Contemporary Issues

Online nursing education: Reform from within our humanity

1. Background

The current economic reality and financial situation of universities in the USA lead nursing educators to a close examination of reasonable actions to take nursing education to the future. The technological era ripped the idea of university in the tradition of the enlightenment period to introduce the cloud-platform university where space is ethereal and higher education is amply available to meet the contemporary needs of learners. Transitioning a larger number of courses to the online environment is an option to be considered and may be rewarding. The purpose of this article is to stimulate reflection and research on online education. Universities, instructors, and students' investment return from increasing the number of online courses and programs could surpass the conventional benefits of live courses.

Throughout the years, since ancient times, the Socratic method has impacted education as a method to teach how to think critically by answering questions. This method is student centered and has shown to be more effective than lecture (Monteverde et al., 2018). Sometimes, discussion questions take students beyond the required course readings when they wish to strengthen their arguments. As opposed to a three-hour-live class, each online module lasts, usually, one week. Students have time to study and research about the topic to answer the discussion question(s) and make comments to classmates' answers, furthering the discussions. This process would not be easy to be implemented in face-to-face classes with the same efficacy because of the time factor; the time would not be sufficient to give learners the opportunity to hear the answer from the perspective of each classmate, reflect on those answers, and participate in the discussions of their choice. There are a few factors in online education that may contribute to its appeal: relaxed environment, freedom to attend classes at the students' convenience, freedom of expression of ideas in the discussion forum, and quality assurance through the individual certification of courses. A framework (rubric) for assessment of the quality of online courses and faculty training and empowerment is frequently used to ensure the quality of the courses. Usually, this choice of framework is based on the

world region where the course or program is based (Martin and Kumar, 2018). An example is Quality Matters, an international non-profit organization that offers an assessment framework based on a replicable faculty peer-review to ensure the quality of online teaching (Swan et al., 2012).

Online activities are in line with the expressly established course learning outcomes, which can be tracked for each student (Boud, 2017). This data is available in online courses that follow online-design standards of practice. On the other hand, currently, this data is not available in live courses (Boud, 2017). This is a point of significance in online education; the effectiveness of courses and programs can readily be measured. Face-to-face courses cannot be peer reviewed and certified with the same reliability as those online, mostly because it would require an independent instructor to be present during all classes to review the entire course.

In pedagogy, the learner is dependent on the teacher, who is responsible for the curriculum, how to learn, and when to learn. On the other hand, andragogy is based on the learners' development to self-directedness. The teacher takes the characteristic of facilitator, whose responsibility involves nurturing the change from dependency to self-directedness and autonomy (Power and Holland, 2018). In the universities' live classroom environment, pedagogy still prevails; the educator gives the fish to the students, so to speak, while in the online environment, students learn to catch the type of fish that they desire, in the waters of their own choice.

2. Reform from within our humanity

Watson's (2009) Theory of Human Caring is a framework designed to enhance nursing practice and nursing education. Applying this theory to produce a radical reform coming from within our humanity may be essential to reverse the detachment too often seen today. The community sense and life, which are common in live courses, are not lost in online higher education; communication and interaction were strengthened because distance is no longer a deterrent. In the online

environment, the professional relationship between instructors and learners is important and possible by dedicating special attention to knowing the students. Usually, the class-member introductions in the first week of the course provide the initial opportunity for the application of Watson's (2009) theory through the facilitation of a heart-centered encounter (caring moment) and being an authentic presence for the students (transpersonal caring). Most students work at least part time, and need to balance their family, work, and academic life. Many are eager to learn, expand their horizons, and start a career in nursing or bring their nursing career to the next level. They are investing on their personal and professional development; some through the generosity of their employers and others by using their own hard-earned resources or student loans. Employers, federal-loan-servicing agencies, and students look for a grade of B or better, which is the required grade to allow progression in many nursing programs. These factors may be the source of a lot of stress. Watson's (2009) theory instills the development and practice of humanistic values to self and others. For example, validating the uniqueness and potential of oneself and students as an effort to establish an environment of joy, hope, cooperation, mutual support, and so on.

Student attendance as the count of students' physical presence is obsolete; instead, the focus is in the learning outcomes. Students' weekly participation in discussions or through submission of assignments are demonstrations of the leaning process outcome. It is possible to identify online students' struggles through clues, such as inconsistency in work quality, absences, and multiplicity of questions (Sitzman, 2016). Most students can keep up with the pace of online courses. However, a small percentage may deal with life stressors. Upon an absence (lack of participation during the week) and after assessing the situation, the instructor should provide support and encouragement, and offer the opportunity for an individual plan of study to make possible for the student to successfully conclude the course. Whenever an interruption in communication occurs, the instructor should try to contact the student to express concern and explain the student's options. A catching-up plan, may consist, simply, on an extension of a due date for a specific assignment, maybe, a paper or the weekly discussion questions.

Three-credit-hour courses are not the type of courses which a student could succeed without academic dedication and vigorous intellectual work. Online courses can be as challenging and daring as face-to-face courses or harder. Instructors' caring interventions in the online environment can be as effective in improving learning outcomes as with face-to-face courses. The needs and complexities of the modern professional life challenge the rigid structures of higher-education (Karlson et al., 2007). Consideration for the students' life challenges, expanding the understanding of extenuating circumstances to include work events, stress, and family obligations as triggers for a recovery plan for students may lead to passing rates extremely high and rare withdraws. A tremendous academic success could be possible through very small accommodations, consisting of compassion, understanding, extension of regards, and flexibility of due dates. One case that could illustrate the worthiness of this system occurred shortly after the first-time it was implemented in an online course; the enrollment doubled the next time the course ran, and a new session had to be opened.

Some hindrances to student retention and success could be minimized by a well-designed course (Ainscough et al., 2017). Throughout the years, this system of regard through supportive communication evolved to include a general flexibility of due dates in many courses that followed the course described above. This action benefited the students, significantly. Some students need to get to their days off to catch up with the week's assignments, which means that, in general, submissions are made within the same grading period. Students' performance improved following stress reduction; no more worries with strict due dates. This system could give peace of mind to the instructor since there is always an automatic alert when something needs grading and every submission is timestamped. Although flexibility of one week

might not affect the instructor's productivity, a course calendar continues to be an important tool to keep students on track and the class moving along together, maintaining a sense of collegiality among all and sound continuation of discussions. Prior notice of the tardiness in submitting assignments should be encouraged. While abuses may not be common, preventing unjustified or excessive use of the flexibility can be achieved by reserving, in the syllabus, the right to apply penalties. One rule is essential, all the work must be completed by the last day of class. An incomplete grade, which allows completion of the course in the following semester, should require formal request and appropriate documentation of a critical situation. Students' responsibility and accountability might grow in result of the flexibility of due dates, which makes possible the adjustment of their calendar to create a harmonious balance among all their obligations. Application of a system of regard toward students has the potential to increase enrolment, reduce stress, and increase student satisfaction.

3. Moving away from face-to-face courses

The cost of live courses at universities is so high that to make them possible without raising the tuition would require an increase in the number of students in the classroom, which, in turn, could reduce the courses' quality and overwhelm the instructor. In some classrooms, the number of students has increased so much that by adding more and more seats, the space is getting as tight as the seat space in airplanes' economic class, since there are not any laws regulating neither the maximum number of seats in an airplane nor laws regulating the space between seats and between rolls in the classroom. However, increasing the number of students in the classroom does not seem to be the best solution for financial issues, because it may increase the cost of the university support system for live classes. This would involve more parking, dormitories, security, in-campus health services, administrative personnel, insurance, and so on. Added to these costs are expenses for maintenance of large buildings and grounds, which are financially impractical, unnecessary, and eventually could lead to a new tuition raise. Further, live programs interfere with students' livelihood and have just a local reach, leaving many people without possibility of receiving education. Understanding economic principles and their applications is everyone's responsibility in preparation for recommending, encouraging, and supporting adequate policies (Stephen, 2012).

Another factor to consider is that some nursing educators do not have formation in the discipline of education; they have only professional clinical experience, which may be a drawback to the development of educational materials and application of adequate methodologies to specific populations. In addition, live courses are very difficult to be replicated by other instructors assigned to teach them, since, usually, the course design and materials are not passed, in details, to other faculty members. Those materials will have to be developed again by each instructor assigned to teach the course for the first time. Contrastingly, an entire online course can be saved in a flash drive or copied and pasted into new course shells multiple times within a matter of seconds. In the live classroom, the instructor will dedicate 2 to 3 h twice a week on lecture plus time to prepare for those classes and create activities suitable to different learning styles. Students' attention span is very limited in a live classroom, requiring a variety of planned activities and methodologies to extend its range. The university instructor will be teaching two to three courses each semester, in addition to participating in committees, advising students, and promoting the development of the nursing science. These many responsibilities can turn, rapidly, to insurmountable proportions. In online education, the bulk of the instructor's time is flexible and is spent in the discussion forum. In addition, the elimination of the commute could save faculty and students' precious time.

4. Conclusion

It is time to plan the future of nursing education. Look closely into the university finances; these are not the times to carry on with the education of the people using opulent brick and mortar structures that are never large enough, modern enough, or have resources enough to meet the needs of the various departments and students. Then, turn to the people who look forward to receiving quality nursing education, and see what they need to reach their goal. The human and economic resources of universities should be directed to that goal, to means of making learning accessible to anyone at any location. Despite the advantages and disadvantages of both online and live education, online education will continue to advance its position in the educational world. Electronic learning seems to be the best investment to further nursing education, limiting face-to-face nursing classes to the essentials, such as health assessment, laboratory, and clinical instruction. Watson's (2009) Theory of Human Caring should be applied to influence and guide the process of development of this new university community of nursing scholars, practitioners, and learners.

Acknowledgements

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