Nursing and Health Care

The Three C's of Effective Online Instruction

Keri E. Justice*

Abstract

Although much focus is given to the technological and instructional delivery aspects of online learning, there is also much research available that indicates that online learners perceive instructional effectiveness in the online classroom based on cognitive and social aspects more so than the mechanisms for delivery of content. The perception that online learners do not crave a socially intimate and cognitively meaningful learning experience is false, and often these aspects contribute the greatest to the student's overall satisfaction with the online learning experience. Behaviors and actions that can be modeled and implemented quite easily in any online course that will significantly increase the effectiveness of online instruction are those that develop and promote communication, connectivity, and compassion. In fact, the Institute for Higher Education Policy's 2000 report of benchmarks for successful online education emphasizes interaction and engagement in the online learning environment, beyond their focus on instructional delivery mechanisms and materials, course curriculum development, and content of the course itself. By implementing behaviors/actions that model connectivity, compassion, and communication, online learners experience a perceived increase in the quality of instruction they receive and an overall increase in program satisfaction, while faculty and the organization experience an increase in satisfaction due to improved faculty-student relationships, assurance of quality education for the community served, and intrinsic motivation for the provision of more meaningful learning.

Keywords : Cognitive; Education; Communication

Although much focus is given to the technological and instructional delivery aspects of online learning, there is also much research available that indicates that online learners perceive instructional effectiveness in the online classroom based on cognitive and social aspects more so than the mechanisms for delivery of content. The perception that online learners do not crave a socially intimate and cognitively meaningful learning experience is false, and often these aspects contribute the greatest to the student's overall satisfaction with the online learning experience. Behaviors and actions that can be modeled and implemented quite easily in any online course that will significantly increase the effectiveness of online instruction are those that develop and promote communication, connectivity, and compassion. In fact, the Institute for Higher Education Policy's 2000 [1] report of benchmarks for successful online education emphasizes interaction and engagement in the online learning environment, beyond their focus on instructional delivery mechanisms and materials, course curriculum development, and content of the course itself. By implementing behaviors/actions that model connectivity, compassion, and communication, online learners experience a perceived increase in the quality of instruction they receive and an overall increase in program satisfaction, while faculty and the organization experience an increase in satisfaction due to improved faculty-student relationships, assurance of quality education for the community served, and intrinsic motivation for the provision of more meaningful learning. To increase academic rigor and student engagement in online learning, it is necessary that nursing educators identify internalized perceptions associated with what contributes to "effective" online instruction. Nursing faculty must understand the importance of effective online instruction, as many students seeking out this format for learning have tremendous extraneous obligations apart from their academic obligations. Upon understanding the importance of comprehensive online instruction, faculty must also understand that there are methods and behaviors that facilitate the success of each student. In Palaparthy's work [2], Cathy Moore stated "The most important principle for designing lively eLearning is to see eLearning design not as

Affiliation:
Assistant Professor of Nursing, Middle Georgia State University, 100 University Parkway, Macon, GA, USA

*Corresponding author:
Keri E,
Justice, Assistant Professor of Nursing, Middle Georgia State University, 100 University Parkway, Macon, GA, USA, Tel: 478-471-2981
E-mail: keri.justice@mga.edu

information design but as designing an experience. It is common knowledge that learner engagement plays a critical role in the success of an eLearning course". Distance learning, also referred to as online or eLearning, is most often consumed by non-traditional or second career students who desire learning to be meaningful, relevant, timely, and engaging [3]. By integrating the three C's, connectivity, compassion, and communication, or the three C's of effective online instruction, both learners and instructors experience a fulfilling and satisfying interaction.

How do Students Perceive What is Effective Online Learning?

Students participating in online courses and distance learning formats consistently state that effective faculty demonstrate transformational leadership; illustrate a trust in their students that comes about by way of developing personal relationships and rapport. In addition, effective online faculty illustrates effective instruction by facilitating interaction and engagement amongst the cohort or group, even when asynchronous learning is occurring. Finally, one of the most important traits crucial to effective online instruction is the instructor's ability to emphasize meaningful application of the content [3].

Common Myths about Online Learning

There are various myths surrounding online learning that have prevented faculty from progressing in their effectiveness and making strides in this arena, even though online learning is booming nationwide. For example, many continue to assume that the technological design and instructional format of delivery is most important in its degree of effectiveness. In addition, some assume that online learners do not crave socially intimate and cognitively meaningful learning experiences, and in fact, seek out easy A's as opposed to meaningful learning. In contrast, the Institute for Higher Education Policy's 2000 report of benchmarks for successful online education emphasizes interaction and engagement in the online learning environment as two of the most important aspects of successful, effective online educational programs [4].

The Three C's of Effective Online Instruction

Based upon what research tells us about what our students need from us in the online learning classroom, the types of interactions they crave, and what propels them to succeed, the three C's are defined as connectivity, compassion, and communication. The reason that implementation of the three C's work is because this practice allows students to do most of the work. The more work and time the student spends engaged via communication, connectivity, and reception of compassion in content, the more they learn. Interactivity is the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning; for example, interaction with peers, faculty, resources, small groups, and one on one [3].

What do the 3 C's Require of Me?

The three C's of effective online instruction require faculty

presence; social presence, cognitive presence, and a strong teaching presence. Each of these three areas of faculty presence is complimentary to the other and necessary for effective online instruction. Regarding social presence, faculty assist students in an online course to begin, to establish a community of learning by projecting their personal characteristics into discussions. In other words, they present themselves as real people first and students second. This is essential because this practice facilitates the expression of emotion/feelings (compassion), belongingness and commitment (connectivity), and the trust for future disclosures (communication). With cognitive presence faculty and students can construct and confirm meaning through sustained discussion in a community of inquiry. While faculty introduces conceptual and theoretical knowledge, students are encouraged to relate such knowledge to meaningful experiences (communication, connectivity, compassion). Teaching presence is the facilitation of the cognitive and social process for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes, understanding that not all students' journey will look the same; communicate and connect with students to identify strengths and illustrate compassion for their unique learning situations [4].

There are many methods by which connectivity can be effectively established. Faculty should not be afraid to convey appropriate personal information to students. For example, an online course may include a Start module or Introductory Bio Discussion from the faculty that facilitates collegial interaction. Faculty can establish connectivity with students by providing timely and meaningful feedback on assignments and commenting on specifics rather than ambiguous details. Be encouraged to integrate yourself as a faculty member into your online course by posting regular web updates and announcements about upcoming assignments or events. Be active and visible within the course, as visibility is equivalent to accessibility, which communicates caring and vested interest to the student. Check in with "at risk" students frequently and provide necessary and beneficial resources [5,6].

Communication is perhaps one of the most important of the three C's of effective online instruction, as the student is totally reliant on all other means of interaction with faculty in absence of face to face contact as in the traditional classroom. One way to facilitate communication is to state clear expectations always; without specifics, assumption is the default. Let your students know the best method of communication for you and expectations regarding timeliness of feedback. When you do communicate with students, personalize responses and include information that is meaningful and specific. If there are behaviors or actions that need to be corrected, sandwich that corrective feedback in between positive remarks about behaviors you have noted or areas of improvement you have seen occurring. Perhaps most important is to exemplify professional behavior. Students expect you to tell them to do certain things and behave certain ways, but seeing you do the very same is the strongest method of communication there is. In all things and always, build up the profession in all communication, and remember that you can never over communicate or over encourage your students [4,7].

Equally as important as connectivity and communication is compassion in the effectiveness of online learning. Some faculty struggle with compassion somewhat, as there can be blurred lines between strict professionalism and a balanced vulnerability of humaneness as a faculty. One of the best methods of communicating and illustrating compassion is to provide an open-door policy for students by establishing a rapport and giving them permission to share while creating a balance of privacy, distance, and concern. Allow for opportunities to learn things about your students that are completely unrelated to their nursing academia. Compassion is truly illustrated when faculty can empathize with and make modifications for the fact that life does not stop when school begins; particularly because many of the online learners are nontraditional students. Concurrently, faculty should reiterate expectations of behavior and conduct and correct issues in a timely and private manner; be an instructor that they do not want to disappoint [5].

How Far Reaching are the Benefits of The Three C's in Online Instruction?

Although faculty growth will certainly occur as a result of implementing the three C's, the students are the real beneficiaries of effective online instruction. When online instruction is effective by way of implementation of connectivity, communication, and compassion, students begin to value learning for learning's sake and not simply as a requirement that must be fulfilled. More students pursue continued education and increasing numbers of students become involved in education themselves. Overall, both faculty and students feel value, respect, appreciation, and satisfaction [4,8].

Conclusion

There are currently faculty utilizing many of the methods of connectivity, communication, and compassion to improve the effectiveness of their online instruction. Many of these faculties have been agents of change, so to speak. Change is disruptive and can be uncomfortable, yet the benefits for our learners can be vast and exponential. Be encouraged to inspire a vision and grow a passion in your online courses; enable others to act and invest in the potential of every single student. Perhaps most important, model the way; there is no buy in when there is no authenticity. Encourage the heart; the three C's do not just produce better nurses, but better people.

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