Benefits and Challenges of Blended Synchronous Learning: An Undergraduate Nursing Student Perspective

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Background

Digital technologies are democratizing postsecondary education by reducing barriers to access. An example is the University of Saskatchewan College of Nursing’s “learn where you live” philosophy, which enables the delivery of undergraduate nursing education in rural and remote communities across the province¹. The program uses blended synchronous technology to link the instructor and students in a physical classroom with other students in cyber classrooms. While initiatives like this make postsecondary education accessible and flexible, it requires educators to re-examine the nature of teaching and learning, pedagogical practices, and outcomes.

This sequential, embedded mixed methods study is the first phase of a study exploring of baccalaureate nursing students’ experience of blended synchronous learning. The primary and distributed sites are located in the south and east areas of Saskatchewan, approximately 200 Km apart. Classes are taught via videoconference from the primary site.

Method

Following ethical approval, nursing students (n=22) were purposively sampled from years 2, 3 and 4 at the Yorkton and Regina sites of the College of Nursing BSN program. After signing informed consent, participants were enrolled into the study and took part in one of a series of focus groups about their experiences and perceptions of the challenges and benefits of blended synchronous learning. The focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for themes.

Data analysis followed a six-phase approach to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clark²³ for identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data. This involved familiarization with the data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes to ensure that they reflect both the coded extracts and the full data set, defining and naming themes, and report writing. The data analysis process was iterative in nature and throughout, we moved back and forth between the analytic to ensure that we were faithful to participants’ intended meaning.

Preliminary Themes

Physical Presence & Physical Distance

By its nature, blended asynchronous learning is characterized by physical distance that provides both opportunities and challenges for teaching and learning in a way that allows the instructor to anchor together two (or more) communities of learners.

Social Presence & Social Distance

Social presence in online learning environments relates to the degree to which learners feel personally connected with their peers and with the instructor. Things that interfere with knowing others and being know by others diminishes satisfaction with learning.

Psychological Presence & Psychological Distance

Psychological presence is linked to social presence and reflects the emotional connectedness-disconnectedness in a relationship. Relationships that feel impersonal, confusing, disengaging or intimidating increase participants’ sense of psychological distance.

Cognitive Presence & Cognitive Distance

Cognitive presence refers to the degree to which participants’ construct meaning by Interacting with course content, critically thinking about concepts, and applying newly acquired knowledge. In this study, cognitive presence was often facilitated by asynchronous activities.

References