

Current trends, innovations and issues in nursing education to cater for the bottom billion nurses

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Abstract: Nurse education is undergoing a process of transition. Nurses worldwide are working towards achievement of higher levels of education and training through an improved education system. Current trends and innovations in nursing education are emerging to prepare more nurses and to deliver education to students across geographical boundaries while taking into consideration their work and family responsibilities. The current trends and innovations in nursing education range from full time face-to-face interactions to distance education programmes. Teaching approaches such as blended learning, online or e-Learning have provided nurses with an avenue for continuing education for development and progression in their career pathways. Every nurse aspires to reach her highest potential. While the current trends and innovations in nursing education provides the flexibility for nurses to continue learning and upgrade their professional qualifications, there are issues to be considered in catering to the needs of the bottom billion nurses. An exploration of related issues will include views from different perspectives, such as that of the institution/provider, instructor/facilitator and student/learner involved in the development and implementation of the related education programmes.

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Introduction

The paper discusses on the current trends and issues in nursing education for the needs of the bottom billion nurses. We often hear that nurses are an integral part of the healthcare system, the backbone of workforce providing care for the community of the nation. We are also aware that more than 80% of the nurses in Malaysia hold a diploma qualification and many aspire to possess at least a degree qualification, which currently is a requirement for all first level professional nurses in most

countries around the globe. Most of these nurses faced challenges/difficulties leaving service to pursue studies to upgrade their professional qualification. In line with the Malaysian Government's Policy to develop Malaysia as a centre for academic excellence, many institutions of higher learning introduced many new and innovative ways in education and training, tapping on recent developments in internet services and information technologies to develop programmes that give flexibility in allowing working adults the opportunity to pursue further studies and continuous professional development.

Current trends and innovations in nursing education

Nursing education is undergoing a transitional process. Current trends and innovations in nursing education are emerging to prepare and educate nurses across geographical boundaries. The innovations and current trends in nursing education ranges from full-time to various forms of distance learning programmes such as on line learning, e-Learning, web-based programmes, virtual learning and blended learning. Distance education methods have penetrated nursing education since the 1990s. Currently nursing education providers are moving rapidly into distance learning programmes to cater to the needs of nurses who are in service and aspire to continue to learn without having to lose out in work service and experience. For a better comprehension of the issues to be discussed later, it is beneficial to view the differences between traditional education versus distance education in nursing.

Traditional education programmes in nursing have typical classroom settings with students and teachers involved in a teaching learning session at a fixed location and time as scheduled in the academic calendar. The teaching is mostly didactic in nature with the teacher playing an active role and the student a more passive role, "soaking" in information imparted by the teacher. This type of learning is not flexible and requires 100% face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the learner.

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Distance education is defined as planned learning that occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring interactive technology in real time or delayed, and a course design supportive of distance education.¹ The two basic models of distance education are synchronous and asynchronous modes of interactivity. In synchronous learning the teacher and the student interact in real time, similar to traditional classroom settings, but this mode decreases flexibility. It requires all students to be online, in a video conference, or in a virtual classroom at the same time. Asynchronous learning occurs when individuals access the educational materials independently and at times and places of their choice. Asynchronous activities allow students to take as much time as they want to read the materials and compose responses or messages. It allows time for reflection and may result in thoughtful discussion. The use of asynchronous technology extends the reach of education to previously underserved populations as well as to those who prefer a more self-directed learning environment.² It is the most flexible and friendly way to use Internet for formal degree programmes and continuing education.

Distance learning offers new opportunities for nurses who are seeking basic or advanced degrees, certificates, or lifelong learning for professional development.³ The advantages to using the Internet are many. First, convenience and easy access are the cornerstones. The course work may be self-paced and asynchronous, the student has easy access to online libraries, databases, and learning resources. The ability to network with colleagues in specialty areas without any geographical limitations is not limited.

However, there are several disadvantages. First, the student needs a computer, modem, Internet service provider and basic computer skills.⁴ Second, bandwidth and connectivity to the Internet are issues that continue to exist in Internet education. This is especially true for individuals who rely on modems to connect to the Internet versus students with broad bandwidth connections (cable, satellite). Third, individual

learners must recognize their personal learning style and determine if Internet based education is appropriate for them. The work in developing and implementing a quality distance education programme occurs before students begin. The spirit and potential of distance education can be best realized by programmes that are specifically designed and implemented on the basis of the needs of the identified population of learners for whom it is intended.

Blended learning is becoming a trend these days where online education is integrated into traditional face-to-face teaching. This mode of learning is called blended learning. In blended learning there are slots of face-to-face sessions together with online learning. Students are introduced to the learning method and are expected to attend scheduled face-to-face sessions, read materials, look up resources and be involved in online learning activities.

Understanding the differences between traditional learning and Internet learning is essential before undertaking an online programme of any kind because students and educators who embark on an online education programme must change their thinking about how they learn or teach. Regardless of the technology used, certain instructional functions must exist¹:

- Instructor presentation of content using multimedia rich technology with supporting printed material
- Student-teacher interaction such as discussion, assignment, or testing
- Student-student interaction in small groups, pairs, threaded discussions, or group projects.

Rationale for current trend and innovation in nursing education

You may ask what is the rationale for the development and increasing demand for distance education, especially when some still question the authenticity of distance education programmes. Let us for a moment examine the requirement for quality healthcare.

Care to be considered high quality must be consistent with current professional knowledge in today's era of technological information. Nurses are assuming more demanding technology related responsibilities in their work, such as managing modern equipment and use applications required by the introduction of new hospital information and management systems within the organisation. Another factor worth mentioning is the acute shortage of nurses. A critical factor to ensure quality care is adequate numbers of nurses in the workforce to provide the care patients need. As a result employers have constraints in releasing nurses to pursue full-time education programmes.

Major changes in the health care system and practice environment have given rise to profound changes in the education of nurses. Nursing education should serve as a platform for continued lifelong learning and there should be opportunities for seamless transition to higher degree programmes. One of the key messages by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) (2011): "The future of nursing leading change, advancing health" endorses that "nurses should achieve higher levels of education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progression".⁵ Distance learning therefore is a very relevant development and platform for the nurses to pursue lifelong learning without having to leave work, at a reasonable cost, with flexibility where nurses can obtain lessons or courses at every moment or anywhere if the process of an online link is available. Nurses can attend class anytime with no necessity to travel to go to education centre or go back home, do not have problem of parking vehicles and there is no need to leave employment.

The current trends and innovations in nursing education are increasing and are here to stay. However there are issues arising from these developments. It is relevant therefore to explore issues arising should nurses opt for this mode of learning.

Issues in nursing education to cater for the bottom billion nurses

Novotny highlighted nine themes which are common areas for research with regards to distance education.⁴ Issues discussed will to a certain extent encroach on any of these themes, which are as follows:

1. In areas of collaboration: between teachers and learners
2. The issues of connectivity related to activities such as discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, conferences and group projects.
3. Focus on student- centred learning and facilitation as the teacher's primary function.
4. The boundaries of online education.
5. Issues related to the virtual community in online learning activities.
6. Exploration and discovery learning related to online programmes
7. Sharing knowledge as the core of education
8. Multisensory experience and online learning
9. Authenticity of online programmes.

The issues discussed will focus on three perspectives: the provider (institution and stakeholder); the student/ learner; and the teacher/facilitator involved in these new innovations.

Issues from the perspective of the institution and stakeholder of healthcare givers

Education is now a business entity with a competitive market. Many are rushing in to develop programmes based on the current trends and innovations using distance learning to attract adult learners such nurses who are in service. Many question the quality and some are sceptical about the authenticity of these programmes. Institutions developing these programmes therefore should consider their social responsibility and ensure the sustainability and quality of the programmes developed. Programmes developed must have the element of quality and avoid compromising in any form: be it in the content, the implementation and delivery of the programmes.

Apart from the curriculum, institutions have to ensure there are adequate facilities and resources, both material and human to support the programmes. As nursing is both a science and art, attention needs to be given for developing clinical competence, where blended learning (face-to-face sessions) or some form of virtual learning approach can be used to teach skills. Assessment regulations and methods have to be valid and reliable and yet be formulated to be flexible and friendly to suit working adults. In some programmes, clinical skills are evaluated by connecting students to instructors, using portable video conferencing devices such as Webcam technology with two-way videoconferencing. Nursing skills can be taught using simulated virtual-reality videos and manikins.

Healthcare employers cannot afford to release nurses for long periods to pursue studies to upgrade themselves as the quality of healthcare is dependent on availability of adequate numbers of qualified and well trained personnel.⁶ Employers therefore can facilitate and support these programme by granting time off and even providing educational grants/ sponsorships for nurses to pursue the learning. It is encouraging to know that there are healthcare institutions coming forward in support by subsidizing local and regional nursing programs.

Issues from perspective of the student (nurses)

The biggest benefit of distance programme is that one can continue on the path of education while adding to one's experience at the same time, as it does not necessitate taking leave from work. Issues from the learner's perspective will focus on aspects such as characteristics of the learners; balancing personal and professional life; and approaches to learning and limitations of effective distance learners.

(i) Characteristics of the healthcare giver as an adult learner and managing finances

In Malaysia, first level registered nurses (RNs) comprise of graduates with diploma (estimated 90%) and degree (estimated 10%). On an average, majority of them earn

between RM 2000 – 3000 per month. Almost 100% of all new graduates are sponsored either by healthcare organizations or government loans which they have to settle when they start employment. Those who have been sponsored will need to serve service contracts of usually five years with the sponsors. The period taken for the nurses to settle their education loans may extend anything from 10-20 years or more. The financial burden on these nurses will be further stretched should they decide to buy a car, house or when they get married and start their families. College is a huge expense and managing finances can be an issue especially when he/she already has a lot of responsibilities. These nurses find it a challenge to save enough to finance further education required either for continuous professional development or career progression. As such, education may not be a priority for the majority of nurses. However there will be opportunities if the nurse can take advantage of organisations providing employee education benefits in the form of funding, study leave or time off for periods that require them to be present during specific face-to-face sessions.

(ii) Balancing personal /professional life and time management

Latasha *et al.*² asserted that nurses not only have to keep up with the growing demands of quality patient care, but they are also required to remain current with the ever changing standards of practice, policy and procedures and continuing education. Research findings in a survey on 1,906 RNs suggested that work-life conflict is common among nurses. Half of them reported that work interfered with family. Nurses in full-time employment have little time to fit school into schedule. They therefore need to balance professional and personal responsibilities by maintaining a constructive work environment and good self care, such as engaging in feed-back groups, having time to self outside work environment and engage in interventions to maintain a successful career life, while still having the health and energy to enjoy personal life.

Many underestimate the demands of distance learning and over commit by signing up for more than one programme, while some do double shift duties. As a result some could hardly find time for reading and participate in online learning activities. Nurses, therefore need to be realistic, have a good sense of the requirements of distance learning, have better self discipline and need to appropriately allocate time for studies if they wish to benefit from the current trend in education.

(iii) Approaches to learning and limitations of effective distance learners

Distance learning requires specific skills. Students need to adapt to distance learning skills. Most nurses are used to didactic lectures. More time is required for nurses to acquire new learning habits such as self directed learning. Online distance learning requires much reading, understanding of content, the ability to analyze work situations and use new content learnt by relating it to the respective work situations. Students therefore need to possess the appropriate cognitive level with the necessary experience to benefit from the learning situation. A good command of English is a prerequisite to cope with online learning as the learners are required to do lots of guided reading before they are able to acquire sufficient knowledge and understanding to key in entries into the e-Learning platform.

Facilitators of online distance learning have to motivate and encourage students in the learning process. Students/learners should work together with facilitators as a team in the learning. The learner initiative is very important for the facilitator to be able to respond and guide the students in their learning to achieve the learning outcomes.

Issues from the perspective of the teachers

Until now the primary function of a teacher has been to transfer knowledge, with the student in a passive role. Majority of teaching and learning is passive and most students find this style of learning very safe and

comfortable. Distance education students and teachers need to be prepared for a change in this approach. When the Internet becomes the primary vehicle for learners to receive information and skills, classes that primarily transfer information become obsolete. Instead the student becomes an active participant in the process. The role of the instructor is to make the information meaningful, create a positive learning environment, integrate knowledge into the learner's own belief system, and create new knowledge and insight that come only when three or more learners are engaged in intense discussion and exploration. The teacher has to update his/her qualification experience to cope with current trends of education.

Technology and the Internet specially are changing the way individuals learn and gather data. Nursing students are using more Internet resources to support clinical decisions, access information and plan care. Teachers are using the Internet in traditional classroom settings to access information, demonstrate processes or mechanisms (animate blood flow through the heart) and promote in-class small group learning activities with wireless mobile technology.

Those teaching in online learning environments must be prepared to deliver instruction with various online modalities in order to meet diverse learning styles of individuals, similar to the preparations that are adopted in the traditional classroom setting for students with various learning styles. Teachers and students must also be prepared to create a "community" of learners by encouraging discussion, participation and presence that may require the use of more advanced technology such as audio capacity.

What is very clear and the message for all teachers is to integrate the element of change in their role as facilitators. Teachers now have to switch from pure didactic teaching in a classroom with walls to teaching where a classroom has no walls and he/she is connected to students in an environment without boundaries through distance learning. New skills need

to be acquired, attitudinal change has to be in place for distance learning or any new innovation in education to be successful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, nursing in Malaysia has many opportunities for the development of educational programmes based on the current trends and innovations that are rapidly occurring all over the world. Lewis had asserted that the academic quality and legitimacy of a well- designed and well-executed distance education programme have been proved.⁷ If nurses do not wish to be left out they need to change and view these current trends and innovations in a positive manner and take the right step forward for the benefit of the nursing community. This will not only to provide working nurses with opportunities for continuous learning based on adult learning principles, but also an effort in improving the quality of service. The government of Malaysia has identified education as one of the key areas for development and the Prime Minister has asserted that we should make Malaysia a centre for global education and has given high priority and much emphasis towards

use of technology as a way forward in education. Against all the rapid development in technology, science and education, nursing has to face and encounter many challenges in line with current trends in education. It can be seen there are issues to be addressed from the three perspectives discussed. We know there is no short term solution for all these increasing challenges as we proceed from one stage to another.

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