Virtual Global Classrooms without Walls:
Collaborative Opportunities for Higher Learning Engagement

Cathy MacDonald, PhD
Rankin School of Nursing, Saint Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia, B2G 2W5, Canada

Debra Sheppard-LeMoine, PhD
Rankin School of Nursing, Saint Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia, B2G 2W5, Canada

ABSTRACT

Educational research demonstrates that conventional pedagogies are no longer effective for actively engaging learners and produces learning isolation. Alternative interpretative approaches that foster learning and inquiry from multiple perspectives and contexts, while emanating from lived experiences engages and empowers students to explore and increase their understanding about sensitive topics (such as palliative care, leadership challenges, and practicing within vulnerable environments). Encouraging students to associate their personal experiences with evidenced-based knowledge and best practices in positive learning spaces supports innovative advancement of health care with a focus on culturally safe practices internationally. This can be accomplished via virtual global classrooms by using synchronous communication implementing video conferencing. The University of Calgary Qatar (UCQ), Doha has been active in this learning approach in both their undergraduate and graduate programs. A shared teaching/ learning experience was facilitated for the undergraduate Bachelor of Science Nursing (BScN) students in Doha, Qatar and the Rankin School of Nursing, Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada. This experience focused on building understanding of community nursing practices in both countries. In the UCQ master of nursing program, a palliative care course was offered for three spring sessions and a leadership course was offered for one spring session with synchronous communication via video conferencing between Nova Scotia and the Middle East. These virtual learning opportunities fostered relational and professional learning engagements that would not have been otherwise been possible. The authors contend that this work provides not only an opportunity for future higher learning engagements, but also a foundation for future global collaborative research and practice partnerships.

Keywords: Collaborative education, Distance technology, Global classroom, Narrative pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

In spring 2014, A University of Calgary Qatar (UCQ) palliative care master of nursing course was taught using narrative pedagogical approaches and Vidyo Desktop technology from Nova Scotia, Canada. This was the first time at UCQ that any course was taught using distance video conferencing technology. This course engaged students to explore and analyze their own beliefs, perceptions, biases and practice experiences with death, palliative and end-of-life

care. The course also empowered students to become more comfortable discussing such sensitive topics, in a virtual culturally safe space. Using narrative pedagogy, students were encouraged to associate their personal experiences and stories with evidence-based knowledge and best practices to advance palliative care in Qatar, while meeting the healthcare needs of dying patients, their families, and communities. In addition, a shared learning experience was offered to undergraduate nursing students in Doha, Qatar and the Rankin School of Nursing, Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia focusing on community nursing practices in both countries. The following is a reflective narrative that describes innovative collaborative learning opportunities for learning engagement for students in virtual global classrooms in both Qatar, Doha and in Nova Scotia, Canada. This article also challenges scholars to consider alternative platforms for higher learning engagement. The authors will share their experiences with teaching a palliative care course and community health nursing to students from Canada, the Middle East, India, Indonesia, Somalia, Tunisia, and other African countries using distance video conferencing technology. The paper will briefly outline the courses taught and highlight the lessons learned by sharing student excerpts.

2. NARRATIVE PEDAGOGY

Conventional outcome focused, and problem-based nursing pedagogies are no longer meeting learners needs to effectively engage in the complexities of nursing practice and challenging healthcare environments. According to Blumberg [1], conventional pedagogical approaches using didactic instructional strategies are primarily teacher centered and fosters passive student learning. Nursing education has previously focused on strategies targeted at covering considerable amounts of content in short periods of time [2] which causes an academic practice gap [3]. Narrative pedagogy is an alternative interpretative approach that engages learners and teachers in a reciprocal relationship, while fostering learning and inquiry from multiple perspectives and contexts [4,5]. Learners and teachers collectively generate, query, exchange and transform knowledge, while challenging assumptions related to nursing practice and education in safe learning environments [4]. Further, experiential knowledge is reflected upon and shared in a collaborative manner by way of storytelling, which engenders new understandings and ascribes contextual meanings [6]. Knowledge acquisition and translation using narrative pedagogy shapes and informs practice and education. Narrative pedagogy is advantageous for advancing palliative care, leadership, and community health nursing knowledge, practices, and policies [7].

3. CLASSROOMS WITHOUT WALLS: DISTANCE VIDEOCONFERENCING TECHNOLOGY

Videoconferencing offers educators and learners an alternative to classroom based-learning. It offered the authors an opportunity to teach the courses, which would have not been otherwise possible. By using Polycom technology, students were taught in real-time and able to meet with the educator individually to discuss assignments and have questions answered about the course. In addition, it was possible to have guest speakers who authored course required readings and have learning opportunities that fostered student and educator engagement in a cost-effective manner. Employing videoconferencing technology motivated both the students and educators and provided a global educational opportunity for all involved. Even the technological support individuals communicated how much they had learned not only about the technology, but the topics and concepts being presented. Videoconferencing provided enriched learning opportunities by expanding the resources for educational opportunities for both the students and educators. This is supported by Polycom Incorporated [8] citing that videoconferencing using Polycom brings the world to the students and the students to the

world, while enabling the re-designing of education delivery in an engaging and interactive manner.

4. DISTANCE TECHNOLOGY CHALLENGES

Although the experiences with videoconferencing technology were very positive, there were a few challenges that required consideration. It was important for the first few classes to allot time and efforts for building trusting relationships with students. There were cultural safety issues that needed to be addressed, such as ensuring students knew they were not being video-recorded, that there was no one else watching them during the class, there were no males present, and they could meet with educators on separate occasions if they requested. Another challenge that was addressed was the picture quality (freezing and grainy) and disconnections by the instillation of a high fiber-op cable at home. There was also a backup plan of telephone calling if disconnections occurred. Students and educators also had to learn how to use the technology for zooming in and out during presentations, adjusting volume, sharing content and what to do when experiencing volume loss or disconnections. There was no IT support at home, so trouble shooting was required a few times.

5. BRIEF OVERVIEWS OF COURSES

Philosophy and Practices of Palliative Care Course

The Palliative Care course was a comprehensive course examining the philosophy of palliative care with an emphasis on the students' self-exploration of their own beliefs, values, and attitudes about life, illness, death, and dying, and how this self-exploration shapes interactions with their patients. Course topics included; an understanding of diverse palliative care philosophies, understanding cancer and immunity, pain and comfort care, symptom management in Palliative care, ethics, decision-making and communication in palliative care,

psychosocial and spiritual care and lastly self-care for palliative care nurses. The course also highlighted an interdisciplinary approach to learning involving the synthesis of evidence-informed palliative care practices across the lifespan for the purposes of improving the quality of life of clients, families, and populations facing life-limiting conditions. Students demonstrated an understanding of the principles of palliative care by using a variety of evidence informed palliative care practice standards and tools. For example, students chose an art form that reflected or represented their philosophy of palliative care or end-of-life care and wrote a reflective analysis pertaining to a practicum experience in palliative care.

Health Services Leadership Course

The health services leadership course challenged students to explore and critically analyze the context in which healthcare organizations and nursing leadership functions. Strategic planning, project management and program evaluation were some of the concepts explored within the context of internal and external operating environments, transformational change, and leadership challenges and decision-making. Students gained an in-depth understanding of the factors and forces that influence and shape nursing roles and leadership responsibilities within healthcare systems. Students analyzed a healthcare experience/issue and developed a plan using leadership principles and practices. Course outcomes involved students being able to synthesize information pertaining to healthcare organizations and understand strategic planning. Students were also able to analyze research, management, policy, education and professional practices and challenges pertaining to health service organizations, while analyzing models and methods for measuring performance to improve the quality of health services.

Community Course

The fourth year Community Nursing Course at Saint Francis Xavier University exposed senior students to diverse community experiences such as public health, family resource center,

community agencies, street nursing and non-government organizations. Community Health Nursing builds understanding about the scope of practice for the nurse working within a community setting. Nursing roles and responsibilities from a socio-ecological perspective that are based on values of social justice, equity, and recognition of the significant influences of the determinants of health are a focus. Students had the opportunity to appraise the determinants of health, decision making, policies, and legislation at local, provincial, national, and international levels. The knowledge of human and cultural diversity, factors influencing health and disease states of populations, the ethics of care, and community/population were examined. Students analyzed prevalent population-based health issues, including chronic disease, and explore population-focused interventions. While the students were exposed to diverse community experiences there was an identified gap in exposure to global community nursing. The authors were connected to the University of Calgary Qatar and were able to build a virtual classroom between the faculty and student at both sites using videoconferencing technology.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

Students and faculty were provided with rich and innovative learning experiences in a global classroom without walls. The dominant themes that emerged from student evaluations and author's experiences of these learning opportunities included the following:

- Distance technology is an effective approach that supports innovative teaching
- Quality and enriching learning experiences were fostered for all involved
- Students are comfortable and want to be taught using videoconferencing technology
- Strong technological supports are required in all locations
- Provided innovative pedagogical approaches and strategies to engage students

- Presented future opportunities for research and publications for a
- Students attained knowledge and interacted with others in ways that would not otherwise be possible with contemporary teaching and learning approaches

7. STUDENT EVALUATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Students communicated the richness in learning experiences and that they were engaged in higher learning via distance conferencing education. The following are excerpts from a few students who provide examples of self-reflection about learning:

- Today was an eye-opening experience for my classmates and me." "There are so many similarities throughout the world regarding health care. It was great to be a part of this experience."
- Gained first- hand knowledge of the issues impacting another culture."
- "The opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation in real time allowed both groups to share openly and learn from one another," … "We were able to share stories about our roles as student nurses, as well as what issues were of greatest importance at this time."
- "We were all apprehensive at first, but this was wonderful. We shared stories and learned as much from one another. The teacher was able to meet with us if we needed. It is much more than someone just being on a big screen in front of us."
- "We are all looking to accomplish the same goal, the best possible health no matter the country there is one common theme underlying health care. That is the understanding and knowing that community and population health impacts and underlies every healthcare system no matter how far apart the systems maybe. Nurses have the natural insight to see the correlation between impact of the population's health on individuals within immediate and global outcomes for all people."

8. CONCLUSION

Using videoconferencing technology students in the Middle East were able to take masters courses in palliative care and leadership from educators in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Also, this is the first time UCQ and Saint Francis Xavier University Rankin School of Nursing brought students together to experience a virtual global classroom without walls using distance video conferencing technology and innovative teaching approaches. This positive experience provided the opportunity for open student exchange with difficult topics, while enthusiastically engaging students, faculty, and IT support. This work provides a foundation for a future research projects for building global understanding of nursing practice in palliative care, leadership, community nursing practice and education. "Global Classrooms Without Walls: Imagine the Engagement Opportunities!"

9. REFERENCES

[1] P. Blumberg, **Developing Learner-centered Teaching: A Practical Guide for Faculty**. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 2009.

[2] P. M. Ironside, "Using narrative pedagogy: learning and practicing interpretive thinking", **Journal of Advanced Nursing,** Vol. 55, No. 4, 2006, pp. 478-486.

[3] P. Benner, M. Sutphen, V. Leonard & L. Day, **Educating Nurses: A Call for Radical Transformation.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

[4] P. Ironside, "Narrative Pedagogy: Transforming Nursing Education Through 15 Years of Research in Nursing Education. **Nursing Education Perspectives,** VOL. 36, 2015, pp. 83-88. doi:10.5480/13-1102.

[5] C. McPherson, & C. MacDonald, "Blending Simulation-Based Learning and Interpretative Pedagogy for Undergraduate Leadership Competency Development", **Journal of Nursing Education**, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2017, pp. 49-55.

[6] I. Goodson & S. Gill, **Critical Narrative as Pedagogy.** Bloomsberry: New York, 2014.

[7] M. E. Makoe, **Bridging the Distance: The Pedagogy of Mobile Learning in Supporting Distance Learners.** 2012 Retrieved from: http://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs/39191/intech-bridging_the_distance_the_pedagogy_of_mobile_learning_in_supporting_distance_learners.pdf

[8] Polycom, Inc. **Polycom Education**, 2012 Retrieved from: http://www.polycom.com/collaboration-solutions/solutions-by-industry/education.html.