nursing courses, online. Baumlein (2003) predicted that by the year 2010 most universities

would offer some of their degree programs as Web-based options. Internet based nursing education is flourishing and is making education available, accessible, and convenient for those seeking basic to advanced degrees (Mancuso-Murphy, 2007).

Nursing is a complex discipline requiring a mix of intellectual and social knowledge, psychomotor and interpersonal skills, and compassionate and professional attitudes. As many have said, including Nightingale back in 1859, nursing is an art and a science. Part of the complexity is the very interpersonal nature of nursing. Given that nursing is such an intensely human discipline it is important that all student nurses become skilled in interpersonal interaction. Whether an individual is studying to be a clinical nurse, a nurse educator, or a nurse administrator all need to become adept at human relations, equipped with relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Within this context, a major question for those who teach nursing online becomes, How can nursing students develop human relationship skills, knowledge, and appropriate attitudes if they are taking courses over the Internet?

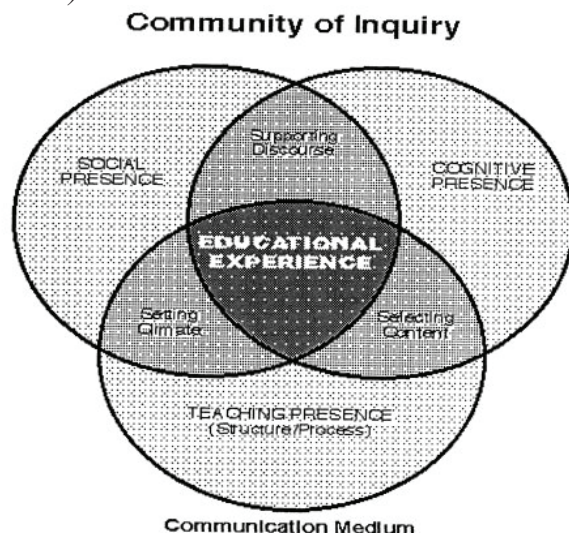
In this chapter we argue that to successfully teach nursing online, educators need to incorporate strategies that facilitate the development of interpersonal abilities. We propose that an important step in creating an online learning environment that supports the growth of interpersonal intelligence is the development of virtual learning communities. Exemplary online nurse educators develop and utilize innovative teaching strategies that help to create virtual learning communities in which interpersonal knowledge, skills, and attitudes can be honed (Perry & Edwards, 2006).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore specific online teaching strategies that facilitate the creation of virtual learning communities online. It is our belief that learning online can be a community experience if instructors are diligent and accomplished at including online teaching strategies in Internet delivered courses. Broadly the chapter addresses the question, "How can educators effectively teach the very social discipline of nursing in virtual classrooms?"

Major themes explored in the chapter include a discussion of the existing literature on the role of relationships in learning, the creation of online

educational communities, and the part immediacy plays in establishing these communities. One section of the review focuses specifically on the Community of Inquiry (COI) Model (Rourke, Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001) (see Figure 1). This is followed by a review of philosophical shifts that influence online community development including the shift from objectivism towards constructivism, from behaviorism towards socio-cognitive views of education, and the pedagogical shift from direct instruction to the facilitation of collaborative learning. Illustration of these themes is provided by examples of practical online teaching strategies that the authors have found promote the establishment of virtual learning community for student nurses. The strategies of Photovoice and Virtual Reflective Centers, among others, are highlighted. The concluding discussion focuses on the social and socio-technical implications of teaching the intensely human discipline of nursing online. A final section in the chapter describes how these developments in online nursing education are changing the social and pedagogical perspectives of distance learning. The chapter ends with a proposal for further research studies related to teaching nursing online.

Figure 1. (Rourke, Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001)



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