

Course Mapping: Expectations Visualized

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ABSTRACT

Academic program curricula have historically been mapped. It is proposed that a map can also be utilized to provide a visual overview for individual courses to meet professional and best practice standards. A course map serves as a visual representation to link course learning objectives to course assignment expectations and how the student can assess achievement. This article is specific to an online course, but the framework could be applied to any course.

Keywords: course design, course expectations, course mapping, learning objectives, online course

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While online education reflects a learning platform utilized by a growing number of graduate and doctor of nursing practice (DNP) programs, there are unique challenges that impact congruence between faculty expectation for performance and student understanding of these expectations. The deficiency of best practice and standardized design rubrics for online nursing courses exacerbates the disparate interpretation.¹ “Connection” and “common understanding” have been identified as essential components for successful curriculum development and student transfer of knowledge to practice.² To support shared understanding, it is critical that students be offered a tool that displays transparency between course learning objectives based on education standards, activities assigned by faculty, and what is required of them to achieve academic success.¹ A course map is proposed as the graphic tool faculty could utilize as a component of active learning to link a connection for students and support their momentum toward engagement and academic success.

COURSE MAPPING

Map Overview

Although there is a paucity of literature describing course mapping, mapping has been addressed in literature, historically, as curriculum mapping of academic programs.^{3,4} Course mapping differs because of its unique focus on a specific course design and how student learning outcomes and activities are connected.

The ideal course map provides student clarity because it identifies, at a glance, crucial course components and actions required to meet standards.⁴ Accreditation and best practice standards, referenced by the faculty, are used to determine the essential course components that form the framework of the course map.⁵

COURSE DESIGN

The design of a course map flows parallel with the overall development of a course. In designing a course, it is necessary to ask from the perspective of the student, “How am I meeting the standards or objectives? What is the purpose of each assignment? What particular outcome(s) is each required assignment designed to meet? Does each assignment align with at least one overall course objective?” Course design with focused attention on manageable learning components supports student learning.⁶ The course map provides a visual overview of all components of the online course.

Identified learning components must each have learning outcomes with transparent paths for student achievement.⁶ Learning components divided into modules with topical themes are formed from the overall course objectives. The strategy for achievement of learning outcomes within the module becomes evident through alignment with assignments and activities.⁵ The student experience of learning and the stated course learning objectives must be clearly linked.⁷ It is also essential that

students have clarity about how evaluation of learning will be accomplished.³ Each assignment weight should be intentional with regard to the importance of the goal an assignment is designed to meet. The grading rubric for each assignment or activity, which is a detailed document supporting the course map, must be instructive and reflect specific performance outcomes. The rubric clearly outlines assignment expectations and how points are distributed within any given assignment. The course map displays how each assignment reflects a portion of the total course score.

The course map includes topical modules to deliver the content by selected themes. Topical modules on the map present an opportunity for the student to visualize learning themes. The identification of focused topics with associated essential learning outcomes has been identified by Fiegel⁸ as a model for clear course design. The summation of topical modules, learning outcomes, and performance measures forms the framework for the course map. By establishing a pathway through the course with the course map, both students and faculty have a clear and shared sense of where they are going and the performance expected to meet learning objectives.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

For the benefit of the course map to be realized, students and faculty must be motivated to utilize the tool and actively engage in dialogue about outcomes expectations and design of meaningful learning activities. Introducing the course map during the first day of class actively involves students in gaining an overall perspective of the course, helps them understand the goal of assignments, and links the information with competencies for practice. The dialogue using the course map could be in addition to the standard course syllabus review or to replace the review. Faculty could begin discussing a competency required for future practice and focus attention on this isolated competency.⁹ After discussing the competency, students would discuss one assignment that strengthens student abilities to achieve that goal. Providing examples initially will help students integrate the information.

For example, during the first week of class in an adult gerontology primary care nurse practitioner

clinical course, faculty could present one competence for adult gerontology primary care nurse practitioners: “Assessment of Health Status: Prioritizes data collection, according to the patient’s age, immediate condition or needs, as a continuous process in acknowledgement of the dynamic nature of complex acute, critical, and chronic illness or injury.”^{9(p13)} This narrow focus of practice competencies encourages focus on the assignment, and requirements for successful assignment completion. The map makes the assignment a clear tool to link experiences in practice with the competency.

Another example to incorporate when introducing the course and course map is patient safety, which is a national recommendation. A goal for an adult gerontology acute care nurse practitioner would be: “Performs specific diagnostic strategies and technical skills to monitor and sustain physiological function and ensure patient safety, including but not limited to EKG interpretation, X-ray interpretation, respiratory support, hemodynamic monitoring, line and tube insertion, lumbar puncture, and wound debridement.”^{9(p16)} This guides students to gain an understanding of how they meet the Assessment of Health Status competency in their future profession. This competency, as outlined by the American Association of the Colleges of Nursing, speaks to students eager to perform clinical skills. When introduced in a clinical course, it can thread back into previous graduate nursing core educational courses (including courses on evidence-based practice, nursing research, and nursing informatics). Relating use of the course map to earlier courses and linking it to the current course helps students understand the connection between accurate patient management and clinical decision-making.

Faculty encouragement of active learning fosters student construction of a personal meaning from course materials presented. Student-centered engagement is the foundation of active learning theory.⁶ Active learning theory encourages students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information as it applies to their current course in association with previous learning.⁶ Faculty support offered to students who will examine the overall goals of a course is an initial step. Student familiarity with the course map can be encouraged through early-

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