

Narratives of Teaching, Learning, and Service in an Online Course

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## Abstract

This paper chronicles the service learning activities that surrounded the implementation of eight holistic approaches to chronic disease throughout the community served. Faculty facilitated independent practice related activities that brought knowledge to community agencies. Students, as a part of an online course, developed close relationships with community agencies and provided educational materials and teaching strategies. Systematic development and implementation of the holistic strategies was accomplished through research and reflective practice activities. The outcomes of this course were evidenced in educational materials such as brochures and teaching manuals developed specifically for each of the eight agencies that served a particular population of individuals with a chronic disease.

Teaching, learning, and service in a holistic online clinical nursing course involve accomplishing objectives, learning strategies, communication, discipline, and active participation. Facilitator and students engage in a teaching and learning process that includes community service learning through a holistic nursing approach. Holistic nursing engages the nurturing of the body, mind, and spirit of clients. Holistic nursing acknowledges the connection with the inner being and the relationships between client and caregiver that promote healing and alleviate human suffering. Students are able to obtain new knowledge and skills. The holistic nursing approach through caring and nurturing assists clients who are feeling helpless to cope with their disease process. Through a facilitator, graduate nursing students are guided with the use of information and resources and encouraged to participate and engage in personnel interviews in the community. Graduate nursing students learn through research and active participation. They are able to reach out to communities and provide information that leads to wellness. They have the opportunity to develop a teaching tool that enhances holistic nursing care for clients. The teaching and service learning incorporates a curriculum that fosters civic responsibility. Through active participation within the community this curriculum provides life learning experiences for graduate nursing students. This curriculum provides a beneficial learning process for graduate nursing students seeking a career. The following article discusses and narrates the processes learned and the knowledge gained in a holistic online clinical nursing course.

### **Service Learning in Nursing Education**

Service learning in a holistic online clinical nursing course is of significance to students because they have the opportunity to learn and at the same time bring wellness to communities and reduce mortality. Service learning is: centered on learning and teaching strategies, combines

community service, and applies the method of current health care instruction. Service learning enriches student's learning experiences and teaches social responsibility at a higher level providing education and guidance towards health promotion. Holistic online service learning is a philosophy and a method of instruction that provides a more personal client advocacy, responsibility, and a commitment to society. The holistic method of instruction allows students an opportunity to learn through experience and also provides service that helps meet the needs and demands of clients in the communities. John Dewey suggested that learning is accomplished through the interaction of knowledge and skills set forth by experience. Dewey stresses that the use of human intelligence through inquiry can promote solving actual problems (Jenkins, A. & Sheehey, P., 2009). Service learning in a holistic online clinical nursing course is part of a curriculum that contributes to solutions of real life problems and is beneficial to students seeking careers in nursing education as they engage more actively in the learning process.

Service learning within a holistic framework involves a curriculum that teaches caring for individuals in both mind and body, as well as nurturing the human spirit. This brings the concept of holism which is derived from the Greek word "holos" (Simpson, 1999). Holistic nursing uses assessment, intervention, and the evaluation process. Holistic nursing interventions bring a balance to the person by using modalities, healing arts, and therapies (Clark, C. C., 2004). Interventions are focused on client needs and responses and are intended to heal the whole person. Through this learning process, students are closely connected with their clients. Students and clients now strive for the same goals. Holistic nursing education recognizes that healthy individuals need emotional security and the experience of feeling valued and connected to others. Individuals can experience the capacity to learn and grow; and through Holistic nursing and service learning, students are empowered in caring learning communities calling forth the love

and potentials that students and teachers already possess (Miller, R., & Koegel, R., 2003). Through this type of learning process, communities are empowered, and clients are able to participate in their care. Clients also have the opportunity to learn, recognize, and identify with their own values and beliefs.

### **Holistic Nursing**

Holistic education is concerned with basic sources of meaning such as reconnecting each person to the context of the physical world, family, biosphere, and the local community that is rooted in a history and a place where culture has meaning (Miller, 2006). Holistic education not only gives instruction to students, but it provides meaning that relates to life experiences. Two principles connect people with holistic education. The first principle connects the person to the world and must start with the person. The second principle is that educators need to respond to the learner with an open inquiring mind and caring heart (Miller, 2006). Holistic education is distinguished from other teachings because of its spiritual orientation. It is a holistic way of thinking that everything exists in relationships. Holistic education nurtures the mind, body, and human spirit which nourishes a caring potential, helps foster partnerships between clients and students, and helps motivate the inner being.

### **Teaching and Learning in Online Environment**

Teaching and learning in an online environment involves communication, participation, discipline, and education between the educator and the student. Through this system educator and student are able to accomplish objectives, learning activities, active participation, and set goals required for that specific course. The process of teaching, learning, and service in a holistic online clinical nursing course provides students with a learning opportunity through active

participation of organized services that help meet a community's needs. It is through this teaching and learning process that students are able to combine academic curriculum and foster civic responsibility. Through life experiences, education and effective learning takes place. This teaching and learning process provides experiences for students in educational programs in universities. It is a beneficial learning process for students searching for a career. Learning incorporates instructional strategy that helps to engage students more actively within communities. Learning activities assist students in gaining new knowledge and learning new skills. Learning provides education for the public on disabilities, and fosters advocacy for civil rights of human beings with special needs (Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009).

### **Clinical Nursing Education in an Online Environment**

Online nursing education is convenient and effective. Although some wonder how it is possible to complete a nursing degree online without clinical rotations, the truth is clinical rotations completed in a previous nursing program satisfy the clinical aspects of the next degree (Medi-Smart.com, 2009). Besides, in many cases, students are also assigned to traditional face-to-face settings such as clinical assignments as well as provided with simulations of real life situations. These simulations guide students to learn and practice new skills which they will later apply to real-life situations (Benson, 2003). Students working full-time can enroll in an online master's degree nursing program and have the flexibility of completing class assignments at their convenience. Students can work late or early hours, between traveling or between family responsibilities and working schedules. Participants of online or distance education have more of a self-discipline challenge than students with traditional campus courses (Payne & Johnson, 2005). There may be more reading required than in a traditional course as well as weekly discussion postings with a weekly deadline submission. While this requires students to be better

time managers, online students have easier access to professors through e-mail or phone calls for any concerns or questions. An online environment is an instructor-facilitated learning environment, and is also an environment where students learn from each other's discussion responses, group writing projects, and each other's feedbacks which provide students with a higher-level learning (Benson, 2003).

## **Narratives of Teaching and Learning**

### *Faculty*

I am a board certified advanced holistic nurse and I teach in a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) program. I was an early adopter of teaching technologies that include online course delivery. Although we do have an online Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at my university our MSN program is taught in varying degrees of online implementation. At this time I am still amazed at the number of colleagues that refute the possibility of engaging in meaningful education for nurses in an online environment. My goals for the Holistic Approaches to Chronic Disease was to offer the course 100% online as a clinical course that engaged the student in service learning. Objectively this was possible in my eyes and the design and development of the course was not difficult. My concern in an endeavor of this sort is student engagement. I did not want students to simply be going through the motions for a grade with the community partners hoping for so much more.

My hopes for the course were soon realized and went far beyond what I might have dreamed. Having built reflective practice into all my courses I was able to see, through the student blogs and message boards, that students were becoming immersed in their projects. Every student engaged, as a leader, their community in helping some aspect of a chronic disease

through alternative modalities. Each facility partnered with their student and developed a relationship that promised to last long after the clinical course was over.

In my long tenure as a member of the nursing faculty, I have engaged students in a variety of community projects. I have seen many classes of students develop leadership projects that are implemented in the community setting, but this small class of 8 students was different. The personal engagement that was afforded by a holistic approach to both the class and the project seemed to propel the students to a self-empowerment that extended beyond the class. When students are encouraged to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning a transformation occurs. Student centered learning allows the student to make decisions and engage in best practices in teaching and learning in a project that is self-directed. This was the basis for the empowerment that became ownership and responsibility for the perceived need for their project.

Student response to the course was good. Several students had extensive plans to continue working with their targeted population and facility and others had plans to reach out to other similar facilities with their project. Many students express a deep satisfaction from engaging in their project. Some were moved by their own ability to make such an impact on the well-being of their clients. From my own perspective I was left moved by the impact of just 8 students who in turn impacted 8 different health care facilities in our community in a lasting way.

### ***Student A***

I am a geriatric nurse and I work in a geriatric nursing setting. I enrolled in a graduate program so that I could increase my knowledge, skills, and advance my nursing career. The graduate program offered a holistic special topics online course and the assignment was to

develop a learning tool on a chronic disease. My area of interest was pain management in cancer clients. After I interviewed and explained to the nurse case manager my concern for a holistic approach in pain management, she became interested in the topic and agreed that there was more to be learned. Through my research I developed an informational brochure that provided holistic approaches on pharmacological and non pharmacological interventions. These interventions included: guided imagery, meditation, relaxation techniques, yoga, medication, and other treatment modalities. I presented this brochure to the case manager as soon as it was completed. We went over the information and she stated that some of the holistic modalities were already in motion, but there were other holistic interventions that could be helpful to these clients. She agreed that the informational brochure would improve the quality of nursing care that would be provided for these clients.

Creating this informational brochure in this holistic online nursing course helped me to increase my knowledge and skills on how to assess, plan, intervene, and evaluate pain in clients. This holistic nursing course was 100% online and was an educational and gratifying experience. I feel that it brought me closer to humanity. I was able to communicate this knowledge with fellow colleagues and instructor on the discussion board of the online course. This online holistic course gave me the opportunity to incorporate service learning in my nursing education and reach out to a community of individuals in need. Through these holistic approaches other health providers can also gain the knowledge to provide comfort and quality of life to our clients.

### ***Student B***

I am a post partum nurse and I work at a medical center. I enrolled in graduate school in order to gain advanced and specialized knowledge that I can impart to the younger generation of nurses. I chose the Holistic Approach to Chronic Disease course to gain knowledge that I did not

have and to develop skills that will help me implement this approach.

I chose diabetes as my topic of chronic diseases. Since we do not have a cure for diabetes at this time, my reason for choosing this topic is to learn how to rightfully approach diabetes from a holistic point of view. On our unit, we get pregnant women who have gestational type I or type II diabetes. I am also quite sympathetic to the population who not only are affected by diabetes but actually do not have access to the traditional methods of diabetes management. The holistic approach to diabetes management may be one of the few options available to this population. I chose a well known medical center to implement my project. I called the diabetes educator (Nurse Lily) to set up a time to meet with her. During my interview with Nurse Lily, she told me that the diabetes center does not teach or practice holistic nursing, but the center's education focus is on proven medical knowledge.

My interview with Nurse Lily, along with the various studies done on holistic medicine opened my eyes to the importance of this aspect of chronic disease management. I was able to develop a brochure on the different holistic approaches to diabetes management. I presented my brochures to nurse Lily, who said "I like the entire pamphlet, it shows life in its natural state; my clients will be happy to receive them."

While the traditional medications and procedures are still given more precedence by doctors and health care professionals, the benefits of the alternative and holistic treatments should not be so quickly ignored. The knowledge that I have acquired as a result of taking the holistic class, using a service approach, has empowered me to speak confidently to clients, peers and family about the holistic approach to diabetes management. I learned that "nine out of ten cases of type II diabetes could be prevented if clients exercised more, ate better, and adopted other healthy behaviors" and that a simple exercise like walking for 30 minutes a day, four to

five days a week is all that is necessary to begin good health practices. (Clark, 2004). Clark also noted that breastfeeding infants actually protect the infants from developing diabetes in later years (Clark 2004). I also learned that alternative medicines include prayers, spiritual practices, herbal therapies, and special diets (Kessler, 2001). While alternative methods may be more natural for the system to process than the more traditional medical treatments, I have found that adopting a lifestyle that protects against this highly preventable disease is definitely the best path to choose.

### *Student C*

I am a registered nurse and teach introduction to health as well as basic health professional skills at a community college. My best friend suggested and encouraged me to start our graduate studies together and I immediately agreed to her excellent suggestion. I decided to continue my graduate studies to gain knowledge and expertise needed to teach nursing students. When the holistic nursing course was offered, I was thrilled about the educational experience I would gain. For my holistic online course, I was interested in learning more about holistic approaches for cancer patients. I interviewed two nursing personnel, one at a hospital setting and one from a hospice setting who currently worked with cancer clients. The intent was to learn about the extent of holistic nursing care at these settings. My first impression after learning about my assignment was that I could not possibly have much to teach the nursing personnel currently practicing and who were evidently more knowledgeable than this graduate nursing student. I began my research on current alternative treatments for cancers of the digestive tract. I chose to do research on cancer since cancer is such a painful and difficult disease and clients suffer emotionally and painfully during sometimes long battles with cancer. I was hoping to learn about holistic alternative modalities that would benefit patients suffering from digestive tract cancers

other than chemotherapy, ginger lozenges, warm baths, music, walks, laughter, pet therapy, juices, and tea tree oil modalities currently used.

Through my research, I created a teaching brochure which encouraged and emphasized calmness and invited healing. The alternative therapies that have been reported beneficial to cancer patients included noninvasive body-mind-spirit therapies such as: relaxation, yoga, acupressure, acupuncture, Ayurveda, Reiki healing, herbs and supplements, affirmation, and naturopathy. While my holistic modalities information seemed very interesting and impressive to both nurses previously interviewed, the nursing personnel determined these alternative measures were not beneficial for their clients with end stage disease but would consider using these holistic approaches in their practice.

The online holistic nursing course provided me an in-depth knowledge of holistic nursing which is a newer and more complete level of nursing care. Clark (2004) described holistic nursing as "embracing interventions that focus on healing the whole person." Besides learning about a variety of alternative treatments practiced around the world, I found these noninvasive body-mind-spirit approaches of healing and caring for clients inviting, interesting and incredibly wonderful information. Holistic nursing has proven to be beneficial to clients suffering from cancer and this approach can enhance and promote a higher quality of care with greater positive outcomes for all other cancer clients. The online holistic nursing course increased my knowledge of holistic nursing and this awesome approach can give clients more hope and one never knows how much this hope can turn around a client's life for a better outcome.

## **Conclusion**

As online graduate nurses, the online holistic course was an educational experience. The service learning experience at the community level launched an independent and learning

experience beyond what we imagined. We increased our knowledge on holistic nursing and shared current modalities to enhance client comfort as well as made nursing personnel more aware of holistic approaches that lead to wellness of body, mind, and spirit. The development of our teaching brochures empowered each of us to incorporate more holistic interventions in our nursing practice. As a result of this online holistic course, we have learned that holistic approach through service learning could be used to research other diseases other than the three we researched. This increased our knowledge of both the traditional and holistic aspects of many other diseases.

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