

Exploring the Use of Blog Narratives as a Method of Informing Nurse Practitioner Curriculum Evaluation

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into the educational experiences of students and graduates of a nurse practitioner (NP) program in Ontario, Canada to inform curriculum evaluation. Participants were asked to provide narratives of their experiences via two separate limited-access blog sites on the program's NP-Education Network. An interpretive qualitative analysis of participant narratives revealed the program is preparing graduates for practice but there are areas for improvement that require attention. From the emerging themes, recommendations are proposed for improving the curriculum of the NP program.



Literature Review and Significance Curriculum Evaluation

"Curriculum evaluation is conducted ... to determine the curriculum strengths, weaknesses, merits, and deficits. Additionally, identification of possible future directions for the curriculum is typically an outcome of the evaluation process (Chen, 2005). As a quality control mechanism, the intent of curriculum evaluation is to assure that the curriculum, its courses, the processes undertaken, and student achievement of intended outcomes are meeting the required standards" (Iwasiw, Goldenberg, & Andrusyszyn, 2009, p. 281) and that the curriculum is relevant for its context. Students and graduates provide important data for the evaluation, typically by completing questionnaires and participating in focus groups (Iwasiw, Goldenberg, & Andrusyszyn; Jacobs & Koehn, 2004; Oermann & Gaberson, 2006; Sauter, Johnson, & Nightingale Gillespie, 2009).

Evaluation of the PHCNP Program and Graduates

Although the NP program has undergone previous curriculum evaluation (Andrusyszyn, van Soeren, Laschinger, Goldenberg, Di Censo, & the Nurse Practitioner Evaluation Group, 1999; Caty, Michel, Wong, & Stewart, 2000, 2001a, 20001b,2002), the narratives of students and graduates have not been sought after or obtained.

Blogs

Blogs have been a feature of the internet since 2003, and came into prominence through eye-witness accounts of the Iraqi war (Martindale & Wiley, 2005). “The word, *blog* comes from ‘Weblog’, a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual (Todoroki, Konishi, & Inoue, 2006, p. 246). However, unlike most personal journals, web journals are shared with other people over the web. Blogs are a means for people to easily create and quickly share content online (Al-Hasan, & Adamic, 2007). In addition to personal blogs to which others may not contribute content, there are community blogs, to which others do contribute content (Silva, Goel, & Mousavidin, 2008).

Features of blogs. Weblogs generally have certain features, including: automatic formatting of content in the form of “headlines”, followed by “entries,” or “stories”; time- and date-stamp of entries; archiving...; a search function...; a “blogroll” – a list of other blogs read by the author(s) of the current blog; a section associated with each entry where readers can post comments...;a simple syndicator of the site content via RRS Syndication)” (Martindale & Wiley, 2005, p.55-56). These features are supported by blog server software. Thus, programming or formatting is unnecessary to create a technically sophisticated and visually appealing website. From a visitor’s perspective, a weblog is merely a website.

From an analysis of Meta-Filter, a blog with 30,000 registered members, Silva et al. (2008) concluded that a community blog is brought about by several features. These are explicit ground rules about membership and participation; presence of moderators; availability of information about participants and identification of the person posting a comment; ‘net etiquette’; tacit rules for discerning pertinent posts; and responses to inappropriate posts to limit them.

Motivation for, and benefits of, blogging. In an analysis of three blog communities, Ali-Hasan and Adamic (2007) reported that the most frequent reason for blogging was a desire to express oneself. Blogs were also used for personal journaling; expanding social networks; and enriching and maintaining existing offline relationships. In contrast to this personal focus, Silva et al.(2008) assert that participating in a community of practice (i.e., a group that is distinguished by a particular practice that is more salient than other attributes such as culture) serves two functions for individuals: learning by enacting and reproducing the practices of the community, and at the same time, forming and reinforcing the community's identity.

The shared practice of community members becomes evident through stories, experiences, and ways of solving problems. Therefore, seeking identity and being regarded as knowledgeable motivates individuals to move from the periphery to the centre of a community.

In a study of participants' motivation in three blog sites about computer technology, Wasko and Farrai (2000) concluded that successful communities have members who acted out of community interest rather than self-interest. Participants had a strong desire for intellectual exchange with a community of practice and did not use the technology to socialize. They enjoyed helping others and considered sharing knowledge the right thing to do. Somewhat differently, in a network of 7000 legal practitioners, directly aimed at problem-solving, people contributed their knowledge and experience when they believed this would add to their professional reputation, with no expectation of reciprocity (Wasko & Farrai, 2005).

Use of blogs for research. Existing blogs have been analyzed to determine technical features (MacDonald & Ounis, 2006) and motivation for participation, (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007; Silva et al., 2008; Wasko & Farai, 2000, 2005). Use of a limited access blog for communication by a research team has been described (Todoroki, Konishi, & Inoue, 2006).

Summary

Curriculum evaluation data provides a basis for subsequent curriculum changes, and students and graduates provide important evaluation data. Research about the motivation for, and benefits of, blogging is limited, although intrinsic and other-oriented motivation has been identified. Blogs have been used as a communication site for a research team, but no literature was found in which a blog was used as a site for collecting data for curriculum evaluation or to provide data for research goals that pre-date the establishment of the blog. Furthermore, no literature was found about the use of blogs in Nurse Practitioner education or about narratives of students and NPs.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was three-fold:

1. To gain insight into the educational experiences of students enrolled in the NP program;
2. To gain insight into the education and practice experiences of graduates of the NP program;
3. To propose recommendations related to curricular issues requiring attention in the NP program.

Significance

Students in the NP program communicate with each other and their faculty primarily online via the program's NP–Education Network. Students also have a private online space where they can safely express thoughts, ideas, trials and tribulations. It may be that they discuss program and course related experiences within this space; however, faculty and program leaders are not privy to this dialogue. An underlying hypothesis was that if students and alumni were asked to share their stories, it would yield rich narratives that could inform program evaluation by shedding light on issues, concerns, questions, and challenges faced in the program. Interpretive analysis of the narratives can provide insights about the program's curriculum that will be of benefit to the program's evolution. This study is the first use of

students' and NPs' narratives in evaluation of the NP program and possibly the first use of blogs as a deliberate site for data collection.

Design and Data Collection

Design

This study utilized an interpretive narrative study design. Interpretive analysis reveals "commonalities in meanings, situations, practices in the depiction of the lived experience" (Rather, 1992, p. 48). Students and practitioners were viewed as separate communities of practice, each with its own blog site. The separation of the groups was ensure that "a contextual coherence in [participants'] experience is there from the start, based on a set of expectations and shared interests" (Pachler & Daly, 2009, p. 5).

Data Collection Procedures

Ethical approval and permission was obtained to access the program's NP–Education Network for data collection; access students enrolled in the NP program; and send an electronic invitation to alumni who were registered via the NP–Education Network. The Nurse Practitioners' Association of Ontario (NPAO) granted permission to send an email through their website describing the study and seeking participants from past NP graduates.

Two blog sites were created, one for current NP students and one for NP graduates. A notice was posted on the NP–Education Network announcing the study and directing interested participants to more detailed information. Unfortunately, due to information technology delays, the blog sites were not ready until late November; a busy time in the NP program. Therefore, a decision was made to wait until the beginning of Term 2 to begin data collection. The message via NPAO's website to NP graduates was not sent out until February. As planned, an RA monitored the blog sites and tried to prompt narratives.

Participation was anonymous; each contributor created a pseudonym. Students contributed data over a three-month period. NP graduates contributed their ideas in the last month. Both blog sites were closed at the end of three months.

Sample

Eight current NP students posted a narrative, with only one posting more than once. Five NP alumni posted narratives, with two posting twice each. None of the participants completed the demographic questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Three approaches for transcript analysis were utilized: first, transcripts were read as a whole to understand the elements present in the text; second, transcripts were read to search for phrases that appeared to be particularly revealing about the experience; and third a detailed sentence-by-sentence reading of the text was undertaken to highlight statements that were particularly essential or revealing of the experience. As analysis of successive transcripts proceeded, common themes among the various descriptions were noted (Van Manen, 1998). Data analysis proceeded until common themes about experiences, curriculum, program, and the continuing education needs of NPs were agreed upon by the researchers. The analysis was returned to participants via the NP–Education Network for verification.

Blog data were examined by two members of the research team to identify common themes. Findings reported below represent the comments of several students. Comments made by one person only were not reported.

Findings

Participants expressed frustration at the “disorganization” of the NP program. They pointed to issues of receiving course materials at the last minute; not having access to program policies; and having to navigate through several layers of a course site to find readings. The intensity of their feelings was apparent in the narratives. As well, there was a sense of being overwhelmed at the beginning of starting the program related to the volume of work and the need to balance time spent in the program with life responsibilities.

Participants were disgruntled with the inability to review their own examinations to learn where they had been successful or unsuccessful, and dissatisfaction about the general and

vague way that questions about the exams were responded to. They wanted to see their own marked examinations.

The self-directed, problem-based learning (PBL) pedagogy was also challenging at times. Having tried unsuccessfully to find answers to learning module cases, they wanted and needed direct answers from their faculty but this proved to be frustrating. Then, trying to engage in class seminars when no one was sure of the answers and appropriate faculty guidance was not forthcoming, was felt to be counter-productive and frustrating.

There were several comments about the need for improvements in the quality of the Pathophysiology course, the responsiveness of the professor, and the linkages between the Pathophysiology, Advanced Health Assessment and Diagnosis, and Therapeutics courses. Occasional guest lecturers in Pathophysiology was valued because they “shined a light” on the topic.

There was discussion about the objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs), specifically the difficulty in preparing for them. There was a desire for more mock OSCE practice to develop critical thinking skills and not just memorization.

Overall, graduates felt prepared as they began their practice, and appreciated the ability to look at the ‘bigger picture’, including health promotion, motivational interviewing, and program development. As well, the value of the Roles and Responsibilities course became more apparent after graduation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The low response was disappointing. It is difficult to determine for certain if the low number of respondents was directly related to the late availability of the blog sites. Making the decision to postpone data collection to Term 2 removed the opportunity to obtain narratives related to students' experiences at the beginning of the program given they reported feelings of feeling 'overwhelmed' at that particular time. The late start in data collection may have therefore affected the timing of the data collection; recruitment of students and alumni to the blog sites;

the use of blogging; the heavy workload of the program; disinterest in evaluation of the program, or other reasons. For example, there has always been, amongst the NP students, a sense of 'skepticism' with anonymity in sharing program or course evaluations. This has resulted in approximately five to eight percent of students' engaging in completing evaluation measures.

Although the response rate was low, the length and detail of the entries allowed for some conclusions. Since participants focused on matters that were problematic for them, the program's weaknesses predominated the narratives.

Strength:

1. In total, the program does prepare graduates for practice

Areas for Improvement:

1. Students' feeling of being overwhelmed at the outset of the program
2. Perceived disorganization within the program
3. A possible over-reliance on self-directed, problem-based learning (PBL)
4. Insufficient individualized feedback about exam results
5. Lack of apparent links between the Pathophysiology, Advanced Health Assessment and Diagnosis, and Therapeutics courses

Recommendations

1. Provide potential applicants with an accurate picture of the workload (readings, studying, online activities, and class attendance) of the program. They might be told, for example, the average number of hours per week they could expect to devote to each course;
2. Ensure that all pertinent program materials and information are accessible in a timely manner, possibly by producing

3. course packages with all necessary materials; Provide guidance to faculty in assisting students when self-direction, PBL is ineffective and frustrating;
4. Develop means to provide students with individualized feedback about their examinations;
5. Provide added laboratory practice with OSCEs to expand critical thinking, and provide concrete suggestions about preparation for the OSCEs beyond memorization;
6. Strengthen the links between the Pathophysiology, Advanced Health Assessment and Diagnosis, and Therapeutics courses. One idea might be to ensure that the topics and readings of these three courses are mapped and sequenced each week, so that the flow between the courses and required thinking processes is related and smoother.

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