

On-line discussions in nursing education: Increase retention and utilize innovative teaching strategies¹

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Abstract On-line discussions are an important component of on-line education. They can be an effective method for enhanced learning and critical thinking. Discussions give instructors an opportunity to use new and creative teaching strategies that can increase student retention. Discussion guidelines should provide detailed instructions of what is to take place in the discussion. With careful planning and organization, on-line discussions can provide a positive learning experience for the associate degree nursing student.

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On-line courses are becoming more common in the United States. The Sloan Consortium found a 17% increase in on-line students, an increase of the 12% from the previous year (Parry, 2010). This survey found at least 25% of college students taking on-line courses. Most of these students were undergraduates. In addition, the Babson Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2011) found that at least 33% of college students have engaged in at least one on-line course.

On-line course offerings provide all nursing educators with many opportunities to expand teaching beyond traditional education methods. Part of that expansion includes on-line discussions. On-line discussions are considered to be meaningful and important components of on-line courses. They can be an effective method for enhanced learning and critical thinking (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006), exchanging ideas, in-depth reflection, providing peer feedback, and increasing utilization of vital technology tools. However, on-line nursing instructors and students may

face many problems and challenges with on-line courses and discussions. Specific teaching styles, strategies, and guidelines have been found that improve on-line discussions and increase on-line student learning.

1. Benefits of on-line discussions

Because on-line technology allows students more flexibility, using on-line technology for assignments may be a way to help retain undergraduate nursing students (Friedman & Friedman, 2011). Further facilitating student retention, discussions frequently provide students with a shared sense of community and an esprit de corps environment (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006; Magnussen, 2008). Discussions can be designed to engage students with other students, faculty, special guests, and experts. The special guests and experts, including nurses working in specialty areas, are useful to bring a deeper level of understanding to course topics. During on-line course discussions, students often have an opportunity to get to know each other better than other traditional courses. Networking between students with like interests is common after a discussion. Moreover, unlike

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time-restricted traditional classes, on-line discussion students have equal participation opportunities.

On-line discussions facilitate additional exploration of course topics. They give students additional communication time with other students. On-line discussions may incorporate valued life and work experiences and thus add to the learning process (Shovein, Huston, Fox, & Damazo, 2005). In addition, during this communication process, students are able to evaluate how well they understand course topics compared with other students. This meaningful insight often provides nursing students an early recognition for assistance and consequently helps students progress as quickly as possible.

2. Role of the instructor

Before the discussion begins, the instructor needs to make several decisions. These decisions include the content and organization of the discussion, the guidelines for the discussion, the size of groups, and the grading scheme. In order to have a significant and valuable learning experience, discussions should be graded. Instructors need to decide the length of the discussion. On-line discussions vary and can continue for a short time or the length of the course (Dawley, 2007). In addition, students become frustrated with unorganized on-line content (Magnussen, 2008), including discussions. It is the responsibility of the instructor to provide structure and organization and, thus, enable students to navigate easily without frustration (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006).

Instructor presence in an on-line discussion is optional. During the discussion, the role of the instructor can vary from being an observer to active participation in the discussion. If the instructor comments during a discussion, this may likely become an expectation for every posting, becoming very time intensive. One possibility is that the instructor comments may be posted at scheduled times (e.g., half way). During the discussion, the instructor may add additional questions or consider summarizing the discussion and asking for deeper inquiry into the topics. This option facilitates student contributions and focuses further discussion and learning. The instructor may consider sending an individual e-mail for an exceptional posting.

Instructors need to frequently check the discussion for incorrect postings, leading other students to post incorrectly. They may need to intervene when the discussion is moving in the wrong direction and help move the discussion back on course. Furthermore, instructors should check for inappropriate postings and unconstructive communication. These postings need to be deleted or responded to by the instructor before the class has followed down the wrong path. It is helpful to send an e-mail to the offending student, explain the problem, take any disciplinary action that may be needed, and take any action the student needs to correct the post.

On-line discussions are asynchronous in nature; meaning, an instructor feedback is not immediately available (Magnussen, 2008). More than in a traditional classroom,

instructors need to recognize that on-line students feel a need for quick critique and feedback. Easy access and speed of on-line technology may produce this unrealistic expectation, especially in a discussion. This can be addressed with critique and feedback time expectations included in the discussion guidelines.

3. On-line discussion problems and challenges

Instructors need to be aware of common on-line discussion problems. A major problem for on-line students includes a sense of being under constant surveillance. Postings are usually permanent, and only the instructor can delete comments, thus every shared thought is recorded and permanently archived. Unlike words in a classroom, on-line postings stay in the discussion forum. The posting is on display for everyone to see and potentially criticize. The words are frozen in time. This may provide a sense of exposed visibility and vulnerability (Armstrong, 2010) and could lead to weak discussions.

Students may have a lack of understanding of the technology. Separate from the on-line course technology requirements, on-line discussions produce special technology problems. Frequently, this difficulty is related to copying and pasting content into the discussion. Problems may also arise from the “disappearance” of a discussion post. Specific technology instructions included in the discussion directions should help students. In addition, students need easily available access to on-line technology assistance, including the organization’s technology contact information.

4. On-line discussion strategies

On-line discussion questions need to create interesting dialog that requires application of course concepts to promote critical thinking and reflection. Instructors need to explicitly clarify what students should be addressing in the responses. A type of instructional method especially useful for associate degree nursing students is scaffolding. Scaffolding involves monitoring and supporting students’ understanding before starting another level of content. It helps on-line students to become more engaged and builds interest (Rourke & Coleman, 2011). Initially, the questions limit the discussion, and then, as students gain understanding, the questions raise the complexity of the discussion.

Another useful on-line discussion strategy is games. For example, a jigsaw approach that divides content into sections where each student makes a contribution to the “puzzle” is an effective strategy (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006). This approach based on discussion questions can allow for application of life or previous work experiences to course content. In addition, a word association game can be used in discussions, and this often helps to keep students engaged in the discussion content. This allows students to post a word in

a subject line, and the next student would do the same using a word association (Dawley, 2007). For example, after student clinicals at a new facility, students could post one word or a short phrase describing the experience.

Instructors should not assume that students understand how to participate. Peer pressure can assist in the starting and completion of discussions assignments (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006), but stimulus, to be posted by the instructor, may be needed. It is useful to post an announcement or e-mail students the need for timely postings in the discussion and inquire about any discussion confusion. Concrete incentives are sometimes needed. This could be an extra grade or extra credit for early postings (Dawley, 2007).

5. Discussion guidelines steps to success

Before the discussion is started, goals and objectives should be present. Discussion guidelines need to be detailed and clear, providing instruction of what is to take place. To avoid very long postings, guidance should include the focus of the discussion, how long the posting should be in word or character count, and how often to post. Depending on the class size, directions may be needed on how many students should respond in each forum.

Specifics to include in the discussion guidelines include rationale for the need to read and respond to other student posts. This will lead to a better participation and learning experience. If peer comments are required, guidance on responding to student posts, length of the reply post, and creation of a quality response should be included. Directions on avoiding responses such as “that was a great post” or “I totally agree” should be included. Faculty can give specific feedback to individual students privately, whereas a “round-up” to the discussion can address issues pertinent to the entire class (Magnussen, 2008).

Instructors need to clarify if attachments are allowed. Allowing attachments may indicate that a formal, lengthy paper is expected. In addition, it is laborious to open and save attachments compared with quickly and easily seeing postings (Quinlan, 2010). Some students may have difficulty opening an attachment and, thus, not be able to even read the comments.

Netiquette discussion guidelines need to be provided (Beitz & Snarponis, 2006). Students may not be knowledgeable on appropriate on-line discussion protocol. Appropriate communication includes using proper language and titles, being professional, considerate, respectful of other people, and avoiding all uppercase letters. In the on-line world, writing in

all caps is considered shouting. In addition, the organizations’ on-line policies or netiquette can be linked or attached.

For students to understand how the discussion will be graded, scoring rubrics should be used (Quinlan, 2010). A detailed rubric should be developed to assess student postings. The rubric should be specifically made for the content of the discussion (Lynch, 2010). Points may be allocated for the number and quality of postings. The post assessment criteria should include information regarding quantity, substance and quality, peer comments, references, and writing instructions (American Psychological Association, grammar, and spelling). In addition, deadlines and timeliness of postings are a part of the scoring rubric.

With careful planning and organization, on-line discussions are able to provide a positive learning experience for the associate degree nursing student. Despite the inherited challenges, on-line discussions provide new and exciting learning opportunities. As more on-line opportunities become available, on-line teaching strategies and learning outcomes will continue to improve.

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