STUDENT PRESENCE AND FACULTY AVAILABILITY IN FULLY ONLINE COURSES: IS ALIGNMENT REQUISITE?

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ABSTRACT

Distance students consider online faculty availability and immediacy to be very important. Understanding student course usage is imperative to be able to align with their needs. The results of daily course usage by fully online nursing students enrolled in three separate clinical courses on an LPN to BSN track illustrate a clear pattern of extraordinarily consistent usage over six semesters for each course with remarkable consistency between courses. As an aggregate group, students spend roughly the same amount of time each day of the week using their LMS except Sunday, which shows roughly twice the usage as other days. Therefore, matching faculty availability and immediacy to times of higher student activity on the LMS should be considered.

Keywords: faculty availability, course usage, faculty presence, online courses

INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, there has been continual, sustained growth in online education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), by Fall 2014, there were 5,750,417, or 28.5%, of undergraduate students enrolled in an online course. Furthermore, 2,824,334, or 14.0%, of these students were enrolled in exclusively distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Disciplines that routinely require face-to-face interaction due to clinical, experiential learning have also stepped into the online educational landscape. In particular, nursing education has pushed forward seeking opportunities in online education. For the most part, this has included graduate level programs (MSN, DNP) and completion programs (RN to BSN). Much less common is an online option for the LPN to BSN echelon. Regardless, the rationale behind this choice is similar to all others. The online format allows greater flexibility for adults with time commitments, such as work and/or family responsibilities, to have access to a quality education regardless of their geographical location or their institution’s. This provides these individuals with a learning opportunity that they may not otherwise have.

Although online learning offers students 24/7 access to their courses, there is a separation and distance between instructor and learner. This psychological and communications space is known as transactional distance (Moore, 1997). As students assimilate into this learning modality, they expect faculty to be present and available during this “all hours” time frame and to align their online faculty presence to the students’ learning satisfaction (Kang & Im, 2013; Ke, 2010). According to LaBarbera (2013), “students perceived sense of connectedness with the instructor was significantly related to their satisfaction with the course” (p. 218). Arbaugh (2010) determined that teacher presence and instructor immediacy behaviors were positively associated with students’ perception of learning in online graduate courses. Orso and Doolittle (2011) also note that students believe communication, availability, and compassion to be the most important
characteristics of a quality online instructor. Compassion aligns closely with the concept of caring, the basis and philosophical foundation of nursing. Thus, this should be an implicit element of online nursing courses. “An instructor’s competent presence online maintains student engagement, offers encouragement, and sets the expectation and climate for high achieving community members who learn together in an equitable culture” (Young & Bruce, 2011, p. 227). Based on the literature, it is apparent that instructional immediacy behaviors, such as availability, presence, communication, and compassion, serve as elements to reduce transactional distance.

These variables, particularly availability, are ever present in students’ expectations of faculty accessing their course and responding to student communications. Bailie (2015) found that half of faculty surveyed believed they should access their online course once a day excluding weekends as compared to 25% of surveyed students who found these parameters to be sufficient. Likewise, 20% of faculty believed they should access at least once a day, seven days a week, as compared to 37.5% of students who affirmed this to be adequate. Chang, Hurst, and McLean (2016) noted that 46% of their student respondents had the expectation that faculty would return a response within hours of receipt of their email. In alignment with this notion, Sull (2014) believes faculty “checking but once a day is a minimalist approach that can miss important student items and have students feeling you are not actively involved in the course” (p. 50).

In regard to communication, students are interested in a timely, informative response from their faculty (Bailie, 2015), and online students feel that email is a preferred and effective means to communicate with course faculty (Chang, Hurst, & McLean, 2015). Albeit, “given students report greatest use of email to communicate with instructors, students often expect an instant response” (Elbeck & Song, 2011, p. 54). Orso and Doolittle (2011) also found that students expected quick responses from their faculty. Bailie (2015) found that among education students, the majority of faculty and students believe a 24-hour time frame was acceptable, though approximately a fourth believed a 12-hour time frame to be best. In a previous study of experienced online students, 52% of participants expected faculty to respond to emails within 12 hours of receipt (Bailie, 2014). Plante and Asselin (2014) also note that “faculty messages that are respectful, positive, encouraging, timely, and frequent add to feelings of social presence and the reciprocal feelings of caring among students” (p. 222). Although there are multiple means of instant communication, students likely favor email as most institutions provide students with a school email and faculty promote and expect course communications to run through a legitimate email channel.

Of note are the gender differences regarding communicative needs in the online environment. According to Christen, Kelly, Fall, and Snyder (2014), “females rely more on interactive and cohesive messages” (p. 31). Therefore, it may be reasonable to assume that females may also request from their professor communicative behaviors that enhance interactivity and feelings of cohesiveness. Cohesive communication contains vocatives and phatics to create and maintain interconnection (Christen et al., 2014). Vocatives embrace the use of inclusive pronouns (we, us) and/or the name of the other communicator, whereas phatic communication incorporates the use of inquiries or comments on trivial matters such as the weather (Christen et al., 2014). In addition, female students value faculty participation and like having various ways to contact faculty (Gonzalez-Gomez, Guardiola, Rodriguez, & Alonso, 2012).

Based on the demographics on the LPN to BSN nursing completion program for which data are presented, the gender factor is significant as the student body is 90.3% female. As such, faculty teaching female-dominated courses need to thoughtfully consider their communicative behaviors so they align with need and immediacy. The LPN to BSN program is also a prelicensure, undergraduate curriculum. Christen et al. (2014) note that undergraduates prefer more computer-mediated instructional immediacy, which refers to “instructional communicative behavior displayed through CMC [computer mediated communication] that makes students feel physically or psychologically closer to their instructors” (p. 38).

PURPOSE

Delivering quality online education to prelicensure undergraduate nursing students
incorporates the challenge of providing best practices in regard to caring behaviors and social presence to enhance student learning and success (Plante & Asselin, 2014). In acknowledgment of this, student presence is also an important variable to consider. Having a window into student presence via course activity reports that are available through the Blackboard learning management system (LMS) can theoretically portray daily student presence within a course over days, weeks, and semesters. Given this information, is there an assumption that faculty availability may be seen as a greater necessity on higher activity days? Is the typical Monday through Friday schedule a sufficient faculty presence for online students? Or is an expanded, seven-day schedule of faculty availability better suited to match student presence on their course LMS? As a means to answer these questions, the purpose of this study is to identify times and days of course usage in Blackboard LMS by students enrolled in three different clinical courses in an LPN to BSN program to form recommendations for online faculty presence and availability.

**POPULATION AND SETTING**

The students described in this investigation are undergraduate nursing students working towards their baccalaureate degree allowing them to advance their nursing careers from the licensed practical/vocational nurse (LPN/LVN) level to the registered nurse (RN) level. Although there are a multitude of online programs that offer career advancement opportunities for RN’s to move from the associate level RN to a baccalaureate prepared RN, this investigation focuses on prelicensure students who have not yet achieved RN licensure. The program is unique in its fully online availability on a national level and is available in over 30 states in the United States. The vast majority of students enrolled in the program can be considered nontraditional students with a mean age of 38 years, are 90% female, approximately 40% ethnically diverse, and generally not enrolled as full-time students.

Nursing faculty who teach online courses historically have experience in a face-to-face modality and transfer those skills to online education. Transferring content knowledge from a face-to-face setting to an online setting is relatively straightforward; however, faculty availability is something quite different in a face-to-face environment as compared to an online environment. Faculty may need to consider how to respond effectively to students who use time outside of the normal workweek to complete course requirements and have little time during the workweek to interact effectively with faculty. Thus, adjustments to access by faculty may be necessary.

**METHODS**

Previous studies have looked at student course logins in order to determine individual frequency of overall access, frequency of accessing reading materials, time-on-task, and discussion board postings (Park 2017; Wei, Peng, & Chou, 2015). Likewise, Kauffmann and Wilck (2014) assessed the relationship of site hits and time spent on the LMS with overall course grades, although they felt that the level of detail available through Blackboard course/student reporting options was limited. Based on this, the attempt of this study is to capture time spent in a Blackboard course for the simple purpose of determining days and cumulative hours of use for a class as a whole. There was no attempt to collect information on time spent by specific students or what information was accessed within the Blackboard LMS. The purpose of this study is based on the premise that students are accustomed to the 24/7 availability of their course and their presumption/expectation is that instructor availability aligns with this.

After receiving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determination of exempt status, archival data was collected from three fully online clinical nursing courses in an LPN to BSN nursing program over six consecutive semesters (Fall and Spring semesters) from Fall 2013 through Spring 2016. These homogenous courses included NURS 338, “Mental Health Nursing,” NURS 324, “Nursing Care of Adults II,” and NURS 424, “Nursing Care of Adults III.” NURS 338 is a four-credit-hour mental health nursing course with a 45 clinical-hour requirement while NURS 324 and NURS 424 are both five-credit-hour medical-surgical nursing courses each with a 90- clinical hour requirement.

These three courses were selected because each course has a clinical requirement, and courses with a clinical component have an added time element required to complete the experiential learning that is significant in these courses. The LPN to
BSN students align with a preceptor in a medical facility in their geographical location for their clinical experience. As the students are paired with an individual preceptor, they must be flexible and align with the shifts of the preceptor as nursing is a 24/7 occupation. These shifts can be eight or 12 hours long and can be any shift, day or night, any day of the week. Given that the vast majority of students enrolled in the program are working adults, weekends are not only part of the available time to work on course requirements, but they may be necessary to complete clinical experiences as well. Thus, the assumption was that students could easily be completing clinical hours on weekends, which may result in a wider variety of time per day of the week spent in Blackboard, the LMS utilized in these courses.

Data retrieval from Blackboard has limitations (Kauffmann & Wilck, 2014). Thus, for purposes of this investigation, only the Course Activity Overview feature available through Blackboard was utilized. This function provides the number of hours users spend in any specific Blackboard course on any specific day. Although Blackboard allows for raw data to be broken down to specific user, only aggregate data for all users in a specific course was collected and reported.

The data presented utilize only descriptive statistics and no attempt is made to determine if the differences between days of the week, courses, or semesters is statistically different to each other in any way. The data collected from the Course Activity Overview feature in Blackboard are an aggregate report of the hours students spent for each day of the week within each of the described Blackboard courses. The data are then converted from actual hours spent for each weekday to percentage of hours spent to percentage of time spent for each weekday. With the conversion of data to percentage time, a comparison of data across the semesters and courses is possible without considering the number of students. With the data normalized, it is no longer necessary to account for the number of specific students in any of the specific courses or for any of the different semesters. Although this is the case, there is still value in knowing the number of students in each of the specific courses in each of the semesters to demonstrate a reasonably homogeneous class size, as is represented in Table 1.

FERPA guidelines were adhered as only faculty who had taught the courses accessed the aggregate data for each respective course. To obtain the data from Blackboard for the courses in question, the aligned faculty accessed Course Reporting/Course Activity Overview reports that provided the number of hours students spent per weekday in the LMS.

In order to assess student login activity, five specific blocks of time per semester were chosen. Based on the assumption that students may spend more time in a new course, Weeks 1–3 (block 1) for each semester of each course was reviewed. Likewise, presuming students are settled in and acclimated to their course, Weeks 7–9 (block 2) for each semester of each course was reviewed. Additionally, end of semester busyness could be reflected in an assessment of Weeks 12–14 (block 3) for each semester of each course. During Week 15 (block 4) for each semester, there is a required Study Week that is defined by the institution as the last week of the semester in which no major assessments are to take place and is intended to allow to preparation for final exams. Therefore, this was also reviewed for each semester for each course. To provide a complete overview, the cumulative time spent during the entire semester, Weeks 1–16 (block 5), was also obtained.

Raw aggregate data obtained from the Course Activity Overview feature within Blackboard were obtained and entered into a commercially available spreadsheet software. The total time in hours students spent each weekday over each of the five noted blocks in each of the courses for each of the semesters noted was obtained. The total hours spent by the students were then converted into a percentage of time spent for each of the five time-

| Table 1. Number of Students per Clinical Nursing Course for Each of the Semesters |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Semester | COURSE         |
|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|          | NURS 338 | NURS 324 | NURS 424 |
| Fall 2013 | 29     | 48     | 36     |
| Spring 2014 | 42     | 44     | 46     |
| Fall 2014 | 40     | 58     | 33     |
| Spring 2015 | 45     | 24     | 51     |
| Fall 2015 | 30     | 30     | 27     |
| Spring 2016 | 39     | 28     | 20     |
| TOTAL    | 225    | 232    | 213    |
blocks. The percentage of time was calculated by taking the actual aggregate time students spent for each day of the week and dividing by the total time students spent in the course for each of the time-blocks, for each of the three courses, for each of the six semesters. These data were then converted graphically to demonstrate visually the percentage of time students spent each day of the week in each of the three courses, for each block of time, for each of the six semesters separately.

Further analysis was then conducted by combining all of the hours spent within Blackboard over the six semesters, for each of the three courses, for each day of the week. The percentage of time was calculated by combining all of the hours for each weekday over the six semesters, for each of the five time-blocks, for each of the three courses, and dividing by the total respective time for each of the five blocks. Once again, the data were then converted graphically to demonstrate visually the percentage of time students spent each day of the week, in each of the three courses, for each of the six semesters separately.

RESULTS

Specifically, aggregate data indicating the percentage of time students spent for each specific day of the week are presented to determine if availability of instructors to students can or should be maximized. Figure 1 shows the percentage of time students spent for each day of the week, in each of the three courses, over the entirety of the semester (Weeks 1–16), for each of the six semesters analyzed.

Although there is some variation, Figure 1 shows a clear pattern of usage by the students that is extraordinarily consistent over a period of six semesters for each of the three courses and is also remarkably consistent between the courses. As evidenced by the data, students spent roughly the same amount of time each day of the week with a spike on Sunday that shows roughly twice the time spent as compared to each of the other days of the week. It should be noted that although there was no effort to coordinate assignments and due dates between the three courses, the vast majority of due dates for assignments in all three courses fell on Sunday, which likely results in the increase in time spent by students on Sundays as demonstrated in Figures 1–7.

To investigate in greater detail if usage remained consistent throughout each day of the week throughout the semester, four additional blocks of time, Weeks 1–3, Weeks 7–9, Weeks 12–14, and Study Week, were analyzed. Figures 2–5 show the percentage of time students spent for each day of the week, in each of the three courses, over the four separate blocks of time mentioned.

As can be seen in Figures 2–5, there is more variation seen for each of these blocks of time as compared to Figure 1, yet usage remains reasonably steady for each day of the week with the same spike in usage seen in Sundays, with the exception of Study Week. The greater variation in Figures 2–5 is reasonable to expect given that each block of time is an average of three weeks (Weeks 1–3, Weeks 7–9, and Weeks 12–14), while Study Week is only an average of one week, as compared to Figure 1 which averages the percentage of time spent over the entire 16 weeks.

To get a better overview of the percentage of time spent within the LMS over the six semesters, for each of the three courses, for each day of the week, the data were further reduced by combining all six semesters for each course separately. Figure 6 demonstrates the percentage time within the LMS for each day of the week, for each of the three courses, with combined data for all six semesters for each of the five time-blocks discussed.

As demonstrated by Figure 6, the percentage of time spent in each of the three separate courses is once again remarkably consistent. The data presented suggest that, at least for these three courses, students spend roughly the same amount of time each day of the week with a spike on Sundays that is roughly twice the amount of time spent each other day. Figure 7, a composite of the three courses for all six semesters combined, over the entirety of the semester (Weeks 1–16), illustrates the same consistent pattern.

CONCLUSIONS

As noted previously, although there was no coordinated effort between the courses, due dates for the majority of the assigned work fell on Sunday. The data suggest that perhaps the increase in usage on Sundays may be linked to these due dates. And, regardless of the number of clinical hours in the educational week, this did not seem to demonstrate an effect on Blackboard usage as initially suggested.
Once again, it should be noted that this LPN to BSN program is a degree completion program and many of the students are working adults. The average age of the students is 38 years, which further suggests that many are working adults with families. Thus, weekends may be a prime time to access course materials and complete assigned work even if the student is also working and/or attending clinical on a weekend.

The results may indicate a need to redefine faculty workweek parameters, availability, and flexibility to align with student usage patterns within Blackboard. The LPN to BSN student is an adult juggling the demands of academics, clinical hours, work, and family obligations. Thus, it can be assumed that these students carve out blocks of time to attend to academic obligations and should pertinent questions arise (immediacy), a timely response may enable the student to stay on task. Miller (2015) questions the outcome of students needing a question answered while waiting an unknown amount of time for a response. The outcome is very dependent on the immediacy of the question. Therefore, determinations must be made to anticipate days of potential immediacy (for example, the due date for an exam) based on the witnessed (previous) submission timelines of the students.

The results indicate that as an aggregate group, students in the clinical courses investigated in this LPN to BSN fully online nursing program spend approximately twice as much time in Blackboard on Sundays as compared to other days of the week, and faculty availability during this time should be considered. According to Sitzman (2010), “productively moving forward with online delivery of nursing education, while honoring, preserving, and modeling core caring values, requires mindful and deliberate intention on the part of faculty” (p. 178). In a similar vein, students must also be informed that “last minute” work is a choice and be aware that instructor availability may not align. According to Bailie (2015), we “live in a world where instantaneous gratification has become an expectation of technology” (p. 52). Social norms of communication for today’s students differ remarkably from those of just a decade ago due to the ubiquity of social media and smart phones (Crampton & Ragusa, 2012).

Given that the array of interactions can be complex, faculty need to establish firm communication boundaries (Crampton & Ragusa, 2012). Yet, as nursing faculty, we should remain close to our foundation of caring, the spirit of nursing, and extend this behavior into the practice of online nursing education within reason. It is through this educational process and interaction with faculty that “students first learn about the meaning and embodiment of professional caring” (Sitzman, 2016). Albeit, there is a fine line that faculty must establish to avoid being enablers while laying a firm foundation for what is considered necessary (typical response time frame) and for what is considered immediacy. Students must also be accountable and meet faculty somewhere in the middle as to what is expected. As proposed by Bailie (2014), “when we place ourselves in the role of a student, would it not be reasonable to assume that such qualities would also match our own expectations?” (para. 29). As such, using a consistent pattern of caring within our online communication may be an ideal adjunct to course policies regarding communication and feedback. By demonstrating “full presence, acknowledging shared humanity, attending to the individual, asking for and providing frequent clarification, demonstrating flexibility, and pointing out favorable opportunities while acknowledging challenges” (Sitzman, 2016, p. 38), caring can be communicated in a virtual world. Providing and sustaining these practices, along with a framework of course guidelines, opens up the possibility that students will reciprocate a similar caring behavior to their respective faculty.

With that said, this research shows that students will be students and continue to push the limits of “due.” When that due date falls on a weekend, as it did for these courses, is it wise to consider altering the due dates? Or, should we redefine the hours of online faculty? The answer may lie in redefining our presence in a caring manner in order to elicit caring reciprocity from students. Respect begets respect, or at least we wish it to be so in our virtual learning community. As faculty, we must provide clear communication instructions, especially when there is an anticipated time of greater need.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations to this study include the use of hours of student usage in their Blackboard course. The number of hours that a student spends in
Blackboard is not necessarily reflective of the actual hours spent working on material in the course, nor is it reflective of the times that faculty could maximize their availability. Hours or time spent within Blackboard as reported in the Course Activity Overview feature shows only how long a student is in Blackboard but does not indicate if they are actively engaged in any specific activity. The data obtained from the LMS do not reflect what was “hit” during the login or how long each individual hit lasted. The data were used to show evidence of use but were not specific enough to expand on type and length of use given that a significant amount of the work can occur outside of Blackboard.

A second limitation is the use of the LPN to BSN student population as their usage pattern may differ considerably from traditional full-time students or students in other disciplines. Regardless, this student usage mapping could possibly relate to other disciplines that offer online courses to nontraditional students. It should also be noted that this study focused specifically on clinical nursing courses in which students are expected to spend an appreciable amount of time in a clinical setting, which may further limit the time available to spend specifically on the didactic portion of course content.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research recommendations should include student LMS usage patterns that have consistent due dates that do not fall on a weekend by proposing alternative scheduling options that do not use Sunday as a due date. Analysis of nonclinical nursing courses may also provide further insight if the clinical component may be affecting LMS usage. Other disciplines with a clinical or experiential learning component and more traditional schedule (Monday through Friday) should also be considered to determine if there is congruency in LMS usage.

The demographics of the LPN to BSN students differs from the general population by consisting of primarily females with an average age of 38, which may also influence LMS usage patterns. This LPN to BSN group, as well as student populations with differing demographics, should be investigated utilizing qualitative research methods to gain a better understanding of their reasoning and their decisions regarding the use of their LMS.
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Figure 1. Percentage of Time Students Spent in LMS Each Day of the Week in NURS 338, NURS 324, and NURS 424 Over the Entirety of the Semester (Weeks 1–16) for Each of the Six Semesters Analyzed.
Figure 2. Percentage of Time Students Spent in LMS Each Day of the Week in NURS 338, NURS 324, and NURS 424, Weeks 1–3, for Each of the Six Semesters Analyzed.
Figure 3. Percentage of Time Students Spent in LMS Each Day of the Week in NURS 338, NURS 324, and NURS 424, Weeks 7-9, for Each of the Six Semesters Analyzed.
Figure 4. Percentage of Time Students Spent in LMS Each Day of the Week in NURS 338, NURS 324, and NURS 424, Weeks 12-14, for Each of the Six Semesters Analyzed.
Figure 5. Percentage of Time Students Spent in LMS Each Day of the Week in NURS 338, NURS 324, and NURS 424, Study Week, for Each of the Six Semesters Analyzed
Figure 6. Percentage Time Students Spent in the LMS Each Day of the Week, for Each of the Three Courses, for All Six Semesters Combined, for Weeks 1–3, Weeks 7–9, Weeks 12–14, and Study Week.
Figure 7. Percentage Time Students Spent in the LMS Each Day of the Week, for Each of the Three Courses, for All Six Semesters Combined, over the Entirety of the Semester (Weeks 1–16).