

Virtual Nursing, Virtual Learning



Carla D. Sanderson, PhD, RN, Karen Cox, PhD, RN, FACHE, FAAN, and Joanne Disch, PhD, RN, FAAN

The purposes of this paper are to share best practices in effective virtual learning based on the experiences of Chamberlain University, and to introduce findings on the role social factors play in achieving learning effectiveness. Research suggests social factors are more predictive of learning success than academic ones; social determinants of learning is a framework for designing effective social engagement and interventions in virtual learning in nursing. Positive virtual learning prepares nurses for virtual practice, such as telehealth, by developing abilities for effective engagement through the use of online interpersonal skills regardless of face to face or virtual patient care environments.

A positive experience in a nursing program, including a positive online experience, can lead graduates to set high expectations for positive online learning experiences in the workplace. Developing an effective teaching and learning process for online teams of faculty and students begins with a commitment between the teacher and learner to engage across the miles and take the distance out of distance education. The purposes of this article are to describe how faculty and students who never meet face to face achieve learning effectiveness online, introduce a new idea about the role social factors play in achieving learning effectiveness, and give examples of social interventions that impact online learning.

EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNING

In an article by Nagel et al entitled “Getting a Picture: A Grounded Theory of Nurses Knowing a Person in a

Virtual Environment,”^{1(p.71)} the authors define knowing a person as requisite to practicing nurses building effective relationships online. Likewise, nurse educators aim to know students fully by “getting a picture” of who they are. Getting a picture of the online student’s experience means establishing a strong social presence virtually where “students feel connected and part of the learning environment.”^{2(p.220)}

With a mindset to establish presence with one another as the fundamental first step, online students and faculty begin relating to each other through the proper rules of “netiquette”:

- Extending greetings with warmth
- Setting a tone of reciprocity
- Creating a safe environment for exchange
- Addressing one another by name
- Establishing relevance by sharing a story from one’s journey
- Stirring curiosity
- Conversing on familiar ground, like re-entry to nursing study
- Relaying experiences with work–life balance
- Showing consideration by timely, prompt responses

Faculty know that effective online teaching starts with engagement. Faculty begin by connecting with students, and also helping connect students to one another, through identifying commonalities such as shared identity, history, hobbies, work settings, views, personal goals such as parenting, and professional aspirations. Faculty also know that some students have to overcome initial barriers to effective engagement online.

KEY POINTS

- **Health, economic stability, and self-motivation are strong social determinants of learning and are more predictive of student success than academic factors.**
- **Student engagement and belonging in the context of an academic culture of care can lead to deeper satisfaction in learning and practice.**
- **Virtual learning develops abilities such as online interpersonal and communication skills, concentration, prioritization, and managing multiple tasks.**

Students may need help:

- Navigating uncertainty
- Finding logistical support
- Building learning confidence in themselves
- Building trust in their classmates and faculty.

Faculty respond by:

- Meeting the student where he or she is
- Demonstrating their sense of calling to teach
- Enlarging the student's view of him or herself
- Connecting students to meaningful learning activities
- Empowering students by reproducing opportunities to use their strengths
- Multiplying positive learning outcomes
- Forming a meaning virtual relationship with each student

These general fundamentals are the starting place for effective online learning. This article demonstrates how one university developed and implemented online learning that goes beyond the fundamentals to include consideration of the learner at a deeper level.

A CULTURE OF CARE

Chamberlain University is built on a culture of care for students, and places priority on hiring online faculty who are a cultural fit for Chamberlain Care, defined as “the excellent service we provide to each other and to students to help them achieve their goals and reach their dreams.”^{3(p.8)} We carry this out by finding faculty who believe that taking extraordinary care of students will result in graduating extraordinary health care professionals who will have a significant and positive impact on health care around the world.³

Chamberlain believes a nurse's readiness for meaningful practice can be affected by a meaningful learning experience, whether online or face to face, through care. Care for students means strong student satisfaction in their learning experience, and it also means support in meeting learning outcomes as well as in helping students make the necessary personal and professional adjustments to be successful. Care for students also means support in finding a sense of belonging. What makes the learning experience effective and meaningful for students is shifting.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF LEARNING

Education is experiencing shifts, not unlike the shifts in health care toward social determinants of health,⁴ which gives emphasis to the physical and environmental circumstances impacting the well-being of individuals across the lifespan. Nursing history and physical examination formats are evolving from assessing current state to assessing causation and antecedents to what is current, that is, why have you been

unable to take your diabetes medications, what type of transportation to your pharmacy is available to you.

There are social shifts that must take place in the educational model, too. Online tools and a focus on the student experience are changing how we teach; these are “just in time” advances as higher education braces itself to adjust to the changing demographics and learning readiness in today's student population. Tomorrow's nursing workforce will reflect today's higher education demographic: students who may be the first in their family to go to college, and may be English language learners, and who may be managing the stressors of family responsibilities at home while balancing full-time study and full-time work.

Chamberlain is embracing a new social framework we call social determinates of learning (SDL), a lifelong learning framework that reflects, not just the process of learning, but also the long-term context, consequences, and impact of learning as owned by the learner. Education must also ask social questions, that is, *why* are you unable to study at home, *what* do you see as a barrier to your success.

Today's student is different and the social support we must give today is as strategic as the learning itself. Chamberlain's research suggests that a student's success is one-third dependent on academic variables and two-thirds dependent on social ones (L.M. Hollinger-Smith et al, unpublished data, 2019) (*Figure 1*).

Based on research that identifies psychosocial factors impacting baccalaureate student success (L.M. Hollinger-Smith et al, unpublished data, 2019), the research team has developed an initial framework for the SDL that includes 6 main social domains that determine learning: physical health, psychosocial health, physical environment, social environment, economic stability, and self-motivation. Predictive analytics identify students' needs for social assistance in developing language, reading comprehension, and psychosocial behaviors such as resilience/mindfulness and belonging.

LEARNING IS A RELATIONSHIP

Chamberlain's academic and nonacademic model drives effective online learning by first fostering relationships, a lesson we have learned from face-to-face students. Chamberlain's on-campus students say the best things about Chamberlain are feeling like they belong to something special and studying where “everyone knows your name.” Care for students happens within the context of a relationship.

Chamberlain's president, Dr. Karen Cox, shadowed an alumnus for the first half of his 12-hour clinical day to get to know him more fully by getting a picture of his experience, listening to his point of view, observing him give care, and literally walking in his footsteps back and forth across the unit. “I cannot know every Chamberlain student and alumnus, but I

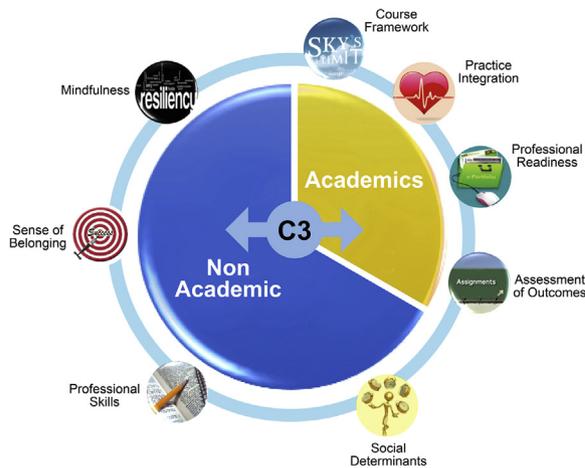


Figure 1. Chamberlain Care Curriculum. C3, Chamberlain Care Curriculum.

know this one,” she said. “I appreciate knowing that every student is known by a Chamberlain faculty member who extends a personal touch to them, and offers an opportunity for belonging.”

Helping students feel like they belong to something special is fundamental for Chamberlain. Belonging in an online community comes when students find a mentor whose life and work demonstrates something extraordinary the student wants to emulate. Belonging online comes when students find a meaningful connection with someone to support them and hold them accountable in meeting shared learning goals.

Chamberlain seeks to foster belonging for all students through intentional strategies such as:

- Limiting online class sizes to a 1:25 faculty to student ratio
- Knowing students through weekly “Let’s check in” sessions
- Dividing online students into small pods of 5 to 6 students for threaded discussions
- Establishing high expectations for collegiality in online discussion posts by modeling professional behavior and decorum
- Responding to the student’s preferred method of communication: posts, texts, phone calls, virtual meeting software, video conferencing
- Promoting the library as an academic commons with 24/7 access to learning support and chat and services
- Assigning student service advisors as virtual lifeline partners for navigating virtual resources, that is, curricular guides, financial aid support
- Integrating new academic technologies in the form of virtual assistants for 1-stop answers to questions, scheduling needs, reminder notifications, and student services connections
- Offering “motivating actions instead of demotivating actions and encouragement instead of

discouragement in the face of challenges” (Chamberlain University’s College of Nursing Philosophy of Nursing Education)

- Chamberlain’s leadership team regularly meets with students and asks why they choose to study at Chamberlain. One student said it was Chamberlain’s reputation for caring about students as people that lead her to come. She had transferred from a highly reputable nursing program because of its demotivating environment. Remember the old “look to your left, look to your right, at least 1 of the 3 of you will not graduate from this nursing program” saying? This student let us know those same words are still being spoken today.
- Ensuring carefully developed, continuously monitored operations to support the culture of care we envision for online students

Faculty must also know when their online student is troubled. They learn to “watch” students for cues: reading tone, assessing for indications of stress, detecting cynicism, anger, and other signs of nonproductive behavior. Faculty learn to listen for distress in students, heard in the form of an online sigh:

- Irritability, defensiveness, or passive aggressive messaging with their classmates or faculty
- Undue and unwarranted anxiety about assignments
- Repeated questioning when their questions have already been addressed
- Significant declines in engagement or performance from one week to the next

Observations like these prompt the faculty member to place a phone call to the student to learn more.

The lack of sufficient time is the biggest hurdle students face and is a source of stress. Faculty can anticipate a student’s need for more time from observing behaviors such as a lack of participation early in the course or repeated submission of assignments right before deadlines. Faculty can reach out and negotiate a new assignment deadline as needed.

Listening to students in the online environment is different and requires “generous listening.” “Just listening” is listening with a mindset to agree versus disagree or find right versus wrong. A generous listener listens for possibilities, commitment, and action, what might be missing and where there is an opportunity for engagement and support. A generous listener knows every conversation counts.⁵

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Not all online learning problems have been fully addressed, and sometimes operational and technical issues can threaten to overwhelm students and faculty. The work is hard, and occasionally discouraging, yet on a day-to-day basis, online learning is working well

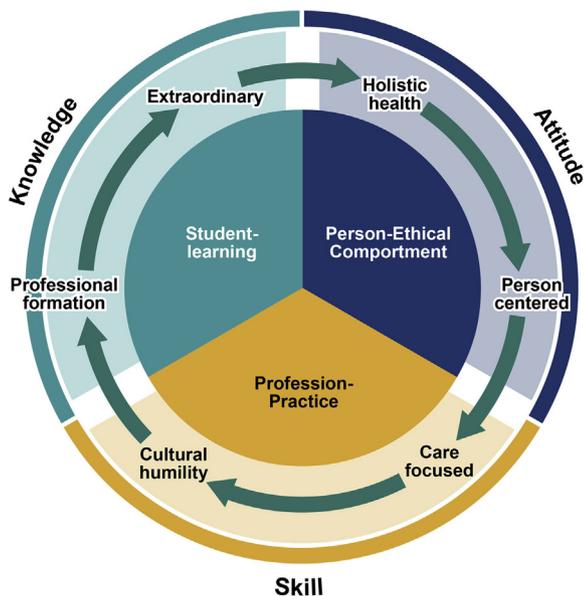


Figure 2. Transformational Learning.

as evidenced by an atmosphere of cooperation, trust, and collegiality.

A list of challenges and opportunities for improvement in support of online faculty and students is as follows:

- Addressing academic integrity violations such as plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty through moving from a “caught you” to a “taught you” culture
- Aligning and adapting curricula to be responsive to the drive toward value-based care and the social determinants of health, the opioid crisis, and the increase in telehealth nursing practice
- Creating partnerships where students can engage directly with practice through virtual preceptors that bring clinical learning opportunities to the online classroom
- Supporting Generation Z’s preference for online learning while also supporting their unique oral communication and interpersonal learning needs created from growing up relating less and texting more
- Resourcing the social and learning support needed by a growing number of students who are not ready for the rigor of nursing education and for whom formal study is becoming less affordable

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

New online technologies are creating “positive disruption” for “just in time” learning and training. Adaptive learning and assessment, virtual simulation, and virtual and mixed reality will soon bridge the education-practice continuum—it is truly a transformational time for learning. For Chamberlain,

education alone is just knowledge transfer whereas transformational learning brings a change in knowledge plus a change in skill and attitude that causes the learner to think, feel, and act differently. Chamberlain has established outcomes of professional judgment, professional integrity, cultural humility, and a spirit of inquiry to complete its conceptual framework for learning—transformational nursing practice rooted in extraordinary care of patients, families, communities, and nations (Figure 2).

Online students are preparing for practice by developing the ability to:

- Use interpersonal skills to engage effectively through multiple means of communication
- Concentrate for long periods of time, work in stressful circumstances and prioritize and manage multiple tasks
- Function within an ever-changing environment
- Think carefully and well in forming clinical judgment through the habit of a practice-oriented learning framework: to prepare, explore, translate to practice, and reflect
- Practice nursing care in virtual settings, such as telehealth
 - A Delphi study listed 14 competencies required for nursing telehealth activities.⁶ Six of those competencies are developed through online learning, that is, “supporting patients in the use of technology, training patients in the use of technology as a way to strengthen their social network, providing psychosocial support, assessing patient capacity to use telehealth, coordination of care with the use of telehealth technology, and guidance and peer consultation.”

CONCLUSION

Online engagement cannot replace the value of physical human interaction. Students and faculty find sheer joy when they meet their virtual learning teammates face to face at an immersion learning experience or commencement ceremony. It’s like watching old friends and family become reunited. It’s the ultimate scene of Chamberlain Care in action.

Online learning can and does, however, provide a differentiated educational experience and advance the educational mission to educate, empower, and embolden learners for excellence in nursing practice. Student and faculty engagement, collaboration, and care are woven throughout online learning activities in all undergraduate and graduate programs and specialty tracks. Faculty set ambitious goals for students to thrive as confident, whole individuals, stretching to pursue their online nursing degree and reach their potential as extraordinary nurses and nurse leaders transforming health care practice. Faculty and students alike believe

that being excellent in an online environment is hard work, but worth the effort for the flexibility and possibilities online learning provides. Ultimately, there is strong fulfillment in pursuing Chamberlain Care online: faculty and students from across the United States and around the world representing diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, all coming together, finding belonging and sharing the same values and goals to educate and become extraordinary nurses.

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Carla D. Sanderson, PhD, RN, is university provost at Chamberlain University in Downers Grove, Illinois. She can be reached at CSanderson@chamberlain.edu. Karen Cox, PhD, RN, FACHE, FAAN, is university president, and Joanne Disch, PhD, RN, FAAN, is chairman, board of trustees, at Chamberlain University.

Note: The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest relevant to this paper. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors wish to acknowledge assistance from Chamberlain University colleagues in support for this paper as follows: learning pedagogy graphics from Laura Fillmore, senior director, transformational education and learning innovation; social determinates of learning framework from Linda Hollinger-Smith, associate provost; faculty and student examples from online program leaders Jill Price, senior director, online nursing programs, Kathryn Kay, director, academic operations, and Kevin Letz, director, nurse practitioner programs and online program faculty; and literature review from Eric Bemiller, regional librarian.

1541-4612/2020/\$ See front matter
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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2019.12.005>