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Instructional Perspectives of Nurse Educators Engaged in Teaching via Distance Education

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INSTRUCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF NURSE EDUCATORS ENGAGED IN TEACHING VIA DISTANCE EDUCATION

Gretchen Drinkard & John A. Henschke

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to contribute to knowledge regarding instructional perspectives of 35 University of Missouri-St. Louis nurse faculty, who were teaching via distance education formats. The study was designed to identify differences of respondents rating the seven factors of the Instructional Perspectives Inventory (IPI), which include: teacher empathy with learners; teacher trust of learners; planning and delivery of instruction; accommodating learner uniqueness; teacher insensitivity toward learners; learner-centered learning processes; and teacher-centered learning processes (Henschke, 1994). This study also identified differences between the seven factors and specific demographic data (age, number of years teaching nursing, number of semesters teaching via distance education, formal exposure to adult education concepts and highest degree earned).

The two areas of statistically significant findings from the analysis of the data were regarding the factor "teacher trust of learners." Respondents with doctorates outside of nursing scored significantly higher on teacher trust of learners than those with doctorates in nursing. Also, respondents with a Master of Science degree in nursing scored significantly higher on teacher trust of learners than those with doctorates in nursing.

Introduction

Distance education, defined as "any formal approach to learning in which a majority of the instruction occurs while educator and learner are at a distance from one another" (Verduin & Clark, 1991, p. 8) is a driving force in development and implementation of higher education programs in the new millennium. Kascus (1994) estimates that by the year 2007, approximately 50% of learners enrolled in higher education programs will take courses through distance education. The U. S. Department of Education (1999) reports that the number of distance education courses offered in 1997-98 was approximately double what it was in 1994-95.

The discipline of nursing has embraced the possibilities offered by distance education, with approximately 51% of nursing programs in the United States being engaged in distance education endeavors (Potempa, 2001). The current nursing arena contains many forces that demand increased access to higher and continuing education for nursing, including an acute shortage of nurses, not only in numbers, but also in qualifications. In addition to the need for more nurses, there is a need for nurses with advanced degrees.

There is evidence that educational programs offered via distance education formats are based upon assumptions regarding the learner and the faculty described by adult education tenets, including such things as:

- the need for self-directedness on the part of the learner (Chapman, 2000);
- relinquishing some control of the learning situation by the faculty (Olcott & Wright, 1995);
- active engagement in the learning process (Hayes, 1990; Lewis & Farrell, 1995; Novotny, 2000);
- student-centered learning (Jansen & Lewis, 1996; Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 1996; Novotny, 2000); and,
- learner's high level of motivation (Mclsaac & Gunawardena, 1996; Novotny, 2000).

Many students who select distance education programs are adults with personal and professional requirements which make distance education formats appealing (Verduin & Clark, 1991). Knowles (1980) did extensive work in developing and advancing knowledge regarding how adults learn. His concept of andragogy addresses the differences between adult learners and child learners regarding the: Self-concept of the learner, role of the learner's experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, motivation to learn, and a reason why they should do something. He also advances the theory to assist educators in how to think about the adult learner so as to best assist the learner to address learning needs. Knowles' definition of andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43) continues to describe the phenomenon as we move into the 21st century.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to knowledge regarding instructional perspectives held by nurse faculty engaged in teaching via distance education formats. This will occur by identifying the group mean differences of respondents rating the seven factors (Henschke, 1994) of instructional perspectives (beliefs, feelings, and behaviors) held and practiced by Nurse Educators engaged in teaching distance education formats.

This study was undertaken to answer the following questions: 1. What is the perspective of nursing faculty engaged in teaching via distance education formats in relation to the following adult education principles: teacher empathy with learners, teacher trust of learners, planning and delivery of instruction, accommodating learner uniqueness, teacher insensitivity towards learners, learner-centered learning processes and teacher-centered learning processes?

2. Is the use of adult education principles by nursing faculty engaged in teaching via distance education formats related to demographic factors, including age, number of years teaching, number of semesters teaching in distance education courses, highest degree earned and formal exposure to adult education concepts?

This study was designed to contribute to research in adult education, nursing education and distance education. The intent was to help provide foundational information to assist in understanding the theoretical underpinnings of instruction in this expanding instructional milieu. The use of the understanding regarding instructional perspectives derived from a theoretical base may contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of distance education programs which are coherent and based upon a defensible theoretical foundation, rather than merely a selection from the smorgasbord of techniques and technologies.

The Methodology

Nurse Educators engaged in teaching via distance education at a Midwest University were invited to participate in a descriptive study designed to measure their instructional perspectives from an adult education frame of reference. Henschke's (1994) "Instructional Perspectives Inventory," a demographic form, and an informed consent agreement were secured from participants. Sample size was 35 nurse educators.

Henschke (1994) designed the Instructional Perspectives Inventory as an assessment instrument indicating self-reported beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of adult educators in practice. The seven factors identified as beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of adult educators are: teacher empathy with learners; teacher trust of learners; planning and delivery of instruction; accommodating learner uniqueness; teacher insensitivity toward learners; learner-centered learning processes; and, teacher-centered learning processes and are the dependent variables in this study.

Demographic data were collected on the following: age, number of years teaching nursing, number of semesters teaching via distance education, highest degree earned, formal exposure to adult education concepts and campus location. These items are the independent variables in this study.

Descriptive statistics were used to describe data collected in the research sample. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine significant differences in means when comparing each dependent variable to each independent variable. Tukey's (Cohen, 1987) test was applied in areas where significance was found in order to determine which demographic subgroup caused the significance.

Summary of Significant Findings/Conclusions

The area of statistically significant findings for this study has to do with Teacher Trust of Learners, an attribute considered to be the harbinger of an adult education approach to the learning situation. Eleven dimensions of trust included: Purposefully communicating to learners that they are each uniquely important; believing learners know what their goals, dreams and realities are like; expressing confidence that learners will develop the skills they need; prizing the learners to learn what is needed; feeling learners' need to be aware of and communicate their thoughts and feelings; enabling learners to evaluate their own progress in learning; hearing learners indicate what their learning needs are; engaging learners in clarifying their own aspirations; developing a supportive relationship with learners; experiencing unconditional positive regard for learners; and, respecting the dignity and integrity of learners. Participants with doctorates outside of nursing showed significantly more trust of learners than participants with doctorates in nursing. Participants reporting their highest degree as a Master's in Nursing also report greater trust of learners than those with doctorates in nursing.

Discussion of Findings

The issue of trust is pivotal in the adult education field. Henschke (1998) describes the importance of trust in the education of adult learners: "To be effective, an adult educator needs to have trust in the ability and potential of learners (emerging adult educators) to understand the learning process and make the right choices" (p. 12). Interpreting the finding that faculty members with doctorates in nursing have less trust for the learner

than the faculty member with either a Master's in Nursing or a doctorate outside of nursing merits additional scrutiny.

The current status of preparation of nurses with advanced degrees reflects a similar turmoil to the one experienced within the profession historically regarding the best way to educate nurses—this time taken to the graduate level. The impetus provided by the desire for nursing to fit into academe as relative newcomers in the 1940's and 1950's was instrumental in a flurry to dramatically increase the research base of the profession (National League for Nursing, 2002).

The literature reflects the focus at the doctoral level in nursing education as being on nursing research and nursing science. In describing purposes for doctoral study at various institutions, LaMontagne (1996) and Fitzpatrick (2000) relate the goal of preparing nurse scientists to expand the knowledge base for nursing practice. No mention is made of the educator role.

Kelly (2002) describes that there is a lack of emphasis on educational tracks in master's and doctoral nursing programs and states that "the preparation for a research career as emphasized in doctoral programs is not sufficient for effective teaching" (p. 25). Increasingly, 4-year colleges are eliminating the educator role at the master's level, since those tracks are shrinking while the advanced practice nurse programs are growing (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 1999) and because of pressure that the preferred entry level for teaching nursing is at the doctoral level. Yet, it is at the master's level that students can choose an educator focus.

The AACN (1999) reported the following: Exacerbating the nursing shortage overall are inadequate numbers of doctorally prepared nursing faculty. In its core guidelines for master's education, AACN notes that the primary thrust of master's programs should be to prepare nurses for clinical roles and that the doctoral degree 'should be considered the appropriate and desirable credential for a nurse educator.' But of more than 9,000 faculty at AACN member nursing schools, only slightly more than 50 percent are doctorally prepared. (p. 1)

The number of doctoral programs in nursing has increased. The National League for Nursing (NLN, 2002) details the increase by describing that in 1993, there were 54 doctoral programs in nursing. By 1999, the number of programs had increased to 72, an increase of 33 percent. However, the decided focus of doctoral programs has become to produce researchers. Kelly (2002) states that the incentives for faculty in terms of promotions, tenure, and merit pay increases occur primarily for research activities.

Perhaps the significant differences found in this study regarding teacher trust of learners and highest degree obtained could be related to the emphasis on research (Fitzpatrick, 2000; LaMontagne, 1996) and lack of emphasis on educational concepts in programs leading to doctorates in Nursing (NLN, 2002). Thus, at the MSN level (this group was found to have greater teacher trust of learners than those with doctorates in Nursing), nurses are more likely to have exposure to adult education concepts and precepts. Similarly, when comparing individuals prepared with doctorates outside of nursing (often sought from education) to individuals with doctorates in nursing, it is not unreasonable to believe that there would be more likelihood of exposure to educational theories, including andragogy, outside of nursing.

Implications for Practice

There is tremendous pressure for nurses to pursue their doctorates in nursing, and often a resulting bias against those who look outside of the nursing discipline. This researcher has long believed that Nursing must have all contributors: nurse clinicians, nurse scientists and nurse educators. The expertise upon which we draw to accomplish our mission comes from many disciplines, a fact in which we have taken great pride. The "liberal arts" basis for nursing practice, which is reflected, to an increasing degree, in our curricula, has been a cornerstone at the undergraduate level. It seems apparent that the nursing discipline would be further enriched by maintaining a multi- and inter-disciplinary approach to our education at the graduate level as well.

In addition to nurse scientists, nursing needs individuals who are skilled educators and work in the area Boyer (1990) would call the scholarship of teaching. The nursing profession must continue to explore the purpose of doctoral education and begin the process of "rethinking doctoral education" (Fitzpatrick, 2000, p. 159). It is the opinion of this researcher that nursing faculty who pursue doctorates outside of nursing augment the richness of the profession by possessing an interdisciplinary grounding, for example, an understanding of theoretical underpinnings informing and guiding the education of adults. The findings of the current study, including the statistically significant findings which show that individuals with doctorates outside of nursing have higher trust of learners, a pivotal component to the education of adults, help to illustrate that belief.

Leaders of programs of study leading to doctorates in nursing are encouraged to examine their curricula for inclusion of theoretical background for the teaching role of the faculty member, as well as for the research role of the faculty member. Innovative strategies will be necessary to avoid eliminating the specific theoretical information for education within a practice discipline from doctoral programs in nursing.

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