

We are in this together: Learning in an online cohort PhD program

Keywords

Online learning, PhD education, doctoral education, cohort based-education, focused ethnography,

Abstract

In Canada, there is a shortage of nursing scholars to fill academic positions. Many nurses have difficulty accessing quality doctoral education as they often cannot easily relocate. Online learning is one way to overcome this challenge. To date research has focused on understanding learning in online courses as opposed to online programs. The Faculty of Nursing initiated an online cohort of its PhD program in 2015. This offers a unique opportunity to study the experience of learning in an online cohort program. Using focused-ethnographic methods, the goal of this project is to understand how students learn to become scholars in the context of an online cohort approach. Increased understanding and knowledge will lead to the development of guidelines and best practices for others looking to provide alternative approaches to doctoral education.

We are in this together: Learning in an online cohort PhD program – Project Description

Background

While academic employment opportunities for many students pursuing doctoral education can be challenging, this is not the case for those seeking tenure track positions in nursing. In a 2012 study conducted by the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) and the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) researchers warn of the looming shortage of nursing faculty as the current supply of newly graduated PhDs will fail to meet the demand for new faculty. By their count, as of 2011 “schools were unable to fill 101 faculty positions [across the country] representing a 4% vacancy rate” (p.15). This situation is fueled, in part, by the demographic composition of the current members of the academy and the actual and anticipated retirement rates which outnumber potential PhD prepared recruits for the foreseeable future. A similar phenomenon is also occurring in the United States (Cathro, 2011). In both the Canadian and US context, online delivery is proposed as a viable alternative for the provision of doctoral education in nursing. Yet, as of 2014, there was only one doctoral level nursing program in Canada offered online. Considering that the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta offers a well-established and highly esteemed PhD program, where students had been able to take some courses online, the Faculty of Nursing determined that it was time to develop an online cohort that would parallel the campus program. In addition, the Online Cohort of the PhD program is also unique as it is situated in a research intensive university and in a faculty ranked second in Canada according to McLean Magazine 2015 rankings of nursing schools. After several years of planning and development, the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta accepted the first online cohort of students to the PhD program in May 2015.

Innovation, Collaboration and Evaluation

In a report released in January 2013 by the “Online Visioning Committee” of the University of Alberta, a series of recommendations were suggested to increase the institution’s adoption of learning technologies as it makes its foray into what is perceived to be the increasingly competitive and compelling world of online learning. Specifically, the first recommendation made by this committee was to:

Aspire to offer the highest quality digital learning environment within our comprehensive learning offerings to enhance in-class experience and create a strong online learning presence. (p.2)

The Online Cohort of the PhD Program of the Faculty of Nursing is the first doctoral program to be offered at a distance through the University of Alberta. In this particular case, doctoral education by distance is strategic. Typically, students entering doctoral studies in nursing do so after having been in the workplace for a number of years and, as such come to further studies after establishing both professional and personal roots within their community. In many cases these professionals are filling much needed teaching and administrative positions within institutions already struggling to find sufficient numbers of qualified candidates, As such, it can be difficult, if not counter-productive for them to relocate, making the option to pursue their studies online an attractive one both for the individual and for their employers.

With an established and ongoing online cohort of the PhD program, we now have an opportunity to conduct a research project that will enable us to gain understanding of online doctoral education and best practices that enable students to be successful as they pursue their graduate education at a distance. This TLEF proposal is a request for funding to support a study of the Online Cohort of the PhD program, in the Faculty of Nursing over a two year period. As a team of three tenured experienced researchers, we are interested in learning more about the experience of being a student in the online cohort of the PhD program. Using focused ethnography our research will examine the experience of students as they learn to become scholars in an online cohort approach. Feedback from colleagues involved in teaching these students will also be sought.

Student isolation has been identified as a deterrent to program completion in on online graduate education (Govender & Dhunpath, 2011; Halter, Kleiner & Hess, 2005; Janta, Lugosi & Brown, 2014; Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009). We need to understand whether a cohort approach to online doctoral education creates a community of learners that could alleviate some of the commonly reported feelings of isolation. The proposed research will be informed by and grounded in the work of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) who were instrumental in developing the now much adopted *Community of Inquiry* (COI) framework that focuses on the building of educational communities through the inclusion of social, teaching and cognitive presence in online courses. We will also incorporate elements of the work of Kumar and Ritzhaupt (2014) who adapted the COI framework to online programs. Research of this nature is particularly important as there is a general sense in the literature that studies focusing on distance programs, as opposed to distance courses, have been neglected (Kumar and Ritzhaupt, 2014). In addition, Janta et al. (2014) have found that there is a “dearth of research in understanding the experiences of doctoral students” (p. 557). By focusing on the student experience within an online doctoral program we can make a significant contribution to both the literature on, and practice within online graduate education programs. It is our hope that by learning more about how doctoral students learn online, we will be in a better position to promote retention and limit time to completion, which ultimately will lead to more nurses being prepared for academic positions.

Study Design

Qualitative focused-ethnography facilitates exploration of a specific topic and privileges one kind of data collection, in this case, interviews (Agar, 2006; Knoblauch, 2005) while adhering to principles of qualitative inquiry including an emic perspective and a cyclical process of concurrent data collection and analysis (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2011). Focused ethnography is particularly suitable to understanding specific phenomena within distinct cultures and sub cultures where the members may be geographically dispersed (Wall 2015), such as students in a distance online PhD program.

Research Questions

With a goal of understanding how students learn to become scholars in the context of an online cohort program, the following research questions will guide this project:

- 1) Are online cohort students developing a community of scholars/learners?

- 2) What are the key factors that lead to or inhibit the development of a community of scholars/learners, including their integration into faculty research programs?
- 3) What are the key factors that enhance or inhibit student learning in graduate online studies?
- 4) What strategies can we refine or develop to enhance our students' experience and their sense of community?
- 5) Does the online cohort approach to doctoral education provide an effective and positive learning environment?

Students from the May 2015 and May 2016 intakes of the program will be invited to participate in the study. In addition, faculty members teaching and/or supervising these students will be given the opportunity to participate. We anticipate a sample size of approximately 15 students and 15 faculty members.

Data Collection and Analysis

Experiential data from individual interviews produces a rich body of data expressed in the respondents' own words and context. Guiding questions will be based on major domains emerging from our experience and extant literature and will be revised for each new interview based on outcomes of the previous one. Participants will be encouraged to speak freely about their on-line program experience and to give examples of the interactions and activities with their peers that contribute to a sense of belonging to a cohort.

Student participants will be interviewed at least twice during their program of study. This will give us the opportunity to track the first cohort students after completion of structured course work and while they are progressing through comprehensive/candidacy examinations. For purposes of verifying the adequacy of our analysis we will invite students to participate in a virtual focus group. Faculty members who teach in the program and/or supervise these students will be interviewed at least one time. The project coordinator will conduct all interviews either in person or electronically. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. After cleaning the data and checking for accuracy data will be managed using NVivo 10. Content of all data, including interviews and interviewer field notes, will be analyzed thematically and inductively (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2003). Data analysis will commence following the first two interviews. Open, in vivo, and comparative coding will be used to reduce the data to manageable size and to identify ideas, categories and themes of interest. Concurrent data collection and analysis facilitates ongoing verification of our analysis (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers 2002).

Sustainability / Impact on Students

It's not hard to find studies that declare online learning is exploding in both educational and corporate sectors. In a 2012 report, Contact North - The Ontario's Distance Education and Training Network observes that "online learning is thriving across the country at the post-secondary level and that new investments are being made to support its continued growth and development..." (p.2). Because of this increased growth, it is essential to gain the best understanding possible of what works and how to ensure students are provided with a quality

educational experience. This study will enable us to gain a better understanding of the role that cohort models can play in contributing to an effective, online learning environment. As a result, our findings will be useful to Departments and Faculties embarking in the development of online doctoral programs. The results of this project will have the potential to guide those who develop online doctoral programs in Canada and beyond. The Online Cohort of the PhD program, is a high priority in the strategic plan of the Faculty of Nursing. The Faculty views this program as part of the solution to address nursing education workforce issues in the short and long term.

This study will benefit future online cohort doctoral students as it will increase knowledge related to quality online program delivery and the development of a community of scholars/learners. The Faculty of Nursing will use the results of this study and share findings with others.

Dissemination

We plan to participate in the University of Alberta Centre for Teaching and Learning's "Festival of Teaching" and the Faculty of Nursing's annual "Olive Yonge Teaching and Learning Scholarship Day". We will submit abstracts at the annual conferences held by the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) and the Western & North-Western Region Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (WRCASN). We intend to publish our results in the *International Journal of Nursing Scholarship, Quality Advancement in Nursing Education/Avancée en formation infirmière, the Journal of Higher Education, and the Journal of Distance Education.*

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