ABSTRACT

By using principles of instructor presence, faculty of distance-accessible nursing courses can foster a climate of learning that supports student achievement and provides role modeling for communication. Faculty used principles of instructional design, facilitation of student discourse, and clear direct instruction to improve the learning experiences of approximately 300 graduate nursing students taking part in a health assessment course. Specific suggestions for faculty that take place before and throughout the semester are offered. [J Nurs Educ. 2014;53(8):479-482.]

The need to educate advanced practice nurses (APNs) to implement the Affordable Care Act is critical; indeed, the use of community care teams led by APNs is predicted to be an important tactic in reigning in costs of primary care (Green, Savin, & Lu, 2013). Accordingly, distance-accessible nursing education programs have become one strategy to meet the goal of a larger primary care workforce. With this in mind, distance-accessible programs have proliferated, and the traditional methods of interaction with students and other faculty have changed. Successful distance education is not merely loading a traditional course to an online platform; rather, instructor presence must be cultivated for students to engage in learning (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Indeed, teaching presence has been positively correlated with successful student outcomes. As technological support for distance platforms has improved, faculty members are becoming skillful in building relationships with students in an online platform. According to Mangan (2012), “technological advances have made the online-learning process more interactive and in many ways more personal that the large lecture classes of many introductory courses” (p. B4).

However, despite the improvement in the delivery of course content, one critical aspect of student satisfaction and success often eludes many distance programs—the ability to develop a sense of community and accessibility. This critical component of online learning often fails due to limited or inconsistent use of existing modes of communication and student engagement. A useful tactic for building a sense of community within a distance-accessible course is to establish instructor presence.

Instructor Presence

Instructor, or teaching, presence is defined as the instructor’s interaction and communication style involving input into class discussion and communication (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Attributes of teaching presence generally include:

- Instructional design that gives the course organization, time parameters, communication expectations, and electronic communication etiquette.
- Facilitation of discourse that promotes student discussion, recognizing areas of agreement and disagreement, and setting the climate for learning.
- Direct instruction that presents course content, while also prompting discussion, reviewing, and reinforcing main concepts, and providing information, where students have misperceptions (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010).
These three attributes were cultivated in the fall 2010 semester when a school of nursing, with a total of more than 1,300 students enrolled in advanced practice, distance-accessible nursing courses, first addressed the challenge of fostering a sense of community. Specifically, challenges existed in a distance-accessible Health Assessment and Diagnostic Reasoning for Advanced Practice Nurses course with 243 students, taught by five instructors. Approximately 150 student evaluation comments from the previous term identified poor communication, lack of faculty availability, and dissemination of conflicting information as being the most common problems within the course.

One anonymous student wrote in her course evaluation:

Although the content was good, I leave this course knowing nothing more about the instructors or university. For all I know they could all be in different states, never talking to one another. Some instructors provided more information and direction than others. Nothing about this course made me any more familiar with the instructors or the other students.

Problems Identified in Course Design, Discussion, and Direct Instruction

In an effort to improve the course for the next offering in the spring 2011 semester, a new course manager began leading and incorporating changes. The course itself was complex: a 4-hour course that included coordination of a 2-day, onsite intensive for all students. During the online intensive, students traveled to campus for an immersion experience in didactic instruction and evaluation of expected competencies. Students were divided into smaller, cross-listed sections of 35 students within the larger course platform. Cross-listing is defined as students enrolling in different sections of one course. All the sections are then placed into the same distance-accessible course, but the sections remain separate. This method allows for groups to remain smaller while still receiving the same course information with all other sections. Orellana (2006) conducted one of the largest studies to date on class size in online courses, as related to student interaction and learning. Orellana suggested that there are other variables besides class size that must be considered. Four of these variables were (a) instructors’ time commitment, workload, and experience with using the technology; (b) the nature and content of the course; (c) student characteristics, such as comfort level with the technology; and (d) limitations of the technology itself. Mupinga and Maughan (2008) studied workload issues related to teaching online and concluded that each institution must set their own firm workload guidelines. Recommendations for distance-accessible class size vary widely in the literature, with several sources suggesting no more than 20 to 30 students (Aragon, 2003). Taft, Perkowski, and Martin (2011) recommended that numbers of students in online classes range from fewer than 15 to 40 students. To address the larger group size, the course faculty used strategies to fully engage the students.

Using strategies such as weekly online chats alternated with virtual office hours, videos, discussion boards, and a 2-day on-site intensive, faculty found that they were able to fully engage students in the smaller course groups. During the virtual chats, students and faculty would log into the virtual conferencing site within the course. Faculty would deliver formal presentations or conduct informal question-and-answer sessions around a specific topic. However, most were directed toward specific content and presented in the form of case studies applying module content. Students could attend these chats or listen to the archive. If listening to the archive, the students lost the ability to ask clarification questions live. However, they could benefit from the questions by other students or could e-mail faculty with their own questions. In contrast, the open virtual office hours were student led, where they could ask questions or offer comments and suggestions to faculty and other students.

In an effort to troubleshoot before the next semester, the course faculty met and evaluated communication within the course. Seven major issues emerged:

- Although all groups were cross-listed into the same course, they often received conflicting information. Instructors would often e-mail their assigned groups with information that was not shared with other groups.
- No ground rules were established for the use of e-mail. Students would often e-mail all instructors or all students instead of one student or the group instructor. In addition, no clear commitment had been set by instructors on e-mail response times.
- Practicing and making arrangements for the onsite intensive was stressful for students. Without a clear mechanism for communication among students regarding the upcoming onsite activities, e-mail and discussion boards were overused or misused.
- Instructors spent a tremendous amount of time addressing the same questions in multiple e-mails, which, in turn, slowed down response times.
- Feedback on assignments varied by instructor. Grading was consistent due to use of rubrics, but the quality and amount of feedback was not consistent. Deadlines for returning grades and feedback were established by course faculty at the course meeting prior to the term.
- The use of open office hours during which the students could call the instructor’s office to talk resulted in few students calling or able to get through during the time allotted.
- No mechanism was available for identifying areas of student concern or confusion until they had escalated to a difficult point.

Each of the seven issues was discussed by course faculty, and solutions, guided by the components of instructor presence, were implemented.

Instructional Design

Several of the course issues could be solved by improving the design of the course. For example, even before the spring 2011 semester started, although there were approximately 300 students in each section, students could be placed in one larger course but within smaller groups of 35. This resulted in students having the same opportunity to receive the same information posted within the course, yet feel like they were in a smaller class size. Discussion boards were created to facilitate student-to-student and student-to-faculty discussion. At the same time, a document on the best practices for distance-accessible courses was approved and implemented throughout the school. In this document, acceptable response
times to student posts and e-mails were defined. On the basis of this information, faculty formally responded to student e-mails within 48 hours (excluding weekends) and student-to-faculty questions at a minimum of twice per week. However, the student-to-student and student-to-faculty discussion boards were monitored by faculty daily during the week.

Also, prior to the term, course introduction content was bolstered by including a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document placed in the course information folder. Students were instructed to review this document, along with the course overview and topical outline documents, on the first day of the course opening. The FAQ document addressed common questions, provided faculty contact information, established expected e-mail and telephone call response times, and discussed appropriate use of e-mail, including basic electronic communication etiquette and tips for course success. Each school term, this document is updated based on student feedback. Students were also directed to the discussion board. Two boards were provided for student use—one student-to-student area and one student-to-faculty area. Discussion here was either between students or students and faculty. However, it was made clear to students that because the boards were not private forums, the topics were of general interest and did not include sensitive information.

Facilitation of Discourse

Within the student-to-student discussion board, several set discussion categories existed: (a) onsite intensive discussion (one for onsite logistics and one for fair-game topics) and (b) module content discussion (one for each module). In addition, students were encouraged to start their own threads within the discussion boards. Instructions on best practices for creating and participating in threaded discussions are provided and implemented in two core courses just prior to this assessment course. Students were encouraged to upload a photograph to further personalize interaction in the discussion board. Faculty monitored the student-to-student discussion area daily during the week. When areas of confusion regarding course content were encountered, course announcements were made to the entire class to clarify the issue. Best of all, avoiding confusion and timely responses decreased student frustration, promoting the learning of course content. Since the initiation of these faculty presence efforts, the student-to-student discussion boards have been broken down into groups of six to 10 students within each 35-student group.

The student-to-faculty discussion allowed students to ask questions of the faculty. Many students have the same questions, so this approach limited redundancy of information. Faculty monitored the board daily during the week and responded to inquiries at least twice during each week. To ensure that all students in the course received the same information, faculty shared student questions with the other course faculty each week, and responses were posted for the entire class to view.

Virtual office hours (2-hour blocks at least once every other week) serve the same purpose of decreasing frustration. A virtual office hour session within the first 72 hours of the beginning of the semester was found to be a highly useful tool for faculty to “meet” students early on. Some students strongly prefer talking directly to the instructor about areas of concern. Instead of taking scores of phone calls, the virtual office hours (which are conducted within the virtual classroom of the online course platform) can also be archived. This task can be rotated by all faculty who are assigned to the course. Students’ personal issues should be discussed outside of virtual office hours.

Direct Instruction

Faculty presence was further enhanced by using direct instructional methods. Course faculty met on a monthly basis during the semester and shared what was and was not working. Also, areas of student confusion were often addressed through the direct-instruction method, posting clarification of content within the course, or addressing the confusion, during the next open virtual office hours or virtual chat. This focus on quality improvement was beneficial. Faculty became aware that anxiety was aroused when even tiny changes were suggested. Thus, they carefully avoided making changes, and, if changes had to be made, the changes were announced at least twice to underscore the importance of the communication. Specifically, from the direct-instruction perspective, upgrades in the online course platform caused some difficulties mid-semester and prevented some students from viewing a live presentation that had been planned. Fortunately, it was archived and students were able to view it later. However, faculty made sure to overcommunicate this to prevent student frustration.

Improved Communication Outcomes due to Instructor Presence

The changes discussed were implemented with the next course offering in summer 2011 and then were evaluated and modified on a continual basis throughout the course. Student satisfaction improved, with fewer negative evaluations regarding poor communication, lack of faculty availability, and opportunities for student engagement. During this semester, only 120 students were enrolled in the course, making it much more manageable.

However, in the spring 2012 semester, the number of students increased to 314, with five instructors and eight groups, and students were divided into cross-listed groups of 35. During the term, a markedly reduced number of 204 e-mails were sent to the course manager, with total of 405 total e-mails received by all course instructors. Evaluations lacked the previously noted negative comments from earlier semesters and instead included positive comments about the opportunities for engagement, the availability of instructors, the organization and communication in the course, and the formation of a sense of community.

One anonymous student wrote in her course evaluation:

“This was the most organized course I have ever taken. Professors anticipated questions and concerns and provided information early and often. I know the professors were so busy, but they always made me feel that students were the priority. It was so nice to be able to talk to the instructors and ask questions during open office hours. They came across as very human and I could tell they really wanted us to succeed.”

Beyond the Initial Effort

The course was used as a model to increase instructor presence in all distance accessible courses within the school. It is
an expectation that faculty teaching in the distance-accessible courses use these foundational principles, critically evaluate methods used at the end of each term, and make changes to facilitate student learning and engagement. Changes made during the term were applied using the direct instruction method and were implemented as needed and when needed only in situations benefiting the student. Rather than innovation in instructor presence being a task, it is part of the culture of the school. Faculty openly share ideas of what does and does not work, embracing the idea of student and faculty success through open communication in a progressive learning community.

Conclusion

To meet the demand for APNs, schools of nursing must strive to apply efficient methods of instruction and communication with students. Although e-mail has become the standard for communication with students in distance accessible programs, this method alone serves poorly to engage students. Faculty sought to engage in a stronger instructor presence and created a variety of ways to communicate beyond e-mail, which included open virtual office hours, virtual chats, announcements, and discussion boards. The experience of this course demonstrates simple steps to assist in engaging students. The course changed drastically, resulting in less student anxiety and confusion and faculty frustration. However, as online platforms change, faculty will need to return to the principles of instructor presence to continue to deliver an optimal learning environment.

References