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eModeration: Contextualising online learning in undergraduate nurse education

Adrian K. Morgan

University of Notre Dame Australia, amorgan3@nd.edu.au

THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

eModeration: Contextualising Online Learning in Undergraduate Nurse Education

Adrian K Morgan

School of Nursing, University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle, Australia

Abstract: *The wide availability of flexible, mixed-mode methods of course delivery to nursing students places increased demands on the skills and adaptability of nurse educators. The rapid uptake of computer-moderated learning, in particular, has required educators to reconsider some of their long-established pedagogical beliefs and practices which, over time, have faithfully sustained face-to-face teaching in classrooms. Inevitably, a certain degree of pedagogical adjustment is required when teaching online to ensure that the qualities of educational processes are consonant with expected learning outcomes. This paper discusses these important aspects, together with strategies that can help optimise educational practice, with a view to improve the delivery of Web-based courses.*

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Introduction

There has been rapid technological change in the learning environment of nursing students in recent years, brought about by improved access to courses through Web-based learning materials. Such access is a manner of addressing criticism levelled at the amount of time required to attend traditional methods of classroom learning.[1] Although nurse educators have embraced this revolutionary change through the provision of blended methods of learning, online teaching continues to challenge educators to develop fresh and innovative instructional skills.[2-5] Indeed, the author's own experiences as an online instructor have prompted the adoption of strategies that contrast with approaches normally adopted to encourage classroom interaction and increase student participation.

Research suggests that effective online interaction helps to support the learning goals of students.[6] Furthermore, learning occurs where there is encouragement to participate through activity because it stimulates student involvement.[1] This paper will, therefore, provide pragmatic insights based on the author's instructional experiences, with a view to encourage nurse educators to engage in this challenging method of learning and teaching.

eModeration

The term 'eModerator' derives from the word 'moderator' that is usually associated with a mediating role, but with a difference — while a moderator is someone who presides over a meeting, an eModerator has a more extensive role within the context of computer-moderated learning (CML), a role that is still evolving.[7] The eModerator's role is characterised by online instruction in which creative-learning processes are designed and utilised to facilitate the construction and dissemination of knowledge.

In Australia, the rapid uptake of online learning has placed increased demands on the traditional role of educators. For example, there is substantial emphasis and expectation placed on the student's own initiative, self-motivation, and resourcefulness in CML when compared with classroom teaching. As an eModerator, promoting creative thinking and reflection in students is also a challenge, but one that can be assisted by generating a safe, interactive climate that supports a sense of inclusiveness, community, and belonging. However, this does place a lot of responsibility on the eModerator's role, with tertiary education providers also having to develop suitable online infrastructure, training programmes, and support mechanisms to assist the use

Correspondence: Adrian K Morgan, PhD, MEd, BEd (Hons), PGCEA, DipN (Lond), RN, School of Nursing, University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225, Fremantle, Western Australia 6959.
Tel: (61 8) 9433 0183; Fax: (61 8) 9433 0227;
E-mail: amorgan3@nd.edu.au

of Web-based teaching modules. Faculty support for online instruction is another key consideration, as academic staff will be reluctant to incorporate CML into their courses, if adequate time is not provided by educaion providers.[1,8] In this case, it is imperative that academic workloads reflect the extensive development and reconfiguration of learning resources that are needed to engage with students online. In this respect, caution is urged because it is quite easy to be blindly swept away by the novelty that a sophisticated point-and-click learning environment can provide. Therefore, it is crucial for nurse educators who take on eModerator roles to closely monitor the extent to which computer-mediated course development and instruction eats into their working hours.

Synchronous versus Asynchronous Learning

The distinctions between synchrony and asynchrony are important within a CML environment. Synchronous learning applies to interactions where students and instructors engage in live, spontaneous online discussion at prearranged times while asynchronous learning refers to interactions between students and instructors that do not occur simultaneously, such as via bulletin board discussions where threads of discourse take place over a wider time frame.

Synchronous learning offers a number of benefits — increased motivation, group involvement, quick feedback, and student compliance. Unquestionably, the most significant of these benefits is motivation, as it should increase during synchronous learning where the student engages in real-time interactions with others. These group processes provide a sense of being part of the learning community, so that participants can obtain immediate feedback and group decision making can be more easily accomplished.[9] When interactions are synchronous, students are encouraged to keep up with the group, commonly referred to as the 'pressure of pacing'.[9] Synchronous learning offers distance learning to a non-traditional target group and, if the process can be modelled on more traditional educational experiences, it may help facilitate the learning of students who are less motivated.[10]

There are, of course, less desirable aspects associated with synchrony, as spontaneous interaction can provoke anxiety and be confrontational to some students, particularly those who are used to engaging in reflective asynchronous discussion that has been considered and thought through. The quality of student discussion and decision-making could be affected in spontaneous situations where variables are not thoroughly talked through and suitable options are not properly considered. The pressure of expected response immediacy can be problematic. Nevertheless, real-time synchronous discussion does provide a useful forum for more senior students to experience and practise the pressures and demands associated with hypothetical simulations and critical incidents. For example, in nursing contexts that require swift and accurate clinical judgement and ethical decision making.

Group processes also come into play, particularly, if codes of online behaviour are ignored or not adhered to by group members. This may be detrimental if unmoderated criticism by dominant group members marginalises other students, thus increasing levels of stress and dropout rates. The best way of preventing this from occurring when an online course unit is run is by asking participants to articulate their views about developing a code or guidelines that will be acceptable to the entire group.

Time management is an important practical issue to be considered for courses that use synchronous interaction. However, getting everyone started and communicating on a regular basis is a major limitation, particularly where course participants live across different geographical time zones.[11] When technology becomes unreliable and Internet downtime poses difficulties, it inevitably leads to frustration, anger, and distress, which can decrease motivation and increase rates of attrition.[12]

Asynchronous learning, on the other hand, allows for flexible online access and provides students with the opportunity to download course materials and participate in delayed group discussion at their own convenience.[9] Indeed, student learning and outcomes improve if learning proceeds in digestible chunks. This allows the individual to participate in modules of study using their own time frame rather than adhering to that of others.[13] Asynchronous learning, therefore, has the potential to play a vital role in promoting self-determination and responsible time management among adult learners.

Preparing for the Role of eModerator

The challenge that eModeration can present to nurse educators who are new and relatively unfamiliar with

an online teaching role is manifold. A certain degree of pedagogical shift is a likely outcome for educators who teach online, which may contrast with the tried and tested methods associated with successful face-to-face teaching in the classroom. It is highly likely that long-held assumptions, which over time have supported traditional methods of teaching, will need to be re-evaluated and possibly readjusted. However, there are no distinct boundaries between face-to-face and online methods of teaching. Although some aspects of the 2 pedagogies do overlap, the suggested approaches that follow should help to support the practice of teaching online.

An Understanding of Self by the eModerator

An appreciation of 'self' and how this relates to and can influence teaching online should be considered in the eModerating role. Critical reflective processes are a useful manner of scrutinising the concept of self in terms of examining one's own beliefs, values, and approaches as an adult educator. Critical reflection leads one to question and illuminate established patterns of teaching related to one's own practice, which can subsequently help in adjusting or adopting an educational paradigm relevant and highly applicable to CML.[7]

Providing Effective Leadership

An understanding of self also leads the eModerator to evaluate his leadership role within the context of CML. For example, it is important that leadership style be one that facilitates group interaction and activity instead of one that dominates and censors student input. In this context, effective leadership attempts to draw on the strength of the group and encourage an atmosphere of collegiality that endorses the sharing of ideas, opinions, and exchange of information. Leadership also needs to include good preparation and organisational skills, ensuring that timelines are achievable and appropriate to the Web-based learning environment.[14]

Addressing the Needs of the Adult Learner

Central to the success of CML is the utilisation of teaching methods that promote and highly value student involvement, as this is where the adult student engages in problem-centred activities, critical reasoning, and reflective actions. It is important that eModeration fosters a climate that stimulates intellectual challenge and exchange at a level appropriate to the needs of the adult learner.[15] Therefore, the process of teaching and learning online should be collaborative and highly interactive. An educator should expect adult students to share responsibility for their own learning and outcomes, be resourceful and self-directed, research selected content areas, and participate in peer-learning workgroups as a means to stimulate interest and develop understanding.

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

The eModerator must foster a supportive environment to help maintain student retention and course satisfaction. However, moderators should also be aware of the effects of 'flaming' and how this can impede the flow of open and honest communication within the group.[14] Nevertheless, online learning will generate a social perspective to the educational process, if it provides a safe and friendly environment.[14] Ideally, an effective eModerator, ever mindful of contexts where criticism is warranted, conveys messages that are constructive and helpful rather than blaming and belittling. For this reason, the use of online communication, which is devoid of non-verbal content, requires care and tact to avoid misinterpretations of its intent.

Encouraging a Shared Sense of Community

Building a sense of community with online groups is helpful in the absence of face-to-face teaching.[14] In the past, when evaluating their online learning experiences, students have often cited feelings of isolation as an issue. An effective way of overcoming this is to promote a sense of belonging, which will help establish group identity and cohesion, and will in turn reduce student dissatisfaction and attrition. A learning community can also, over time, develop its own cultural identity that reflects conventions or norms that in turn becomes embedded with rules, protocols, and processes. These will often help to reinforce group values, such as mutual support, encouraging respect, genuineness, cohesiveness, and maintaining focus.

Facilitating Online Learning

If the goal of education is to be transformative through processes that invoke change in the adult student, then the eModerator must create opportunities that situate learning as an intrinsically rewarding activity. Educational change will occur in any, or all, of the recognised domains of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor functionality. Enforcing and heeding a few key aspects can positively enhance CML.

Netiquette

This is a strategy that involves the student group in protocol development to establish etiquette for accepted behaviour during interactive online sessions. Students experience a greater sense of empowerment by contributing their own ideas to this discussion. Individuals will feel less threatened communicating online if these conventions are accepted and adopted by the group. Once protocol norms are established, group behaviour should be continually monitored by checking whether participants are adhering to the agreed communication conventions when online.

Learning Expedition

Informing students of the teaching and learning experiences that they will be expected to engage in is also helpful. This can reduce ambiguity that occasionally permeates online teacher-learner role differentiation and expectation when compared with conventions usually anticipated in face-to-face teaching. For example, introducing online tasks that are highly interactive, or even provocative, significantly decreases reliance on didactic, teacher-centred instruction, thus promoting more equitable collegiate relationships. Although effective eModeration provides adult students with a clear sense of direction and focus, it is also about being tolerant and accepting of the views of others while remaining approachable, behaving consistently, demonstrating flexibility, and avoiding being overly rigid or pedantic.

It is useful to gauge the baseline subject knowledge of the student group as soon as practicable to ensure that a meaningful educational passage takes place. Therefore, it might be necessary to adjust course modules, review subject complexity, or make certain that content is realistically paced and assessment appropriately synchronised with learning objectives.

Constructing Meaningful Learning

Adopting a collegiate approach towards teaching and learning increases the level of equity between educators and adult students, occasionally to the extent that some role reversal is consciously experienced. In terms of the adult learner, this reduces hierarchical barriers so often seen and experienced in educational contexts. The richness of interchange that transpires tends to influence the learning of both the student and the teacher, which supports the legitimacy of adult education as an empowering and egalitarian process that informs and promotes individuality, personal autonomy, and self development. However, as it is not always easy for students to accept and adopt an equitable teacher-learner relationship, the eModerator has to be cognisant and flexible about differences in individual learning styles and preferences.

Careful attention to course structure offers greater direction to students who, initially, might otherwise feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information and tasks expected of them.[14] Structure allows students to systematically work through previously established patterns of study and coping by adopting personal survival strategies associated with anticipated learning demands, seeking out resources, and planning assignments.

Timing can be critical, particularly when introducing new and demanding subject matter, as it helps to maintain focus, increase motivation, and stimulate input from students. As the course unfolds, smaller cooperative groups can be formed, each of which can be assigned responsibility for leading interactive online discussion subjects. Here, group productivity and success is facilitated if individual roles are allocated to each of its members as, for example, coordinator, subject initiator, researcher, and critical evaluator. These group roles may also rotate as each new task is attempted.

Other helpful strategies than can be used to assist meaningful learning are as follows:
- setting up challenging tasks where students can achieve realistic outcomes through reasonable expectations and manageable timelines
- providing clear instruction and regular prompts to reduce the ambiguity sometimes experienced by students in the initial stages of the course, particularly when acquainting themselves with unfamiliar subject matter
- inviting formative feedback from students as a means of periodically evaluating course quality, structure, and content
- using humour within the learning environment is hugely facilitative to group behaviour as it enables rapport and functional relationships to be quickly established, thus reducing tension and anxiety often associated with new group formation.

Promoting a Learning Community

The formation of collaborative interactive groups not only encourages shared learning activities but also

promotes mutuality in terms of its members exchanging course materials and resources. This approach cultivates community acceptance where mutual support and respect for others becomes a predominant feature of group activity, which is far more preferable to a highly competitive and potentially hostile and confronting environment. A collaborative atmosphere can be exceedingly productive as there is a tendency for collaboration to engender inspiration and creativity where there is a culture of shared learning interests within groups. However, some caution is urged where there is an expectation of individual assignments based on original work from students due to the ever-present possibility of plagiarism occurring.

Creating an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, learning community can be achieved by drawing individuals into group discussion. An interactive learning environment will often take shape by posting stimulating and challenging questions online to evoke new threads of conversation. Monitoring student conferencing also helps to gauge levels of participation, bearing in mind that involvement amplifies understanding and augments the construction of subject knowledge. Silent students who do not participate are sometimes labelled as lurkers, but they are usually individuals who are shy and reluctant to interact, needing more time to take part in online discussion. Gentle coaxing and encouragement appears to have a better outcome than direct pressure or criticism. However, where a lack of participation is perceived as probable laziness, this can be effectively addressed through individual contact with the student using personal e-mail postings to clarify assumptions.

Acknowledging the involvement and contribution made by group participants, by providing appropriate comments and timely feedback, is an effective strategy. Although time consuming, it is exceedingly affirming to students and the regular contact helps to maintain momentum for continued participation and growth throughout the duration of online learning.

Managing Technology

Arguably, one of the least endearing qualities of online technology is its inherent predictability to fail the user at the most unpredictable times. Technological problems, such as hardware failures, software conflicts, power outages, modem dropouts, download delays, and virus contaminations can be hugely problematical, confounding, and frustratingly inconvenient. Therefore, developing good working relationships with information technology departments responsible for providing technical support for Web-based learning platforms cannot be overstated. Technology failure is non-discriminatory, in that it will affect both academic staff and students alike. Experience shows that where there is a reliance on technology to deliver courses, if something can possibly go wrong, it most surely will and, in such circumstances, patience is indeed a virtue. When students experience these difficulties, prompt empathic support should be extended to help resolve their technology issues.

Conclusion

Clearly, CML is increasingly being used to augment the education of nursing students. Importantly, nurse educators are using this medium as an appropriate resource to address issues associated with course access and information retrieval from remote locations. However, the effectiveness and success of online learning is largely contingent upon educators embracing this added role dimension, which may require some adaptation to unfamiliar teaching technology and the adoption of a reconfigured pedagogy.

Web-based learning also raises other pressing issues for nursing education that warrants additional consideration, preferably through empirical research. For example, hidden curriculum factors are important as a source of implied learning that takes place in tertiary institutions, but does not form part of the formal or explicit programme of study. There is a pressing need for nurse educators to discover more about the implied learning that takes place in CML, and whether there are similarities and differences in the ethical and cultural values and norms that students develop over time.

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