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Jayne Josephsen
Boise State University

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Jayne Josephsen
Boise State University

Abstract

This study examined a delegation content focused multi-modal instructional design based on constructivism and andragogy. These new teaching strategies were offered in a professional concepts course offered online during the final semester before graduation of an Associates of Nursing program. This study found supporting evidence that this pedagogical framework is effective in delivering essential delegation concepts and skills in an online course as well as contributing to student self-efficacy related to delegation abilities.

Preparation of safe graduate nurses and assisting in the transition to the professional nursing role is a central function of nursing education (Harmer, 2010). The professional nursing role as delegator can be problematic to learn and teach in the nursing education setting. As more unlicensed assistive personnel are utilized in the healthcare setting under the supervision of the professional nurse, it is imperative that graduate nurses understand their responsibilities and role in the delegation process (Powell, 2010). Unfortunately, students often feel unprepared to delegate upon graduation, either due to lack of self-confidence, lack of knowledge, or lack of understanding of how delegation can contribute to quality employee, patient, and organizational outcomes (Conger, 1999; Curtis & Nicholl, 2004; Masters, 2009; Quallich, 2005).

This northwestern university had been offering a one-credit exclusively online professional concepts course, in which knowledge and skills related to delegation were a core course outcome. This online professional concepts course was offered in an associate degree of nursing program during the last semester before graduation. Although this course had been previously offered with examination of delegation being an integral course objective, informal student feedback in course evaluations indicated that they still were uncomfortable with delegating or did not clearly understand how delegation fit into their future nursing practice.

The original instructional strategy utilized to teach delegation concepts was the purchase and use of an online delegation module developed by the National Council for the State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN). This module utilized a case study approach, in which a video representation of improper delegation on the part of the organization, nursing and unlicensed assistive personnel resulted in a sentinel event. In addition, there was a post-test reviewing the concepts examined at the end of the module. The student viewed the module at their convenience and then took the post-test at the end of the module and turned in their score to their assigned faculty. The NCSBN currently offers video clips and numerous suggestions for interactive activities related to delegation as part of their transition to practice communication and teamwork module available at <https://www.ncsbn.org/1603.htm>.

Because of student feedback related to discomfort with delegation it was believed that use of the NCSBN module was not being optimally utilized to meet the multiple learning needs of these online students. Therefore, faculty examined a variety of instructional strategies that would meet differing learning styles, as well as being relatively easy to implement in the online learning format. The purpose of this pilot study was to ascertain if the use of a multi-modal instructional strategy, including the NCSBN module, concept map development, and case study use with asynchronous online group discussion, successfully delivered foundational delegation concepts in the course. Additionally, students were asked to rate the instructional strategies offered, as to which technique best met their learning needs related to this fundamental nursing skill.

Theoretical and Instructional Design

Adult learning strategies and constructivist learning theory complement online instruction and the role of online faculty as facilitator of learning with adult learners (Magnussen, 2008). Adult learning theory is based upon the foundational belief that adults have prior experience and knowledge that contributes to the learning environment and that adults prefer problem-solving type learning activities. Constructivism not only supports the use of activities that

provide for knowledge construction but also activities that engage the student in discourse and social construction of meaning. Use of constructivist pedagogical principles, as a structure for development of instructional strategies was believed to contribute to student connection of delegation concepts and knowledge to nursing practice, and support facilitation of social meaning construction. Use of this format ideally would decrease the knowledge-practice gap and assist the graduate nurses transition to the professional nurse role of delegator (Magnussen, 2008; Peters, 2000). Therefore, a framework including both constructivist and adult learning principles was utilized to create a multi-pronged approach to presenting the delegation content and as a basis of instructional strategy development (Hsu, 2004; Russell, 2006).

Moreover, online courses possess the additional unique challenges related to delivery of education with “real-life” application and development of student and faculty connectedness. Lead faculty considered that part of the student dissatisfaction and lack of feeling prepared or knowledgeable enough to delegate upon graduation was due to the fact that the delegation content had previously only been introduced and assessed via the online NCSBN module. There was a lack of discussion and social connectedness as well as problem solving activities, the thought being students were not connecting the concepts to practice or integrating them into their personal meaning or professional knowledge base. Consequently, utilizing the social aspect of constructivist theory and the problem-solving activity preference of adult learners as a basis for instructional strategy development was deemed essential by course faculty.

Instructional Strategy

The joint statement on delegation by the American Nurses Association (ANA) and the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) guided the development of the course and assignment objectives related to delegation content. The joint statement specifically calls for nursing education to address the area of delegation in their curriculum as shown in this excerpt.

Both the ANA and the NCSBN acknowledge that delegation is a skill that must be taught and practiced for nurses to be proficient in using it in the delivery of nursing care. Nursing schools should provide students with both didactic content and the opportunity to apply theory in a simulated and realistic context. Nursing curricula must include competencies related to delegation (2006, para. 10).

Using this statement, as well as the ANA principles of delegation as a framework for development of course learning objectives the following areas of delegation were identified as core conceptual outcomes: student knowledge of evaluation and communication during and after delegation, identification of risks and appropriate tasks to delegate, and the process of delegation itself. Additionally, learning objectives addressing the role of the professional nurse in delegation, assessment of the delegatee, the state’s nurse practice act, and organizational and delegatee responsibilities were integrated into the teaching strategies (American Nurses Association, 2005).

The first assignment introduced was the continuation of the NCSBN module concerning delegation, as this module was felt to be effective to some degree and provided an excellent resource for the students to access throughout the course. The module presented delegation via a video scenario followed by a posttest. The students were required to complete the module by the third week of the five-week course and email the certificate indicating completion and passing of the posttest to their faculty. The students were encouraged to reference this module throughout the course in their future discussions related to delegation.

The second assignment given was that of a case study, developed by the author, and based upon ANA delegation principles. This was paired with a review of the state’s Board of Nursing delegation rules and regulations. The case study was based upon a graduate nurse experience in home care. The scenario setting of home care was used as some students had indicated in previous discussions the belief that they were not responsible for assessment of their delegatee on an acute care floor since the unlicensed assistive personnel had already been hired and had their duties assigned by the organization. Additionally, several students were working on acute care floors as unlicensed assistive personnel and it was felt that a scenario based in their current work setting might cause the student to make assumptions or be biased and therefore not thoroughly assess the case study.

The case study was made utilizing power point software and included pictures of all fictional characters involved, paired with text explaining the situation. Once the students reviewed the case study they were to develop a concept map of the delegation process that had occurred in the scenario. Each part of the process of delegation was to include a comment about which principle of delegation had occurred and if it should have been done differently in order to be effective delegation. In addition, the students were required to review three of their classmates' concept maps and discuss the process of delegation, referencing evidence-based literature to support their observations. This assignment was based upon constructivist principles of discussion and social context for meaning development. This assignment also offered a vehicle that addressed the adult learning principles related to "real life" application and connection of abstract concepts of delegation to the practice setting (All & Huycke, 2007; Hsu, 2004). Likewise, the assignment addressed the need for nursing education to offer opportunities for the student to apply theoretical concepts in a "simulated yet realistic context".

Delegation concepts explored in the case study included delegator, delegatee, and organizational and delegation principles. In the scenario the new graduate nurse had to address delegation principles of assessment of patient and delegatee, the delegation process, concepts of surveillance and supervision, and accountability. The unlicensed assistive personnel in the scenario had to address delegation principles of acceptance of a delegated task, communication, and accountability. The supervisor in the scenario represented organizational principles of delegation and resource allocation. After reviewing the scenario in depth the student was asked to consider the task delegated, the effectiveness of the delegation, administrative and delegatee concerns, and any ethical issues involved. These areas of examination were selected, as they supported the development of the internalization of knowledge into student practice, as well as compelling the student to conceptually visualize the organizational and collaborative practices that may affect their daily nursing practice related to delegation and to reflect upon these issues.

Next the students were required to review concepts of feedback and evaluation, which are central to the process of effective delegation. The students wrote a performance evaluation and incident warning related to the case study event as a group and discussed how they would give feedback individually to the case study's unlicensed assistive personnel if they were the supervising nurses. Lastly, the students were required to choose topics to discuss such as ethics, patient rights, and organizational theory in relation to the case study. Once the students posted their statements related to the topic and application to the case study they were to review and comment upon three of their classmates work and provide evidence based literary support for their observations. The design and presentation of the assignments ideally encouraged scaffolding of constructivist and adult learning principals through opportunities for social knowledge construction via discussion and group assignments, as well as allowing the adult learner engage in individual and group problem solving, and to participate in collaborative practice and sharing of experiences.

Methods

A survey based research approach was used to investigate student perceived efficacy of the instructional strategies offered. A convenience sample of students enrolled in the course were asked to complete a voluntary and anonymous mixed methods survey at the end of the course to evaluate if they believed they had mastered identified delegation content; as well as soliciting which instructional strategy was felt to be the most effective. Approval was granted via the university ethics review board and the survey was launched using the Blackboard online learning platform. Student consent was implied with completion of the survey. Data were downloaded from Blackboard and interpreted by the author.

The survey tool was developed by the author and focused upon identifying, from the students perspective, if the course learning activities had met the course objectives related to delegation. Specifically, the author was interested in whether the student perceived that they understood concepts and knowledge areas such as the delegation process, the benefits of delegation related to patient outcomes, and scope of practice issues post learning interventions. Additionally, the students were surveyed as to their comfort level with delegation and which learning activity had best met their learning needs concerning delegation.

There were seventeen specific statements about delegation skills and the students were asked to rate their ability to meet the identified delegation focused learning objectives on a 1 to 5 point likert scale with 5 being “strongly agree” and 1 being “strongly disagree”. Students were given the opportunity to add open-ended comments at the end of the survey in order to allow students to respond in their own words and for the author to gather insight into additional areas of course improvement or success.

Results

Eleven students out of twenty-one students enrolled in the course responded to the delegation concept mastery portion of the survey for a 52% response rate. The results of the survey indicated that in general students did perceive that they had learned the course identified delegation concepts. Between 81% and 100% of the students that responded to the survey rated that they either agreed or strongly agreed that they had met the delegation objectives. The one area that did score an 81% in the agree/strongly agrees category was that of understanding how to limit the risks of delegation. This may have been because the students had yet to have relevant experience in the nursing profession to conceptualize the organizational, team, and individual areas that can contribute to risks in delegation. Furthermore, this identified a key area of improvement or enhancement in the learning activity design. This would be an area to explore and enhance in future courses that review delegation concepts.

Students were also asked to rate which instructional strategy related to delegation they felt was the most useful to their learning experience. The students were requested to rate each of the instructional strategies on a likert scale from 1 to 4, with 1 being the “most useful” and 4 being the “least useful”. Ten out of twenty one enrolled students responded to this portion of the survey for a 48% response rate. The students taking this online course perceived that the NCSBN delegation module the most useful, followed by the case study, group discussion, and concept map activity. These results do support the idea that adult learning is best delivered via problem solving activities such as case studies and scenarios. The results also support the concepts of the social aspects of constructivism and knowledge development via collaborative learning, such as the discussion board exercise.

Although concept maps are often seen as a useful learning intervention that will assist the learner in seeing the relationship between variables and allow the learner to visually represent knowledge, in this case the concept map was seen as the intervention with the least learning value. This may be because the concepts related to delegation are very abstract or that the student did not adequately understand the delegation process by the second week of the five-week course when the assignment was introduced. This particular type of assignment may be better introduced towards the end of the course when the student has had time to construct knowledge about the delegation process and then apply those concepts to a relational map.

Student confidence and self-efficacy related to perceived delegation abilities are important to attain. This type of confidence is needed in the practice setting in order for the graduate nurse to develop in their professional nursing role and attain competency in their delegation skills (Quallich, 2005). Therefore, students were also asked to rate themselves on their perceived readiness to delegate in the clinical setting utilizing a likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the “least ready” and the 5 being the “most ready”. Eight out of the twenty-one enrolled students responded to this portion of the survey for a 38% response rate. The survey results indicated that students did feel that they were at least “somewhat ready” to perform the professional nursing role of delegation in their graduate nurse practice settings, as no student respondent chose the option of “least ready” or “slightly ready”.

Discussion and Recommendations

Overall, it was deemed that the use of the multi-modal instructional strategies was effective in teaching delegation concepts in this online course per student feedback and survey results. The students identified each one of the instructional strategies to be useful in some capacity. Comments related to the use of multiple instructional strategies from respondents included the following:

“Great class! Thanks for the multiple learning styles.”

“I think that all the instructional strategies used were helpful in providing me with different perspectives and better understanding of the subject.”

Upon examination of the instructional strategy rankings it appeared that all respondents found the case study based on ANA delegation principles useful in some capacity. Use of the NCSBN delegation module was found “most useful” by the majority of the respondents, but one respondent did indicate that it was the least useful. These results support the premise that adult learners preference for engaged, problem based instruction.

The concept map assignment although supported by constructivist theory, appeared to be “least useful” for a number of respondents. This indicates that this assignment would benefit from adjustment or redevelopment. It is believed by this author that the concept map assignment could have met the principals of constructivist learning theory more effectively if a reflective component had been introduced as well (Conceicao & Taylor, 2006). This being the case, if the assignment were to be introduced again, the concept map exercise could still be utilized but with specific changes that might include development of an “ideal” general concept map of the delegation process and then a comparison to the case study. Conceivably requiring a compare and contrast type of student reflection and applying this to delegation principles would enhance the reflective aspect of the assignment, and increase understanding of the delegation process and connection of the process with personal meaning.

As for the group discussion component of the course, it is felt that this strategy could be improved upon as well; since a number of respondents indicated that this was the “least useful” strategy. One respondent commented that the discussion could have been improved if more than one case study had been utilized. Another respondent commented that the requirement for having to read multiple responses about the same topic was too time consuming and repetitive. These are concerns that would need to be addressed when continuing the group discussion instructional strategy. Perhaps adding another case study based on a different setting or leaving out the accessing of evidence based practice literature in the discussion responses would be of benefit and cause the discussion to be more spontaneous and interesting. These changes in the instructional strategy would ideally lead to unencumbered development of social meaning construction and social connectedness via the discussion board.

The course outcome of preparing the students for the professional nurse role of delegator was also considered met. All students rated themselves at a minimum of a 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the “most ready” for delegation in the clinical setting upon graduation. All identified learning objectives related to delegation concepts were met with a rating range of 81% to 100% of the respondents believing they could address the concept. The one delegation principal that did score at 81% was that of identifying ways to lower the risk of delegation. This indicates that this area of delegation practice could benefit from an additional instructional strategy or specific incorporation of risk identification and reflection in case study or discussion activities.

Although the information gathered suggests the multi modal instructional strategy based upon constructivist and adult learning principals was successful in teaching delegation concepts and assisting the student in development of perceived delegation self-efficacy, there are limitations to this study. Specifically, the study was a single pilot study. For confirmation that use of a multi-modal online teaching strategy based upon the above educational frameworks is a successful way to teach delegation concepts, these learning activities would need to be offered in a variety of educational programs and settings. Additionally, the study population was a small convenience sample from one course. Although the respondent rate was considered by this author to be sufficient to develop conclusions on assignment efficacy, the survey and learning activities would need to be distributed to a greater number of students from different demographics to ascertain whether these type of learning activities are the most appropriate to teach delegation concepts across nursing student populations.

Conclusion

This small pilot project suggests that use of a constructivist and andragogical design paired with multiple instructional strategies could provide a workable format for online course design related to delegation concepts. There are minimal resources available to teach delegation outside of the clinical setting and even fewer available for online instruction (Henderson et. al., 2006). Therefore, this small student perception survey and introduction of a new instructional design might offer other online nursing educators a foundation for development of delegation learning activities. The use of multiple teaching strategies in the instructional design also provides the foundation for scaffolding of delegation concepts that may reinforce knowledge and meaning development (Vella, 2002).

This project raises implications for further research endeavors, such as online knowledge construction of delegation concepts and theory, application of delegation theory to simulated activities, as well as faculty use of summative instructional evaluation for pedagogical improvement. The results of this project support the use of a constructivist theoretical foundation for instructional strategy development and online course design related to delegation concepts. Further research is needed on the specific instructional techniques utilized in this pilot project to ascertain if they would be as effective in other nursing programs and/or other online courses that focus on nursing delegation concepts. Furthermore, research is needed on the use of a variety of instructional strategies to teach the concept of delegation, as this pilot study suggests that a multi-modal teaching approach is effective in delivering delegation content in an online course.

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