Multiple Modalities for APA Instruction: Addressing Diverse Learning Styles [1,2,3]

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities are increasingly offering online coursework as a means to meet the demand for a nursing population with advanced degrees. In concordance with progress toward advanced degrees, advanced writing skills are expected from students. Online faculty members are therefore charged with the task of developing such writing skills in students. The effective instruction of writing skills requires multiple instructional modalities for a typically diverse online student community. Findings based on student surveys indicate that a video series can help meet the needs of an online student population representing multiple learning styles.

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Institutions of higher education are in an era of rapid expansion in online learning opportunities for nursing students. As nursing students progress toward advanced degrees, they are expected to demonstrate increased competence in scholarly writing skills. Hence, online faculty are often responsible for the instruction and cultivation of student writing skills. Online classrooms are characterized by their service to notably diverse student populations, and it is the best practice to meet this diversity with significant variance in coursework to facilitate the success of different student learning styles. However, the instruction of scholarly writing is traditionally offered using only references to writing manuals: There is little variance in instructional methodology. In conformity with best practices, and to better prepare students for advanced nursing coursework, a multimodal educational strategy for writing instruction is described and assessed.

Background and Literature Search

The National Academy of Sciences (2010) has recommended that educational institutions increase the number of nurses with advanced degrees. It recommends that the country double the number of nurses with doctoral degrees by the year 2020. Further, it calls for accreditation commissions to monitor nursing schools in order to ensure that a minimum of 10% of baccalaureate graduates enter a postgraduate program within 5 years of degree completion. It is the position of the Institute of Medicine that academic institutions facilitate a seamless transition for students as they make advances from registered nurse (RN) to bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) to advanced degree programs (Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Nursing students, however, often arrive at advanced degree programs unprepared to exhibit competency in academic and professional writing skills. Faculty indicate dissatisfaction with student proficiency in writing, and students themselves experience anxiety and uncertainty surrounding academic and professional writing expectations (Whitehead, 2002).

Beachy (2016) notes that opportunities for advanced education are increasingly available through accredited online programs. Nationally, there are 252 RN-BSN online degree programs and 170 online master's of science in nursing programs. As online programs continue to expand, it is paramount that online instructors support student development as skilled writers. At the baccalaureate level, it is the position of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2016a) that nursing educators issue and assess writing-intensive

assignments to develop effective academic and professional communication skills in students. In advanced studies for postgraduate degrees, students are expected to produce works of scholarly writing (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2016b).

Instructors of online courses must meet the needs of a remarkably diverse student population. Distance education students are more likely to be employed full time and have families and accompanying family commitments and responsibilities. Students enrolled in an online course will often represent multiple time zones and communities ranging from rural to urban. Some students may be proficient in online coursework; others may be beginners (Thomlinson, 2013). In distance education, multimodal teaching methodologies are considered best practice, and research recommends saturating coursework with as much instructional variance as technology and budgets permit (Wu, 2014).

A multimodal teaching strategy for online students may be developed using the Visual Aural Read–Write Kinaesthetic classification system. On a Visual Aural Read–Write Kinaesthetic model, student learning styles are viewed as falling into four categories: those who learn best with visual aids and demonstrations, those who learn best from verbal explanations, those who learn best from text-based materials, and those who learn best from interactive, hands-on activities (Bhagat, Vyas, & Singh, 2015; Khanal, Shah, & Koirala, 2014). Students may prefer a particular style, they may use several styles, and their preferred styles may change as they advance through a program (Mitchell & Santhamma, 2015).

Typically, writing instruction has been limited by the exclusive use of reading-centric teaching strategies. That is, students are presented with the publication manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) and are expected to demonstrate writing mastery, based on exposure to the manual. Students often perceive the APA manual to be intimidating and unhelpful. In addition, the acquisition of writing skills itself is frequently undervalued by nursing students. Faculty report that students fail to see the relevance of such skills in health professions and, therefore, submit assignments that demonstrate little to no mastery of professional or academic writing competence.

To create a path to effective professional and academic communication skills, faculty must employ a wider range of teaching tools for student writing instruction.

Intervention

To facilitate a seamless transition for students beginning in an RN-BSN program, an online orientation class is required for entering students. Within the course, students are given access to learning tools to assist them in mastering scholarly writing skills. The APA manual is a required text; students are also given checklists, writing templates and the Shaw Video Series to provide tools that foster academic development across the spectrum of learning styles.

The Shaw Video Series is an interactive tutorial, produced by the instructor of the online orientation course. Each tutorial lasts approximately 20 min. Students may pause the video and resume play, as appropriate. In the course of the video tutorials, the students watch and listen to their instructor. Students also watch responses on the instructor's computer screen as they are guided through usage of the APA manual. Students are encouraged to join the instructor in the process of formatting a document.

In the course of the video exercises, visual learners may observe the process of finding and applying information in the manual. They observe the instructor at the computer and the on-screen responses of the computer as the instructor formats and edits an APA document.

For audio learners, the instructor accompanies the visual elements of the video series with audio narration of the formatting and editing process as it is performed.

Kinesthetic learners may join the recorded instructor in a process whereby the manual is physically highlighted and tabbed. Learners may also work on their own computer documents in concordance with the instructor's actions during the video series.

Learners who thrive in the traditional read–write environment will continue to have access to the manual as a guide for mastery of APA skills.

Analysis

Initial responses to this instructional approach have been encouraging. After the completion of the online orientation coursework, program faculty have indicated increased levels of satisfaction with student written work. Student evaluations of course materials point to several interesting observations. Students who completed the orientation course were surveyed with an exemption from the host institution's internal review board. Of the 15 anonymous student surveys returned, the majority of students (nine) identified themselves as kinesthetic learners. That is, the students viewed themselves as those who learn best by performing an activity.

The self-identification is notable because online learning is typically not highly compatible with kinesthetic learning styles (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2015). Despite the incompatibility, 13 of the 15 students indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statement "The APA tools/information offered in the online orientation course helped me write my final paper." The remaining two students entered neutral responses, zero students disagreed with the statement.

Conclusions

In the sample group, the disproportionate number of online nursing students who self-identify as kinesthetic learners remains striking and has been noted by the instructional team as a motivator to explore online instructional styles that are compatible with kinesthetic learning. Further research into the efficacy of the Shaw Video Series in APA instruction is planned. Such research will seek to not only assess compatibility with online nursing student learning styles but also pose questions about quantifiable improvements in student academic and scholarly writing skills.

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