Student Presence and Faculty Availability in Fully Online Courses: Is Alignment Requisite?

Kathleen Marie-Anne Huun, PhD, MSN, MS, BS, BSN, RN
Baccalaureate Nursing Completion, College of Nursing, Health, and Human Sciences, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN, USA
Andreas Martin Kummerow, MS, BS, RN, CNE
Department of Baccalaureate Nursing Completion, College of Nursing, Health, and Human Sciences, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN, USA

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 onto the online educational landscape. In particular, nursing education has pushed forward seeking opportunity in the online, cyberspace continuum. The online format allows great flexibility for adults with time commitments (work and/or family responsibilities) to have access to a quality education regardless of their geographical location to their institution providing these individuals the learning opportunity which they may not otherwise have.

Online learning offers students the opportunity of course access 24/7. As students assimilate into this learning modality, their expectations of faculty presence during this "all hours" time frame has been of great consideration. Students align high online faculty presence with their learning satisfaction (Ke, 2010, Kang & Im, 2013) and believe communication, availability, and compassion to be the most important characteristics of a quality online instructor (Orso & Doolittle, 2011). 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 as well as instructional immediacy behaviors, instructor presence, and communication to reduce transactional distance. These variables are ever present in students' expectations of faculty accessing their course and responding to student communications. Students believe "faculty messages that are respectful, positive, encouraging, timely, and frequent add to feelings of social presence and the reciprocal feelings of caring among students" (Plante & Asselin, 2014, p. 222).

Purpose:

Delivering quality online education to pre-licensure undergraduate nursing students incorporates the challenge of providing best practices in regards 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 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, therein lies the assumption that faculty availability may be seen as a greater necessity on higher activity days. Is the typical Monday through Friday a sufficient faculty presence for online students? Or is an expanded, seven day, 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.

Methods:

Although studies have looked at course logins, these were used to determine individual student frequency of overall access, frequency of accessing reading materials, and discussion board postings (Wei, Peng, & Chou, 2015; Park 2017). Likewise, Kauffmann and Wilck (2014) assessed the relationship of site hits and time spent with overall course grade 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 24/7 availability of their course and the like presumption/expectation that instructor availability aligns.

After receiving the IRB determination of exempt status, archival data was collected from three fully online clinical nursing courses over the duration of 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." Only aggregate data was collected which reflected the amount of time per specific weekday that students spent in the LMS in each of the specified courses. FERPA guidelines were adhered to as only faculty who had taught the courses accessed the aggregate data for each of the respective courses. Data was obtained from the courses in question through the Course Reporting/Course Activity Overview reports function which provides the number of hours students spent per weekday in the LMS.

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) of each semester of each course was reviewed. Likewise, presuming students are settled in and acclimated to their course, Weeks 7-9 (block 2) of 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) of each semester, there is Study Week where no exams or papers are assigned and is intended for final examination preparation. This week was also reviewed for each semester for each course. Finally, to provide a complete overview, the cumulative time spent during the entire semester, Weeks 1-16 (block 5) was also obtained.

Results:

Although there is some variation, there is a clear pattern of usage by the students which is remarkably 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 spend roughly the same amount of time each day of the week with a spike on Sunday which shows roughly twice the time spent each of the other days of the week. For the three week time intervals, there is more variation seen, yet with the exception of Study Week, usage remains reasonably steady for each day of the week with the same spike in usage seen in Sundays. The greater variation is reasonable to expect given that each block of time is an average of only three weeks (Weeks 1-3, Weeks 7-9, and Weeks 12-14), while Study Week is strictly one week.

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 was further reduced by combing all six semesters for each course separately. The percentage of time spent in each of the three separate courses is once again remarkably consistent. The data presented suggests 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 which is again, roughly twice the amount of time spent in a course as other days.

Conclusion:

The data suggests that perhaps the increase in usage on Sundays may be linked to due dates. Regardless, the results may indicate a need to define faculty work week parameters, presence, and flexibility as needed to align with student usage patterns in the LMS.

Nursing faculty who teach online courses historically have experience in a face-to-face modality and transfer skills to online education. Transferring content knowledge from a face-to-face setting to an online setting is relatively straight forward, however faculty availability is something quite different. 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. It is through this educational process and interaction with faculty that "students first learn about the meaning and embodiment of professional caring" (Sitzman, 2016).Thus, adjustments to access by faculty may be necessary and a dialogue must ensue.

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 the LMS on Sundays as compared to other days of the week and faculty availability during this time should be considered. As nursing faculty we should remain close to our foundation of caring, the spirit of nursing, and extend this behavior into nursing education practice within reason. Redefining our presence in a caring manner may elicit reciprocal caring from students. Respect begets respect, or at least we wish it to be so in our virtual learning community.

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. Analysis of non-clinical nursing courses may also provide further insight if the clinical component may be affecting LMS usage. In comparison, other disciplines and demographics should also be considered to determine if there is congruency in LMS usage patterns.

Title:

Student Presence and Faculty Availability in Fully Online Courses: Is Alignment Requisite?

Keywords:

Faculty presence, immediacy, Fully online nursing education, pre-licensure and Student LMS usage

References:

Kang, M. & Im, T. (2013). Factors of learner-instructor interaction which predict perceived learning outcomes in online learning environment. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 29*(3), 292-301. doi: 10.1111/jcal.12005.

Kauffmann, P., & Wilck, J. (2014). Relationship of final grade and use of online course materials for an engineering economics course. *Proceedings of the American Society for Engineering Education,* June 2014.

Orso, D., & Doolittle, J. (2011). Instructor characteristics that affect online student success. *Online Cl@ssroom: Ideas for Effective Online Instruction,* 2-3.

Park, S. (2017). Analysis of time-on-task, behavior experiences, and performance in two online courses with different authentic learning tasks. *International Review of Research Open and Distributed Learning, 18*(2), 213-233.

Plante, K., & Asselin, M. (2014). Best practices for creating social presence and caring behaviors online. *Nursing Education Perspectives, 34*(4), 219-223. doi: 10.5480/13-1094.1

Sitzman, K. (2016). Mindful communication for caring online. *Advances in Nursing Science, 39*(1), 38-47. doi: 10.1097/ANS.0000000000000102

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2015* (NCES 2016-014), Table 311.15.

Wei, H., Peng, H., & Chou, C. (2015). Can more interactivity improve learning achievement in an online course? Effects of college students' perception and actual use of a course-management system on their learning achievement. *Computers & Education, 83*, 10-21.

Abstract Summary:

Faculty accessibility and immediacy in a fully asynchronous online pre-licensure nursing program are considered in regards to student expectations and mapped behaviors. Identifying days and patterns of course usage by students within the learning management system (LMS) are presented which may help form recommendations for online faculty presence and availability.

Content Outline:

Introduction

1. Increase in online learning for disciplines with an experiential learning component and increase in fully online programs.
2. Instructional immediacy behaviors, instructor presence, and communication are variables that are ever present in students' expectations of faculty accessing their course and responding to students.
3. Body

Purpose

1. Having a window into student presence via course activity reports available through the Blackboard learning management system (LMS) can theoretically portray daily student presence within a course over days, weeks, and a semester.
2. 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.

Methods

1. Archival data was collected from three fully online clinical nursing courses over the duration of six consecutive semesters (Fall and Spring semesters) from Fall 2013 through Spring 2016. These courses included NURS 338, "Mental Health Nursing," NURS 324, "Nursing Care of Adults II," and NURS 424, "Nursing Care of adults III to determine frequency of usage by day of the week through the Blackboard LMS
2. Four Specific blocks of time per semester were chosen to determine frequency of usage by day of the week to determine if day of the week differed throughout the semester. Additionally, to provide a complete overview, the cumulative time spent during the entire semester, Weeks 1-16 was also determined and reported.

Results

1. Usage remains reasonably consistent for each day of the week regardless of the specific semester, time during the semester, or course for which the data was collected.
2. Usage was similar on all days Monday through Saturday regardless of the specific semester, time during the semester, or course for which the data was collected.
3. A spike of almost twice as much usage was found on Sundays regardless of the specific semester, time during the semester, or course for which the data was collected.

Conclusion

1. The results may indicate a need to define faculty work week parameters, presence, and flexibility as needed to align with student usage patterns in the LMS.
2. 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.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future research recommendations include student LMS usage patterns that have consistent due dates that do not fall on a weekend by proposing alternative scheduling options.
2. Analysis of non-clinical nursing courses may also provide further insight if the clinical component may be affecting LMS usage.
3. In comparison, other disciplines and demographics should also be considered to determine if there is congruency in LMS usage patterns.

First Primary Presenting Author

Primary Presenting Author

Kathleen Marie-Anne Huun, PhD, MSN, MS, BS, BSN, RN
Indiana State University
Baccalaureate Nursing Completion, College of Nursing, Health, and Human Sciences
Faculty, Multi-Year
Nursing Building
Terre Haute IN
USA

Professional Experience: 2009-present – Faculty, Baccalaureate Nursing Completion (Indiana State Univ.). Course lead: Nursing Care of Adults II, Nursing Care of Adults III, and Reflective Nursing Practice. Developed rubric, course template, and matrix to establish continuity between program offerings. The template adapted for use University wide. Has taken QM peer review courses. Nursing Care of Adults III has received QM certification. Other Principal writer, presenter regarding rubric, template, matrix creation,

implementation, and outcomes. Principal writer, "Up Close with Distance Education" Writer for American Academy for Preceptor Advancement (AAPA). Principal writer on introductory section of core curriculum. Peer Reviewer: Scope and Standards of Practice for Preceptor Advancement. (AAPA) Mentor to several junior faculty for BNC Program Multiple years of nursing experience in the critical care environment. Implementation of e-simulation, video simulation and tele-presence simulation for distance students enrolled in BNC clinical courses. Multiple presentations at local, national and international conferences.
Author Summary: Dr. Huun completed the following degrees: BSN, Old Dominion University; BS design, MS textile science, University of California, Davis; MS nursing education, Indiana State University, PhD Human Sciences, Florida State University. Dr. Huun has an extensive background in critical care. Currently she serves as faculty for the online Baccalaureate Nursing Completion Program (ISU). Her research interests include: online course design/delivery and development/use of virtual technologies for clinical education (e-simulations, video simulation and telepresence simulation).

Second Secondary Presenting Author

Corresponding Secondary Presenting Author

Andreas Martin Kummerow, MS, BS, RN, CNE

Indiana State University
Department of Baccalaureate Nursing Completion, College of Nursing, Health, and Human Sciences
Faculty, Multi-year
Nursing Building
Terre Haute IN
USA

Professional Experience: 2012 - Program Director for RN to BS track Department of Baccalaureate Nursing Completion, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN. Fall 2009 - Instructor, Department of Baccalaureate Nursing Completion, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN. Teaching fully online asynchronous courses in both the RN and LPN to BS tracks. 2010 - Sigma Theta Tau, Lambda Sigma Chapter Award for Excellence: Nursing Research Award. Author or co-author of two articles related to student learning outcomes in distance education programs. 2013 - Quality Matters - Peer Reviewer Course, Online, Indiana State University.
Author Summary: Andreas Kummerow completed his BS and MS in Nursing Education at Indiana State University and has been teaching there in both the RN to BSN and LPN to BSN since the Fall of 2009 and is currently the Program Director for the RN to BS track. His clinical background includes both psychiatric and cardiac nursing. His research interests include both psychiatric nursing and evaluation of student outcomes particularly in undergraduate distance education.