Best practices: An online doctoral learning experience

Tracy Christianson & Tracy Hoot

Tracy Christianson, RN, BSN, MN, DHEd (c)
Lecturer, School of Nursing
900 McGill Road, FAN 106
250-828-5478

tchristianson@tru.ca

ABSTRACT

Online education offers students the flexibility to attend to course work when personal or work commitments conflict with learning. Students who do not have the ability to commute to classes have the opportunity to continue their education online through distance learning. Other benefits to online learning are that students are not limited in their decision based solely on program suitability or availability. This paper reviews the literature on best practices for asynchronous online learning and the factors that students should consider when choosing to enroll in an online program. The authors' personal journey, beginning at their decision to enroll in an online doctoral education program, to factors that contributed positively to their online experience is discussed.

Keywords: Online Education, Best Practices, Doctoral Education, Personal Journey

INTRODUCTION

Best Practices: An Online Doctoral Learning Experience

When choosing a doctoral program the candidate must take into consideration a number of factors. For instance, how responsive is the type of program to the candidate's learning needs? Some students may prefer the traditional type of program in which the student attends face-to-face classroom sessions on campus while other students, due to their geographical location, would choose the more non-traditional approach of an on-line learning environment. Other factors, such as family responsibilities, work commitment, feasibility, and tuition costs may also determine the type of doctoral program the student chooses. The purpose of this brief paper is to discuss best practice in doctoral education by sharing the authors' personal lived experience in attending an online doctoral program.

The promotion of online learning in doctoral education has steadily increased over the last 10 years in the United States. Allen and Seaman (2005) reported that 65% of postsecondary institutions that currently offer face-to-face courses also offer the same courses online. The term on-line learning is used synonymously by some when describing distance education (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Ahern, & Liu, 2006). While any course that is delivered to students who are not present in a classroom can be defined as distance education, on-line learning usually means that course delivery is completely administered on the internet. Moore, Dickson-Deane, and Galyen (2011) define online learning as an "improved version of distance learning" (p. 130) and that it may be described as e-learning or web-based learning with online being the environment using computer mediated communication (Finch & Jacobs, 2011). Learning is facilitated through structured learning activities which includes consistent interactions with faculty and peers through online transactions. Single parents and working professionals now have the ability to enroll in graduate studies where program delivery is 100% online. Students tend to be appreciative of the convenience of this type of programming as it provides the flexibility that allows them to work full-time while obtaining a doctoral degree where geographical access is limited (Leners, Wilson, & Sitzman, 2007). Although online higher education remains a controversial and debatable topic in some academic circles (Adams, 2009), research conducted by Sikora and Carroll (2002)

demonstrated the favorability of this type of education amongst students. Research results revealed that students who participated in online learning were equally or more satisfied than the students who were enrolled in the same course in a traditional classroom setting (Sikora & Carroll, 2002) with often having better success than students in face-to-face classrooms (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009 as cited in Finch & Jacobs, 2012). On the other hand, the downside to online education as perceived by some relates to insufficient opportunity to interact with peers and faculty (Adams, 2009). However, this concern can certainly be addressed through course design.

Although the literature on best practice for online doctoral programming is limited, research has established the necessity of certain elements to be considered during course design (Moore, 2011; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Considerations such as learner characteristics, pedagogy, faculty expertise, course technology, learner resources, learner interaction, and learner engagement have the potential to influence the effectiveness of an online asynchronous learning environment (Moore, 2011). Lim, Morris, and Kupritz (2007) identified learner engagement and course involvement as a drawback to online instruction; unless the learner is self-motivated and possesses strong organizational skills, learning online may prove to be a challenge for some learners. In order to be successful in this type of learning environment, learners must be engaged in the experience (Rao & Giuli, 2010). Evidence suggests faculty members who have expertise in online course instruction have the skill to enrich the learning experience for the learner (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Schifter, 2000). The student's exposure to online learning may be limited; therefore he/she may rely on the faculty's expertise to help with the navigation of the course. Post-secondary institutions that offer online courses need to provide students with adequate access to technical support, academic advising, library and bookstore services, and registration. Lao and Gonzales (2005) noted that students who were enrolled in online courses believed that access and understanding of the technology was instrumental to their success. Students expect faculty to guide and support their transition from a face-to-face classroom learning environment to one that is solely administered through the Internet. Since online classroom interactions are facilitated through computers, students should have a basic understanding on how to access the Internet and participate in an online course by using learning management systems, such as Blackboard. Not only are faculty expected to provide students with an orientation to the on-line course but also on how to use unfamiliar computer technology. Since success in an online course may depend on the student's computer skills, faculty members who have experience with on-line teaching can help students overcome the technological obstacles often associated with online learning (Sampson, Leonard, Ballenger, & Coleman, 2010).

Having a teaching presence in the on-line learning environment can increase student satisfaction with learning as Kumar and colleagues (2011) discovered in the development of an online doctorate of education (EdD) program. Based on student feedback the strength of this EdD program was the teaching presence that faculty had with their students. Student satisfaction was directly correlated to faculty expertise in on-line teaching and learning, instructional design, course/program structure and organization, and timely feedback and support (Kumar, Dawson, Black, Cavanaugh, & Sessums, 2011). Furthermore, So (2005, as cited in Lowenthal & Parscal, 2008) reported that there was "a definite, consistent and strong relationship among student perceptions of interaction, social presence, and learning" (p. 4). Students are more likely to actively engage in meaningful on-line discussions if the instructor has a presence in the discussion forum (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). For instance, instead of waiting for the weekend to contribute to a discussion thread, students are more apt to participate throughout the week by critically reflecting and responding to questions posed by their peers and instructor. Faculty members who facilitate and contribute to the on-line discussions create a social presence in the forum that helps guide discussions that students are having difficulty with. When instructors are involved in the discussion forum they can pose additional questions when student responses become repetitive and/or minimal. However, instructors can disrupt the flow of the discussion responses when their involvement in the forum becomes excessive and intrusive. Researchers in graduate online courses concluded faculty-student interactions can create a high degree of mutual support, and increase not only student learning but participation in the online learning community (Varnhagen, Wilson, Krupa, Kasprzak, & Hunting, 2005).

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) concluded in their review of the literature of online learning that faculty should strive to promote both teacher–student and student– student interaction to help learners construct knowledge. Furthermore, instructors need to participate in the discussions and provide scaffolding to help students in their discussions.

Online learning environments that establish a sense of community, offer multiple instructional strategies, promote varied learning styles, and provide opportunities for self-directed and collaborative learning promote the quality of online education (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). A community of online learners can be created by setting clear expectations about how students communicate within the course. Studies revealed that frequent interactions/discussions with faculty and peers had the ability to build trust, clarify ideas or issues, demonstrate learning through reflection and critical skill development, and increase motivation and satisfaction (Butcher & Sieminski, 2009; Moore, 2011). Designing and delivering an online course that is interactive yet cultivates student self-directedness is critical for influencing learning. Using the Sloan Consortium's metrics for online learning effectiveness, Moore (2011) highlighted that on-line programs and courses should be interactive and take advantage of the medium to improve learning; learning outcomes be comparable to traditional courses; and should enhance communication to establish trust and build a sense of community. When choosing a doctoral program, students should question whether the program fits with their personal situation and learning needs. For instance, are the tuition costs reasonable? Does the institution offer financial assistance? Is the student expected to attend a face-to-face orientation on campus? Is faculty involved in the development of the course? Does faculty have expertise in facilitating on-line instruction?

A Doctoral Learning Experience

As Rao and Giuli (2010) have stated, trying to balance work, family, and other commitments can be a significant challenge when undertaking a doctoral program. These considerations, along with geographical location, learning needs and goals, and the overall financial implications were factors that the authors considered when beginning their search for a suitable doctoral program. In their study of PhD nursing students, Jordan-Halter, Kleiner, and Formanek-Hess (2006) found that the lack of proximity to the traditional face-to-face delivery was a significant deterrent for those students who lived at a distance from the institution. For the authors, the opportunity to undertake a doctoral program through distance programming was an attractive alternative since geographically their community was isolated from such learning opportunities. In addition, the flexibility to work at home and at one's own pace around a busy personal and professional life were features that appealed to the authors. Unfortunately, some students may choose a program based on how the program is delivered and not necessarily on the doctoral degree being offered (Leners et al., 2007). Both authors began the process of identifying a suitable program by first listing and ranking which considerations were most important. Once it was decided which features were important to the authors, research into available on-line doctoral programs began. Extensive research into doctoral programs offered worldwide, led the authors to one of the few accredited universities to offer a degree in health education (DHEd).

A.T. Still University (ATSU), in Kirksville Missouri, was established in 1892 by Dr. Andrew Still as the first osteopathic medical training with the philosophy of mind, body, and spiritual wellbeing (ATSU, 2013a). Today accredited by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, ATSU offers a variety of programs through its six schools, including a doctorate of health education (DHEd) program within the School of Health Management (SHM). The DHEd program is a unique credential to ATSU as students learn in a completely virtual learning environment. As one of the few online doctorate degrees in health education, students examine the current state of health education and their individual roles and responsibilities within it (ATSU, 2013b). The mission of the SHM aligns with that of the university by being a learning-centered school focused on preparing students to become healthcare leaders who will promote socially responsible practice, policy, and research to improve health and wellness (ATSU,

2013b). To promote this goal and the mission of the University, SHM endeavours to provide high quality and applicable instruction through innovative, online education; and support health professions students as they participate in scholarly activities that both anticipate and address the health care needs of a diverse society (ATSU, 2013b). The DHEd degree is a 78- to 84-credit-hour program with an applied dissertation component. The degree curriculum is now aligned with the Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) and Master Certified Health Education Specialist (MCHES) competencies defined by the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing (NCHEC); the nationally recognized agency for health education credentialing.

The DHEd program the authors enrolled in integrated many of the best practices for online learning such as supports/resources, learner engagement and interaction, flexibility, and learner outcomes (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Moore, 2011). One of the features of the ATSU online DHEd program is its focus or connection to practice that allows for exploration of health education issues and the learners' roles within health education; and was a key deciding factor as the authors were working as educators. Such emphasis on practice-based learning has been cited by some as an important element to online doctoral programs as it makes learning all the more relevant (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2005). To learn new concepts important to practice can have a positive impact on the wider education and practice community. As reported, there is opportunity for doctoral students to share new ideas and improve professional practice within their community (Butcher & Sieminski, 2009; Leners et al., 2007; Selmer, Graham, & Goodykoontz, 2011). Labaree (1997) discusses how education can be a public good. Students can bring about social change by applying concepts that they learned in postsecondary to needs identified in their community. For the authors, this permitted them to focus many of their assignments on issues they experienced in their education practice or could be implemented as teaching strategies in courses they were currently teaching. Also, each of their dissertation research is focused in ways to improve teaching and learning for health care students.

The technology of being online creates a learning environment that is different than the traditional classroom, making supports and resources for students critical (Finch & Jacobs, 2012). ATSU offers students an online preparation mini course to help potential students understand the nuances of online learning. Moore (2011) describes this introduction to the learning environment as best practice for distance education. Berge (2001, as cited in Bozarth, Chapman, & LaMonica, 2004) supports the concept of institutions offering a mini course to help familiarize students to the delivery of course learning through the use of technology. Doing so prepares students by introducing them to the learning skills necessary to overcome technical problems that may occur when enrolled in an online course. Oftentimes students do not realize how important basic computer literacy skills are to the success of online learning until they participate in an orientation course. Such initial course offerings can ensure students' understanding of the commitment required for online learning; promoting student success by ensuring there is a good fit for the student. Both authors felt that the mini course offered through ATSU appropriately alleviated fears related to distance learning. Applying study and learning skills to a mini course provided the authors with a realistic expectation to online education.

Faculty encouraged student-to-student support by creating a quality online learning community. Student-to-student support can be created by building a community of practice or offering opportunities for students to participate and interact either through course discussions and/or an online platform for non-course dialogue. In each of the authors' on-line DHEd courses, there was the opportunity to meet students in the "coffee shop", a separate place for discussion unrelated to course content discussions. The coffee shop offered the students a place to get to know more about each other, share information about past educational experiences, ask course related questions, and to receive feedback on ideas. For the authors, the "coffee shop" discussions created a social connection as more was learned about peers on a personal level than had been their experiences in traditional classroom interactions. Glisan and Trainin (2006) reported a high positive correlation between student success and social connectedness. Students who felt like they belonged in the class were more likely to finish the course than those students who did not feel connected with their peers or faculty member (Finch &

Jacobs, 2012; Glisan & Trainin, 2006). To enhance the social connectedness for on-line students at ATSU, the faculty member would join the "coffee shop" discussions. Often faculty members would share appropriate personal information with the class and provide students with a synopsis of their professional background. Even though the "coffee shop" provided students with an informal channel for discussions not at any time did the authors feel that faculty and/or students crossed professional and/or personal boundaries.

The authors noted that student-to-student support was also provided to students through opportunities to participate in peer feedback sessions. For instance, during a course on proposal preparation students were asked to assess and evaluate a peer's ongoing written funding proposal. Having the ability to read and respond to feedback from a variety of peers not only highlighted problems that existed in the work but also improved the comprehension of the learned course material. As identified in the literature by a number of authors, peer feedback engages and facilitates student learning, allows students the chance to put previous health education learning into practice, and permits faculty the ability to evaluate student learning (Butcher & Sieminski, 2009; Ertmer et al., 2010; Lu & Law, 2012). In addition, faculty at ASTU created a quality online learning community by helping students adjust to their roles as learners by providing students with prompt written feedback on course assignments, incorporating technology to foster social connectedness, and by creating a presence in online discussions. Faculty established clear expectations for engagement, criteria for assignments, and ensured students knew how and when to contact them. One of the more interesting aspects of faculty utilizing technology to support teaching and learning was when some faculty chose to use audio feedback as a form of evaluation. The use of such technology improved learning for the authors by decreasing isolation and improving engagement with the faculty members. The use of audio feedback personalized the online learning experiences for the authors and thus, demonstrated best practices (Moore, 2011).

Kumar and Dawson (2012) identified student supports and resources as important elements for the development and implementation of an online doctoral program. As mentioned previously, support to students can come from faculty who have a clear understanding about the overall doctoral program, expertise in online teaching, and who can challenge students to think successfully (Kumar & Dawson, 2012; Varnhagen et al., 2005). Other types of support include information technology (IT) services and academic supports. The virtual classroom at ATSU was made accessible through the IT department. IT services were available 24 hours a day; seven days a week should students have any technology issues. Moore (2011) described how organizations that facilitate access for students are demonstrating effective online practices. Online support services that are consistent and include a coherent IT framework are just as important to student success as actual teaching (Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2000). The authors' experience of the IT services at ATSU was excellent with very limited access issues. When the university updated the learning management system, students were provided with tutorials to help learn the system changes. What made this process go easier for the authors was that any IT change, such as the implementation of a different version of a learning management system, was introduced during a mid-semester break. The only other IT challenge encountered by one author was out of the university's control. This author lives in a rural location with no access to high speed internet services which made it challenging when accessing some of the links to course materials or when courses required a synchronous activity, such as Google Hangout. It has been stated that communication technologies can not only increase access and flexibility in course delivery, but can also foster student interaction and collaboration (Finch & Jacobs, 2012; Moore, 2011). At ATSU, there was a feeling of inclusion for the authors as the university regularly communicated and engaged students through email, Google Hangout, and "Rockstar Fridays" where students were recognized for various professional or personal accomplishments. Another opportunity for students to feel supported was how the university created access and flexibility for doctoral candidates to defend their dissertations online. This process not only allows students to present from home but also provides other students the opportunity to observe the presentations; offering support to their peers.

At ATSU an Academic Success Team is used to support its students. The team uses academic success coordinators (ASC) along with the SHM program chairperson in providing responsive service to the students, supporting students in developing their academic progress plans, communicating important dates and policy or procedure changes, and are generally the first point of contact for support. ATSU offers an extensive resource of databases through the library for online students. The library provides access to full text journals, textbooks and other references and with the availability of the "Cyber Librarian" who offers support for students such as online lunch and learn tutorials which have been vital in keeping students up-to-date on library resources. Another important support provided at ATSU is the Online Writing Center that offers resources, tools, and tutorials for students. The Center provides structure, formatting, citation, and organization feedback on students' written assignments and dissertations prior to submission for grades. When this service was used by the authors the feedback received was directed towards correct APA formatting or structural changes to the written work. Feedback was prompt, within 24 to 36 hours, which was helpful to the authors since the assignments in the courses were due weekly.

Learner engagement and learner outcomes are two elements of best practice for online doctoral programs for which the authors' DHEd were successfully incorporated. The DHEd program had an applied research component that offered the authors the opportunity to explore and research health education issues in a local context. Olson and Clark (2009) reasoned an applied research dissertation creates new leader-scholar identity in students as well as helps to close the gap between what is learned in university by empowering students " to use research to guide and study their own practices" (p. 219). Butcher and Sieminski (2009) also discovered that the online experience required students to reflect on their roles as professional selves which increased confidence to use the new understanding, knowledge, and skill in their professional roles. This has been the case for the authors as there has been a boost in confidence to apply new knowledge and skills gained in the DHEd program in their roles as university educators. The benefit of such a pedagogical approach is that it engages students by providing deep learning to occur; such personal journeys can transform students' understanding and ideas related to education and practice (Selmer, Graham, & Goodykoontz, 2010).

Summary

There are many who believe doctorate degrees earned online are subpar to those earned in the traditional settings. There exists the perception that online doctoral programs offer poor quality instruction, lack rigorous discourse and mentoring, and are degree mills due to lack of accreditation (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; DePriest & Absher, 2013; Karl & Peluchette, 2013). By understanding what best practices are for online degrees can dispel such misperceptions. However, current evidence is suggesting universities that offer quality accredited online doctoral programs can provide students with excellent learning experiences. Groups such as the Sloan Consortium have been instrumental in establishing the qualities and best practice standards for online learning which academic institutions should incorporate into their programs.

The evidence on best practices for online learning has been helpful for the authors in reflecting on their online learning journey. Reflecting on what factors have made the online doctoral experience positive was established by reviewing the evidence on best practice for online learning. By making comparisons between traditional classroom education and online learning has validated for the authors that they made the right choice for their doctoral journey. High quality doctoral education can be accessed online and offers an excellent educational experience for students who may not otherwise have other options. Best practice standards for online academic programs can ensure students are getting the best doctoral education while meeting all the other commitments, such as work, family, and geographical barriers that students may have in their lives.

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