

Connectivity Beyond the Bandwidth

Barbara Ann M. Messina

The summer of 2020 in New York City COVID-19 caused the closure of onsite university classes necessitating the transition of the onsite post-baccalaureate undergraduate nursing program to an online synchronous distance mediated format. Failing to recognize each student program cohort as unique with the anticipated expectations of their academic experience can result in decreased student learning, feeling isolated and disengaged from their program, each other, faculty, and the university.

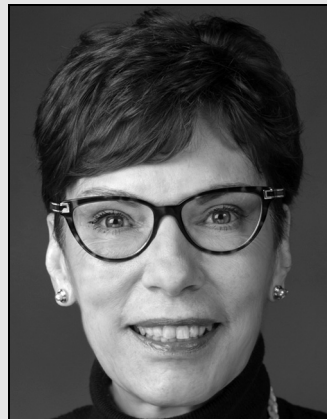
BACKGROUND

C COVID-19 resulted in the closure of onsite university classes necessitating the transition of the undergraduate nursing program to an online synchronous distance mediated format. Failing to recognize each student program

cohort as unique with their expectations can result in decreased student learning, feeling isolated and disengaged from their program, each other, faculty, and the university.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the number of New Yorkers infected with COVID-19 was rising at an alarming rate. To reduce the transmission of COVID-19, the governor of New York imposed a state-mandated lockdown. March 20, 2020, the governor signed an executive order, NYS PAUSE (New York State, n.d.). All nonessential business was closed, and all New Yorkers were ordered to work from home. Therefore, the NYS mandated lockdown included the closure of all schools, colleges, and universities. Essential businesses were defined as healthcare facilities, pharmacies, grocery stores, and restaurants offering take-out or delivery services.



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STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK/ COLLEGE OF NURSING (SUNY DOWNSTATE/CON)

SUNY Downstate/CON offers two undergraduate degree programs, the regis-

tered nurse to a baccalaureate degree program (RNBS) and the accelerated baccalaureate degree program (ABP). The programmatic curricular pathways for the RNBS program and the ABP program include coursework during the summer semester.

The RNBS program is an asynchronous distance mediated program. Students enrolled in the RNBS program have completed their associate degree with a concentration in nursing, have successfully passed the registered nurse licensure exam before entering into the RNBS program, and usually work full time as a registered nurse. Because students in the RNBS program are licensed registered nurses upon entrance into the program, the RNBS program does not include foundational practicum clinical experiences. Therefore, the closure of the university did not affect the university experience for the RNBS students.

Students in the ABP program have previously completed a baccalaureate degree in another discipline. They are returning to the university setting to obtain a second baccalaureate degree with a concentration in nursing. Unlike the RNBS program, the ABP is onsite and includes onsite faculty-supervised clinical practicum experiences as these students are first-time nursing students. The ABP at SUNY Downstate/CON is 15-months. The mandated closure of the university resulted in all program coursework for the ABP being transitioned to an online distance mediated format.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

During the transition of the ABP to a distance mediated format, faculty unconsciously made two implicit assumptions. Both resulted in faculty failing to recognize that student expectations of the ABP student and the RNBS are inherently different. Failure to recognize the differences in student expectations in each of these pro-

grams profoundly impacted the ABP student.

FIRST UNCONSCIOUS IMPLICIT FACULTY ASSUMPTION

The first implicit faculty assumption was that the ABP students were digital natives. Students enrolled in the ABP program were in their mid-twenties to early forties. They had grown up in the digital age, they were digital natives, and the virtual world was familiar to them. Establishing connections, communicating, and socializing via digital technology was a cultural norm in this age group (Prensky, 2001). Therefore, the transition to an online format would not impact the student's ability to establish social relationships and to connect with each other, the faculty, the program, or the university.

Supporting this first implicit faculty assumption, that the students in this age demographic possessed the social-psychological skills to establish and relationships in the digital world (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2018), closure of the university necessitated the university and CON orientation to be presented virtually. The digital virtual platform utilized was Zoom. Zoom is a digital communications application that allows synchronous virtual audio and video conferencing. Part of the university orientation includes student orientation to the university digital academic platform suite and student access to university email. By the second day of orientation, the students stated they had established a virtual group chat to connect and communicate with each other.

SECOND UNCONSCIOUS IMPLICIT FACULTY ASSUMPTION

Both the RNBS and the ABP student goal is the achievement of a baccalaureate degree. The RNBS student graduation rates at SUNY Downstate/CON have consistently exceeded programmatic benchmarks.

Additionally, student program and course evaluations consistently receive high student satisfaction scores. Also included in the program and course evaluations are a field for free text. Students can then add any other comments they feel are not captured on the general and course surveys. A consistent theme in student narratives is faculty's timely response to emails, and the frequency of student-faculty communication results in students feeling connected to the faculty. The consistently high student graduation rate coupled with the consistently documented student satisfaction reported on the anonymous student program and course evaluations supported the second implicit faculty assumption. The XXX already had a successful baccalaureate degree program; therefore, the transition of the ABP to a distance mediated format will be seamless and will not impact student satisfaction.

TRANSITIONING TO A DISTANCE-MEDIATED FORMAT

The digital academic platform suite utilized at SUNY Downstate/CON is Blackboard. Course lectures would be presented via Blackboard collaborate. Blackboard collaborate permits real-time virtual audio and video conferencing where faculty can share PowerPoints, use a whiteboard, and question and answer chat-style text messaging can be incorporated during the course lectures.

Simulation experiences, both virtual and onsite, were part of the teaching methodologies employed in the onsite ABP curriculum. The CON Learning Resource Center Simulation Laboratory is where didactic course content is reinforced. Students begin developing the cognitive framework for clinical reasoning skills by practicing basic fundamental clinical skills and engaging in structured simulation experiences. However, university closure prevented student access to the CON Learning Resource Center Simulation Lab-

oratory. So, the utilization of virtual simulation was increased. While virtual simulation does not permit hands-on clinical skills, it does provide the students with visualization of clinical nursing skills. Moreover, like onsite simulation experiences, virtual simulation increases knowledge retention and develops the cognitive framework for clinical reasoning skills (Padilha, 2019; Watari, 2020).

SEMESTER COMMENCEMENT: SUMMER 2020

The ABP August 2021 graduation class began their studies during the 2020 summer semester while the university was still in lockdown without ever stepping on campus.

The summer 2020 semester began with the usual beginning of the semester student apprehensions. The anxieties the student expressed were not unusual. These anxieties expressed at the beginning of the semester were similar to student behaviors exhibited in previous RNBS and ABP student cohorts, so nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Students expressed concerns regarding course assignments, time management, and apprehension regarding the ability to master the technical skills necessary to navigate Blackboard.

However, unlike previous semesters, whereas the semester progressed and student apprehension decreased, as evidenced by decreased student emails and an increase in student class participation, the exact opposite occurred. Active participation in course lectures remained negligible. Despite encouragement, it was challenging to elicit student engagement in course discussions. Furthermore, when students did engage, their responses were made via the student chat text instead of verbalizing their response.

Students seemed apathetic and disengaged, and the volume of student emails continued to increase, so much so that the emails were challenging to manage. Addi-

tionally, there was also an increase in student requests for one-to-one faculty-student conference(s).

Often, the reason for requesting one-to-one faculty meetings was vague, and student discussions were frequently unrelated to course content and were more of an informal chat. During one of these meetings, a student informed me that she, as well as many other members of the cohort, felt isolated and disconnected from the faculty, the program, and the university.

I was stunned. I felt very connected to the students. Between emails, one-to-one faculty-student meetings, and the synchronous Blackboard collaborate course lectures, my day was consumed. It was becoming increasingly more difficult to find time to complete other faculty responsibilities.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

A dialog with the students was initiated during the next scheduled synchronous Blackboard collaborate course lecture. Unlike other discussions, the response was immediate and robust, so robust that the students talked over each other. To provide students the opportunity to be heard and express their thoughts, the teacher asked students to raise the hand icon via the text message chat. In this manner, each student could be called upon individually, and every student had the opportunity to speak uninterrupted.

The central theme that emerged during the discussion was that the students felt distressed that the university experience was not what they had anticipated. Although they understood the need for university closure, they also stated they were looking forward to experiencing the ability to socialize and participate in various universitywide and CON student activities. The inability to meet and interact

with each other, the CON administration, faculty, and staff spontaneously onsite versus planned designated virtual experiences resulted in their feeling anxious, isolated, and disconnected from the university, the CON faculty, staff, and university in general.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

Unconscious implicit faculty assumptions prevented faculty from considering ABP student expectations as more than attaining the degree. Program and curriculum developers need to incorporate not only the didactic content required to attain the degree being sought, but the student expectations of the university experience during the pursuit of the degree must also be considered. Therefore, curriculum development needs to incorporate student expectations of the social aspect of the university experience and the academic aspect of the university experience (Hanover Research, 2014, 2017; Jorgenson, 2018; Watari et al., 2020).

Students enrolled in the ABP expect onsite university engagement. The dissatisfaction expressed by the ABP students was a failure to meet the student's anticipated expectations regarding the university experience.

Student expectations of the university experience in the RNBS program are inherently different. These students specifically seek an online distance-mediated program where course lectures are presented asynchronously. Consequently, students enrolled in the RNBS program do not anticipate nor expect to participate in onsite university or CON activities. Therefore, because the student expectations regarding the university experience are met, student graduation rates and satisfaction scores remain high (Astin, 1999; Hanover Research, 2014, 2017; Jorgenson et al., 2018).

CONNECTING TO THE FACULTY, ADMINISTRATION, AND STAFF: VIRTUAL PET MEET AND GREET

During the Blackboard collaborate synchronous lectures, many of the student's pets would join the lecture, as would mine. As a matter of fact, if Steven Tyler (my Welsh terrier) were not present, the students would ask for him.

Dogs and other animals have been used to provide emotional support to humans since the 9th century. Throughout the centuries, multiple studies continue to be conducted in various settings, indicating that pet therapy programs can be an effective means to reduce stress and anxiety. Playing with a pet, petting, or even watching animal activities has been shown to lower cortisol levels and decrease serotonin production, making us feel less stressed Dalton et al., 2020; Ein, 2015; Koukourikos et al., 2019).

With this in mind, the idea to host a virtual pet day was conceived, providing a forum whereby students, faculty, and staff could spontaneously interact with each other. After permission was received from the Dean, an invitation was sent to the students, faculty, and staff in the CON. The response to the invitation was immediate. The students were ecstatic. It was a wonderful afternoon. Students, faculty, and staff in the CON had the opportunity to interact with each other and to connect with one another spontaneously in an informal manner. At the end of the hour, students and the faculty and staff in the CON, unanimously verbalized virtual pet day should become an annual event.

CONNECTING TO THE CON STAFF: STAFF MEET AND GREET

Although the virtual pet day provided an opportunity for the students to interact with the CON faculty and staff informally, it did not allow the students to interact with CON staff formally. Consequently,

the students could not discuss with the CON staff what their roles and responsibilities were in the CON.

During the initial discussion with the students, the students verbalized they also wanted to meet and chat with the staff in the CON. Again, permission was sought from the Dean and a virtual meet and greet with the staff in the CON was initiated. Student connection with university staff has been shown to have a direct correlation to student satisfaction and success (Ciobanu, 2013; Doyle, 2020).

At the end of the hour, both the students and staff verbalized that meeting the students and discussing their role in the CON was a mutually beneficial and satisfying experience.

ESTABLISHING A VIRTUAL DROP-IN OFFICE

During the discussion with students, the students expressed they missed not stopping in faculty offices. Utilizing Blackboard collaborate drop-in, faculty office hours were established. Like onsite office hours, designated days and times for open faculty office hours were established. Blackboard collaborate links were posted in a course folder in Blackboard. Students were then able to enter the Blackboard collaborate session during the specified open office hours. Leaving the Blackboard collaborate session open, the computer screen was split. Students could enter the open hour faculty office hours at their leisure, thus, providing the students the ability to "drop-in" to the faculty office.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The transitioning of the program curriculum is more than changing the curriculum delivery to a different platform. Change in program curriculum can have implications that exceed the pedagogical approaches and teaching methodologies. Changes in

program curriculum can affect assumed student expectations that faculty may not be consciously aware of. Failure to meet student expectations can result in increased student anxiety and overall student dissatisfaction. Student satisfaction is an essential academic success and retention (Astin, 1999; Hanover Research, 2014, 2017; Jorgenson et al., 2018).

Therefore, changes in program curricula need to be holistic. A holistic approach to curriculum development incorporates student needs and expectations (Astin, 1999; Jorgenson et al., 2018). Thus, the importance of student involvement in university and school committees. Before making programmatic or curriculum changes, seeking student input reduces the risk of faculty making unconscious, implicit assumptions. Additionally, soliciting student feedback needs to be continuous and not a discrete process. Several strategies have been employed to facilitate continuous student feedback.

Before the start of each lecture, a 15-minute student perspective has been instituted. Students are asked for their perspective regarding the assignment, readings, or elective or required supplement learning activities included with the lecture using the following questions. (1) What have you learned about your learning? (2) How did you learn about your learning? (3) What were the most and what were the least effective learning activities, and why? (4) What advice if any would you give to the faculty regarding this week's assignment? Recognizing that some students are introverts, a link has been placed on the CON web page that is anonymous. Once accessed, students can submit comments via a free text survey document.

Finally, in the free text comment field at the end of the semester course survey, the same directed and guided questions have been incorporated. However, instead of the third question asking about a specific weekly assignment, the question asks what

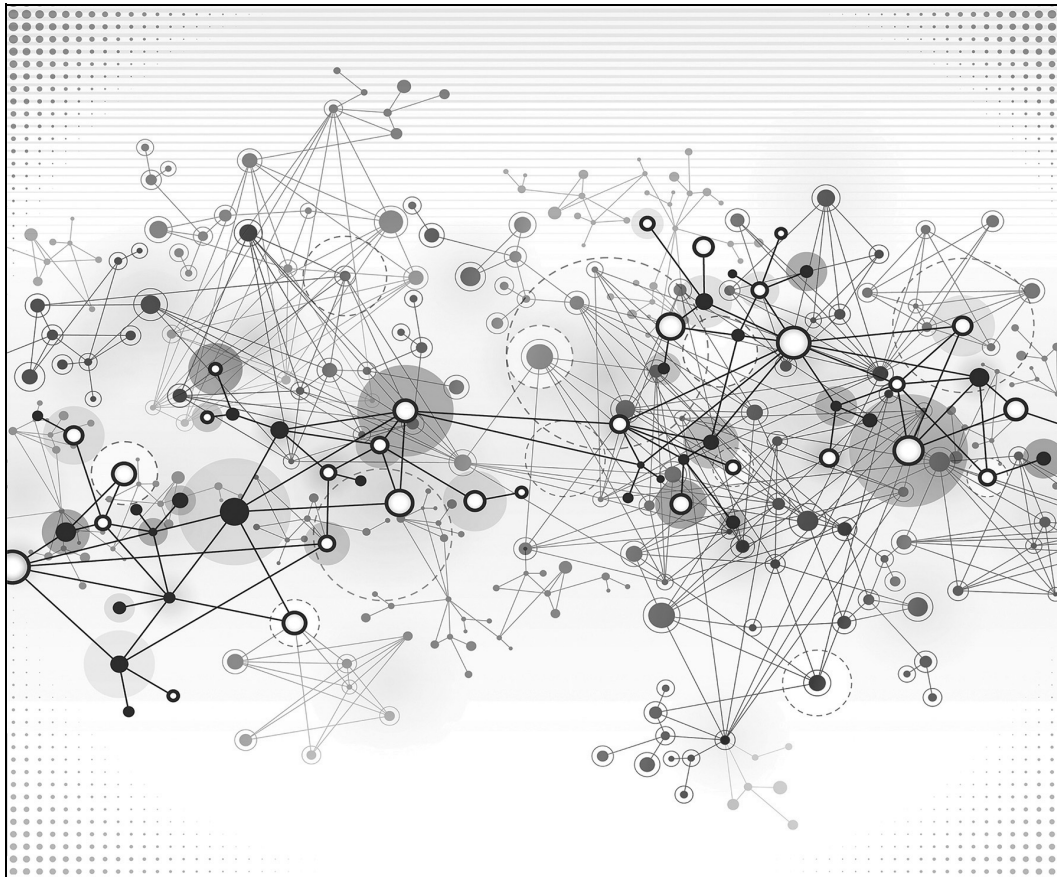
advice, in general, do you have for the course faculty about course assignments and the course in general. Since the inclusion of these guided and directed questions, the student feedback is less vague, more reflective, and more specific.

Educators need to recognize that teaching is more than the employment of pedagogical approaches. Teaching and learning is a reciprocal process whereby students and faculty learn from each other. It is about observing student behaviors beyond the context of student learning outcomes.

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