

THE SITUATION OF CONSTRUCTING A BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH TO MEET WITH STUDENT DIVERSITY IN NURSING; AN INSIGHT INTO THE LITERATURE

Ginny Henderson

Griffith University, School of Nursing & Midwifery, Nathan Campus
Brisbane / Australia
g.henderson@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

The historical nature of nursing has bore witness to the evolution that has seen its rise from a traditional industry educated approach to the current scholarly teachings of today's professional nurse (McBride, 1999). It is an occupation that attracts a diverse range of people who all come with varying ideas of what it is to be a nurse, demonstrate unique attitudes towards learning, hold different education styles and needs as well as having a number of fundamental outside lifestyle commitments (Felder & Brent, 2005; Gallagher, 2007; Gaynor, et al., 2007; Robinson, 2009).

The traditional role of a face-to-face mode of learning can be argued as being less desirable amongst this particular population and their diversity calls for Higher Educational establishments to offer a more flexible approach to learning and teaching.

The overall concepts are situated within a constructivist approach which is said to offer guidance in explaining how students draw from different sensory processes and social and cultural influences, in order to construct meaning and argues how the milieu which is blended learning, is an ideal platform to offering flexibility for Students, the wider University Communities and the Nursing Profession in meeting with the increasing diversity and enabling a more significant learning experience through engagement of this diverse nursing student body (McLoughlin & Luca, 2002; Oliver, Herrington, & Reeves, 2006; Rovai, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978).

This paper presents an insight from the literature that supports a notion of constructing authentic learning situations using interactive applications suggestive of helping to contextualise students' experiences, in particular within a theory driven nursing research course. It explores the opportunity for uptake of alternative information and computer literacy skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly technologically driven workforce and argues for the value of engaging learners in learning through an interactive experience.

Keywords - Blended Learning, Constructivism, Student Engagement, Nursing.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nursing, historically has been a form of occupation influenced from a variety of health related disciplines (Donaldson & Crowley, 2002). It attracts a diverse range of people who all come with varying ideas about what it is to be a nurse (Gallagher, 2007). Students entering into the profession do have different styles of learning. They also experience different learning needs and have a variety of outside lifestyle commitments.

Many approaches have been suggested as applicable when addressing the differing learning styles and needs of students. Blended learning is one such an approach that enables the integration of face-to-face contact with online interactions (Bonk & Graham, 2006).

It provides a flexible platform which aids in addressing diversity seen in students' learning styles and need through the integration of interactive online techniques with more traditional teaching strategies (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Holley & Dobson, 2008).

Constructing authentic learning situations using interactive applications along with traditional teaching strategies may assist in meeting with the diverse learning styles and needs of the nursing student

bodies and seek to engage them in constructing their own contextualised experiences and succeed in lifelong learning both in University and their wider clinical nursing practice.

The commentary presented in this paper offers some insight into the changing nature of nursing through a shift in its educational practices. It illustrates the variety of learning styles and needs of students attracted to the Nursing profession

In addressing this diversity the paper lends itself to presenting some of ideas highlighted in the Nursing and Education literature which aims are to provide students with opportunities to construct authentic learning situations through adopting a blended learning approach in learning and teaching.

2 THE CHANGING NATURE OF NURSING

Nursing, historically has been a form of occupation influenced from a variety of health related disciplines (Donaldson & Crowley, 2002). It has often been referred to by the wider population as either an art or science and this debate has continued throughout the last few decades (McAllister, Madsen, Godden, Greenhill, & Reed, 2009). The attraction that binds the two opposing poles within this somewhat infantile profession may be in danger of losing its roots however as (McAllister, et al., 2009) proposes the development of new pedagogy in the realms of nursing history can resurrect this.

Nursing presently attracts a diverse range of people who all come with varying ideas about what it is to be a nurse (Gallagher, 2007). Its education was previously embedded in the industry itself rather than being immersed in the more scholarly environments of its time (McBride, 1999). During the last century the education of nurses saw a shift from the more traditional hospital-based training which has slowly been eroded as the sole provider of nurse training, into higher education establishments (Francis & Humphreys, 1999). This shift has spanned different continents and whilst there may be key variation in their overall structure and funding arrangements, the call for a more defined nursing role through changes in social movements of the time and the thirst for knowledge and respect has brought about a unified directional change in education requirements, methods and standards (Lusk, Russell, Rodgers, & Wilson-Barnett, 2001).

An increase in the global attraction of Nursing as a career has not been without its challenges and the changing nature of nursing has seen a shift in the overall working profession, the students' individual and collective characteristics entering into this profession, their overall style of learning and the approach to teaching needs to develop (Robinson, 2009).

As the aging worldwide population become more knowledgeable about their health care needs, their demand for better quality care continues. The plea also for more health care workers, in particular nurses has been suggested (Daly, Jill Macleod Clark, Lancaster, Orchard, & Bednash, 2008) however this has not detracted from the appeal for the professional nurse in modern day practice to be skilled, knowledgeable, critical thinkers capable of providing optimal care to their patients through evidence-based practice being heralded (Simpson & Courtney, 2007).

The overall expectations of a modern day nurse are diverse and this diversity can be witnessed in the unique clinical practices of individuals, in their practical applications, attitude to learning and also their educational needs and styles (Gaynor, et al., 2007; Wright, Frew, & Hatcher, 1998). There is also a complex mixture of learning experiences that take place for students whether it be on campus, en-route to part-time or full-time employment, in the workplace, or in Halls of University residence or in homes (Felder & Brent, 2005). The emergence of University priorities in meeting student diversity has embraced a vision which looks to attract and retain a growing population of quality students offering a unique and individualised learning experience through innovative approaches in its' teaching and learning environments (Griffith, 2005).

The ability to access higher education regardless of the diversity seen amongst students has been argued by (Dziuban, Moskal, & Hartman, 2005) who identified that despite differences in educational dimensions of students both the engagement and interactive value of this mode of learning was sought after and seeks out a greater audience. (Main, 2004) continues with this perspective on engagement through interaction further explores the use of virtual environments to foster students' learning and teaching experiences. However caution was expressed by (Dziuban, et al., 2005) when they highlighted attention to the mix in blended learning should be considered in order to meet the needs of the intended audience otherwise there runs a risk of dissatisfaction and potentially disengagement.

2.1 CONTEXTUALISING LEARNING SITUATIONS THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING

The blended learning approach which seeks to meet the growing diverse needs of students is blended learning, enables the integration of face-to-face contact with online interactions (Bonk & Graham, 2006). It provides a flexible platform which aids in addressing diversity seen in students' learning styles and need through the integration of interactive online techniques with more traditional teaching strategies (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Holley & Dobson, 2008).

With many Universities operating in highly competitive international markets where external pressures are increasing to accept large cohorts of students, in some cases without the facilities or resources blended learning not only enhances the student experience and meets the diverse demographic and geographic population it also offers the university as a whole, a flexible cost effective way of delivering high quality education and meeting student needs (Falconer & Littlejohn, 2007). This essentially aims at extending University's quality assurance frameworks to support blended learning approaches and meet with student demands.

(Woo & Kimmick, 2000) proposed that alongside the more technological aspects of enabling flexibility for students when accessing essential course information, blended learning also offers greater student satisfaction in their learning opportunities and overall experiences and thus aids in addressing these issues inherent within disparate cohort of Nursing students (Smith, 2010). Caution is expressed however in the need to be clear about what it is that's to be achieved, how it's to be achieved and the best approach to achieve this and should also consider all users needs in order to successfully implement a blended approach to teaching and learning (Harris, Connolly, & Feeny, 2009).

Within nursing and in particular the delivery of a theory-driven nursing research course, the need for a flexible and adaptable approach to assist in meeting student diversity of learning styles and needs is paramount. The historical nature of disengagement in the teaching of such material has been suggested as being suited to the blended environment as it encourages the student to interact with their subject and in a sense gain ownership of their learning (Heaton-Shrestha, May, & Burke, 2009).

The benefits of engaging in a blended environment can assist in the acceptance of new technologies and enhance the experience of students (Johnson, et al., 2010). Also engaging in this environment can support students in their application of information and communication technologies and with the age of the virtual and electronic world upon us, the need for students to engage in these technological platforms is vital. Supporting students in this is seen as helping gain lifelong skills which they may transfer into the workplace (Ward & Moule, 2007).

There is also a deeper need when thinking about utilising the tools of blended learning in order to engage students in developing proficiency in computer and information technology literacy skills. The call for the Nursing profession to be competent in both their practice and their ability to ensure accurate documentation in clear and legible forms is one of upmost importance and also one that requires a level of information literacy (Haigh, 2004; Hellesø & Ruland, 2001; Langowski, 2005; McNeil, Elfrink, Beyea, Pierce, & Bickford, 2006). There is an argument that requests standards to be set and skills to be acquired so as to ensure accuracy as well as continued development of skills (Barnard, Nash, & O'Brien, 2005; Kennedy, 2005).

A key aim of producing critical readers who can engage in the literature and utilise skills which enable them to interpret and integrate this newly acquired knowledge into their practice is expressed in such an undergraduate nursing research course. However the historical reputation that precedes this is one of an instructive, stagnant and unnecessary activity that is required in order for students to achieve their overall aim of gaining a degree certificate.

It is not necessarily one of engagement in a topic that both challenges and shares in the development of knowledge in this group of learners. The attempt to go beyond the superficial didactic style and seek to engage the student in developing their learning through a consultation process guiding learning and attributing to a deeper style of learner is preferable as to incur a more lifelong approach to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Vandever & Norton, 2005).

Carefully designed blended learning seeks to engage learners in developing and growing their knowledge and skills in their undertaking of a theory driven nursing research course. The requirements of knowledgeable critical thinkers conversant in a more technological language than their predecessors is more apparent in today's professional nurse and therefore needs to be embedded in overarching learning and teaching outcomes. The need to reach out to all sectors of

learning styles in order to engage students, particularly returning to their studies in the nursing arena is pointed out by (Smith, 2010).

Contextualising the learning environment is a way in which the opportunity for authentic learning can be achieved and may offer a path through which any potential disengagement problems may be overcome. (Oliver, et al., 2006) illustrated this idea through their suggestions of meeting educational needs by contextualising learning situations and providing supportive environments and assistance to learners. The applicability of this notion in a nursing arena is expressed in (Twomey, 2004) efforts which view this more modern style to learning and teaching of knowledge and clinical skills as needing to be embedded in sound theoretical principles of core pedagogical approaches to both online and clinical nurse education. There is a strong sense of responsibility however to not only recognise the styles and needs of students to ensure direction in teaching is geared appropriately but also to be prepared that not everything can be solved by blending the learning environment (Gill, 2006).

(DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002) offers the perspective of how constructivism can guide the use of blended learning in the education of students. Constructivism enables a lens through which guidance can be offered when seeking understanding of how students' knowledge can grow and develop through their pivotal involvement and drive towards building their own learning opportunities in a variety of educational situations (Rovai, 2004).

The need for student-centred learning to overcome its predecessor, the teacher centred approach in higher education lends itself to taking guidance from the constructivist style (Kala, Isaramalai, & Pohthong, 2009). Engaging students, through a learner centred approach can facilitate students to construct meaningful learning experiences. However attention to their own learning style and needs should be considered paramount (McLoughlin & Luca, 2002).

Achieving student learning outcomes and offering meaningful experiences that are not only constructed in confined environments of didactic style classrooms but are also conducted out with these settings is a fundamental focus when examining how students can reach their potential. (Wertsch, 1997) would argue that it is the social and cultural influences surrounding students which support and guide them in their acquisition of knowledge and that their ability to construct meaning from information is grounded in these influences.

(Von Glasersfeld, 2000) expanded this idea further and explained about how important it was for students to be responsible for their learning through enabling active participation. A belief suggested by (Vygotsky, 1978) over three decades ago was that constructivism may offer guidance to explaining how students draw from different sensory processes so that they are able to construct meaning and thus enable more significant learning opportunities to be devised.

By accepting this notion, and adapting our learning environments, particularly in theory driven nursing research courses, students may be able to construct their own learning experiences within a blended context and thus begin to engage in the content.

3 CONCLUSION

Assisting students to engage in constructing their own contextualised experiences and succeed in lifelong learning both in University and their wider clinical nursing practice is of great importance within both Higher Educational establishments and the Nursing profession.

The literature presented in this paper highlights to some degree the changing nature of nursing and its educational rise to the professional status it holds today through the introduction of a higher education pathway. It demonstrates that with the nursing profession itself attracting a diverse body of people each with an array of unique learning styles and needs their teaching and learning strategies need to be adapted.

The highly competitive educational market calls for University's to acclimatise to the needs of their students and provide meaningful learning experiences that both attract and retain their student population. Through adopting a blended approach to learning and teaching within an historically stagnant and rigid course students can have an opportunity to construct a meaningful learning experience and engage in a course fundamental to helping produce knowledgeable critical thinkers capable of implementing evidence into their practice.

Constructing authentic learning situations using interactive applications along with traditional teaching strategies may assist in meeting with the diverse learning styles and needs of student bodies and seek

to engage them in constructing their own contextualised experiences and succeed in lifelong learning both in University and their wider clinical nursing practice.

In the current market of meeting student diversity there is a strong need to undertake further research which explores the applicability and suitability in the use of innovative technologies to meet with students' varied learning needs and styles and addresses issues pertinent to adapting teaching strategies in the complex and competitive business of Higher Education.

References

- [1] Barnard, A., Nash, R., & O'Brien, M. (2005). Information literacy: developing lifelong skills through nursing education. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 44(11), 505-510.
- [2] Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university: what the student does* (3rd ed.). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- [3] Bonk, C., & Graham, C. (Eds.). (2006). *The handbook of blended learning: global perspectives, local designs* San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.
- [4] Daly, J., Jill Macleod Clark, D., Lancaster, J., Orchard, C., & Bednash, G. (2008). The Global Alliance for Nursing Education and Scholarship: Delivering a vision for nursing education. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 45(8), 1115-1117.
- [5] DeVries, R., Zan, B., Hildebrandt, C., Edmiaston, R., & Sales, C. (2002). *Developing constructivist early childhood curriculum: Practical principles and activities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- [6] Donaldson, S. K., & Crowley, D. M. (2002). The discipline of nursing In J. W. Kenney (Ed.), *Philosophical and theoretical perspectives for advanced nursing practice* (pp. 10-21). Sudbury M.A.: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
- [7] Dziuban, C., Moskal, P., & Hartman, J. (2005). Higher education, blended learning and the generations: knowledge is power-no-more. In J. Bourne & J. C. Moore (Eds.), *Elements of quality online education: engaging communities* (Vol. 6, pp. 85-100). Needham, MA: Sloan Centre for Online Education.
- [8] Falconer, I., & Littlejohn, A. (2007). Designing for blended learning, sharing and reuse. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31(1), 41 - 52.
- [9] Felder, R. M., & Brent, R. (2005). Understanding Student Differences. [Scholarly Article]. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 94(1), 57-72.
- [10] Francis, B., & Humphreys, J. (1999). Rationalisation and Professionalisation: A Comparison of the Transfer of Registered Nurse Education to Higher Education in Australia and the UK. *Comparative Education*, 35(1), 81-96.
- [11] Gallagher, P. (2007). Preconceptions and learning to be a nurse. *Nurse Education Today*, 27(8), 878-884.
- [12] Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95-105.
- [13] Gaynor, L., Gallasch, T., Yorkston, E., Stewart, S., Bogossian, F., Fairweather, C., et al. (2007). The future nursing workforce in Australia: baseline data for a prospective study of the profile, attrition rates and graduate outcomes in a contemporary cohort of undergraduates. *The Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing (Online)*, 25(2), 11-20.

- [14] Gill, G. K. (2006). *Managing challenges in an authentic learning environment: the case of the Teach-Learn Model*. Paper presented at the Engaging Pedagogies.
- [15] Griffith, A. (2005). *Academic Plan 3: Learning for success* - <http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/pdf/academic-plan-3-20071115.pdf>.
- [16] Haigh, J. (2004). Information technology in health professional education: why IT matters. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(7), 547-552.
- [17] Harris, P., Connolly, J., & Feeny, L. (2009). Blended learning: overview and recommendations for successful implementation. *Industrial and Commercial Training* 41(3), 155-163.
- [18] Heaton-Shrestha, C., May, S., & Burke, L. (2009). Student retention in higher education: what role for virtual learning environments? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33(1), 83 - 92.
- [19] Hellesø, R., & Ruland, C. M. (2001). Developing a module for nursing documentation integrated in the electronic patient record. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 10(6), 799-805.
- [20] Holley, D., & Dobson, C. (2008). Encouraging student engagement in a blended learning environment: the use of contemporary learning spaces. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 33(2), 139 - 150.
- [21] Johnson, N., List-Ivankovic, J., Eboh, W. O., Ireland, J., Adams, D., Mowatt, E., et al. (2010). Research and evidence based practice: Using a blended approach to teaching and learning in undergraduate nurse education. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 10(1), 43-47.
- [22] Kala, S., Isaramalai, S.-a., & Pohthong, A. (2009). Electronic learning and constructivism: A model for nursing education. *Nurse Education Today*, 30(1), 61-66.
- [23] Kennedy, D. M. (2005). Standards for online teaching: lessons from the education, health and IT sectors. *Nurse Education Today*, 25(1), 23-30.
- [24] Langowski, C. B. S. N. M. R. (2005). The Times They Are A Changing: Effects of Online Nursing Documentation Systems. *Quality Management in Health Care April/June*, 14(2), 121-125.
- [25] Lusk, B., Russell, L., Rodgers, & Wilson-Barnett, J. (2001). Preregistration Nursing Education in Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 40(5), 197-202.
- [26] Main, E. (2004). Student disengagement in higher education: two trend in technology. *Journal of Educational Media and Library Sciences*, 41(3), 337-349.
- [27] McAllister, M., Madsen, W., Godden, J., Greenhill, J., & Reed, R. (2009). Teaching nursing's history: A national survey of Australian Schools of Nursing, 2007-2008. *Nurse Education Today*, In Press, Corrected Proof.
- [28] McBride, A. B. (1999). Breakthroughs in nursing education: Looking back, looking forward. *Nursing Outlook*, 47(3), 114-119.
- [29] McLoughlin, C., & Luca, J. (2002). A learner-centred approach to developing team skills through web-based learning and assessment. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 33(5), 571-582.
- [30] McNeil, B. J., Elfink, V., Beyea, S. C., Pierce, S. T., & Bickford, C. J. (2006). Computer Literacy Study: Report of Qualitative Findings. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 22(1), 52-59.
- [31] Oliver, R., Herrington, J., & Reeves, T. C. (2006). Creating authentic learning environments through blended learning approaches. In C. J. Bonk & C. R. Graham (Eds.), *The handbook of blended learning: global perspectives, local designs*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.

- [32] Robinson, F. P. (2009). Servant teaching: the power and promise for nursing education. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, 6(1), Article 5.
- [33] Rovai, A. P. (2004). A constructivist approach to online college learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 79-93.
- [34] Simpson, E., & Courtney, M. (2007). The Development of a Critical Thinking Conceptual Model to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills in Middle-Eastern Nurses: A Middle-Eastern Experience. *The Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 25(1), 56-63.
- [35] Smith, A. (2010). Learning styles of Registered Nurses enrolled in an online nursing program. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 26(1), 49-53.
- [36] Twomey, A. (2004). Web-based teaching in nursing: lessons from the literature. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(6), 452-458.
- [37] Vandeveer, M., & Norton, B. (2005). From teaching to learning: theoretical foundations. In D. M. Billings & J. A. Halstead (Eds.), *Teaching in nursing: a guide for faculty* (2nd ed., pp. 231-281). Philadelphia: Saunders.
- [38] von Glasersfeld, E. (2000). Problems of constructivism. In L. P. Steffe & P. W. Thomson (Eds.), *Radical constructivism in action: building on the pioneering work of Ernst von Glasersfeld*. London, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.
- [39] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [40] Ward, R., & Moule, P. (2007). Supporting pre-registration students in practice: A review of current ICT use. *Nurse Education Today*, 27(1), 60-67.
- [41] Wertsch, J. V. (1997). *Vygotsky and the formation of the mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [42] Woo, M. A., & Kimmick, J. V. (2000). Comparison of internet versus lecture instructional methods for teaching nursing research. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 16(3), 132-139.
- [43] Wright, C. M., Frew, T. J., & Hatcher, D. (1998). Social and demographic characteristics of young and mature aged nursing students in Australian universities. *Nurse Education Today*, 18(2), 101-107.