A Nursing Faculty's TRANSITION *to Teaching Online*

ARLENE E. JOHNSON

ABSTRACT The introduction of web-based instruction into nursing education has resulted in a significant change in the responsibilities of nurse educators. This phenomenological research study explored the experiences of a graduate nursing faculty who had recently made the transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to web-based teaching. Through guided interviews, the faculty participants provided a rich description of their transition to web-based teaching and their perceptions of what faculty members need in order to make such a change successfully. Faculty members described how their role as nurse educators was reconceptualized as they learned to teach in a different environment. The participants' accounts of their experiences revealed a true paradigm shift in their perception of the nurse educator role and, for many, a comparable shift in their philosophy of teaching.

WHILE A RELATIVELY NEW PHENOMENON, online learning in nursing education has had a significant impact on the role of the nurse educator. Faculty members are challenged to make fundamental changes in their teaching strategies (1,2). Often, a paradigm shift takes place when traditional courses are converted to an online format. As the emphasis moves from faculty teaching to student learning, the role of the faculty member changes from authority figure to facilitator (3,4). • Nurse educators who are asked to make this transition often have no experience in the development or teaching of online courses. Thus, even seasoned faculty members find themselves in the position of novice (5-7). This article reports on a research study designed to explore the experiences of faculty members in a graduate nursing program and their reflections on the transition from face-to-face instruction to teaching in an online environment.

Literature Review The body of knowledge related to online nursing education is limited. A thorough review of the literature revealed only a small amount of research related to the faculty role in web-based graduate nursing education.

Diekelmann, Schuster, and Nosek examined the relationship between technology-based distance education and the absence of physical presence (1). Their phenomenological study used faculty narratives to identify common experiences in teaching at a distance: losing familiar landmarks and touchstones, challenging conventional pedagogies, reawakening new roles, learning from experience, and creating new pedagogies.

Ryan, Hodson Carlton, and Ali (2) built on the research of Diekelmann et al. Using a dimensional analysis to develop a matrix for describing common experiences, Ryan et al. found positive as well as negative responses to teaching web-based courses. They concluded that before moving to an online teaching format, an infrastructure must be in place that includes policies, technology partnerships, and support systems for faculty. In addition, faculty development, with information on how the faculty role will change in the virtual environment, is needed prior to the transition. Later, Ryan et al. conducted a validation study that confirmed the major dimensions of their matrix and resulted in the Model for Faculty Teaching Online (8).

While lack of technological skill is often identified as a significant barrier to teaching online courses, research also indicates that the lack of knowledge of the pedagogy of online learning is a greater problem. Conrad (9) interviewed graduate university instructors who were teaching online for the first time. Their reflections on their teaching experiences were found to demonstrate little awareness of the pedagogy of online teaching and learning. The overall concerns

of participants centered on whether or not they were able to deliver the course content effectively. The letting go of face-to-face teaching paradigms, which often occurs when experienced faculty teach online, was not noted.

Background for the Research Study The Partnerships for Training (PFT) initiative was formed in 2000 in response to the shortage of primary health care providers across the United States. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, PFT created eight university-community partnerships (consortia) that used distance education technology and satellite campuses to educate advanced practice nurse-midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants to provide primary health care services in medically underserved areas (10). Six schools of nursing, members of one participating consortium, collaborated in the development of 16 distance education courses used by students at all partner schools. For many of the nurse faculty in the consortium's institutions, this was their first experience with web-based instruction.

As an outcome of the project, students at all of the collaborating institutions were able to use the web-based curriculum in their graduate nursing education programs. At the conclusion of the consortium's project in 2004, one of the participating institutions made a commitment to offer a completely web-based family nurse practitioner program. This study was designed to explore the experiences of the faculty members in the graduate nursing program at this institution and their reflections on the transition from traditional instruction to teaching in an online environment.

Method PARTICIPANTS A purposive sample was selected for the study. Participants were 12 faculty members in the graduate nursing program at an independent private college. Their length of time as nurse educators ranged from three to 28 years. For the majority of the faculty members, the transition from face-to-face instruction to web-based teaching was a relatively new phenomenon, taking place from one to 10 years previously, with the average being 3.67 years ago.

A qualitative, phenomenological research design provided the framework for the study. For the process of data collection, the researcher used a guided interview instrument consisting of 12 open-ended questions about participants' experiences during their transition to web-based teaching. The interview questionnaire was adapted, with permission, from an instrument that was used by Ryan et al. in teleconferenced focus groups for their original study (2).

The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. In several of the sessions, the researcher asked additional questions that were raised in response to answers to questions on the interview guide. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

DATA ANALYSIS An inductive process was used to examine the transcripts of the faculty interviews. Key phrases relating to the research questions were sorted into 30 groups of similar observations. The groups of observations were compared and collapsed into 19 key themes. Finally, in an attempt to collapse the data further, the researcher identified associations between the themes, resulting in five categories that provided the framework to report the findings of the study. The categories were: a) structuring and delivering course content, b) faculty development, c) student roles and responsibilities, d) communication and relationships, and e) the faculty role. The themes and categories are shown in the Table.

Table. Sorting of the Data

THEMES	THEMATIC CATEGORIES
Ability to transfer teaching strategies from one environment to the other	Structuring and delivering course content
Monitoring and adjusting teaching based on student understanding	
Types of classroom interaction	
Time commitment and restructuring of faculty time	
Crafting assessment	
Collaboration	Faculty development
Technical knowledge	
Technology support	
Technical barriers	
Impact of faculty learning style	
Responsibility for learning	Student roles and responsibilities
Student learning style preferences	
Critical thinking	
Accountability	
Student evaluations	
Electronic communication	Communication and relationships
Interactivity	
Relationships with students	
The faculty role	The faculty role

Findings The results of the study are presented within the framework of the thematic categories.

STRUCTURING AND DELIVERING COURSE CONTENT Participants spoke of their ability to transfer some traditional content delivery methods to the web-based teaching environment. One faculty member explained how she initially thought that traditional teaching methods would be lost in the transition, but as she gained experience, her thoughts changed: "I think you can kind of resurrect them [traditional teaching methods] as you start getting more creative. I was most concerned about flexibility." As she became more comfortable with the new teaching milieu, this participant experimented with a variety of online teaching strategies.

THE MAJORITY of the participants agreed that TO TEACH in the web-based environment EFFECTIVELY, they had to RETHINK their PHILOSOPHIES of teaching and learning. One spoke of the need to ASK QUESTIONS in CONTRAST to delivering information.

An individual who had developed lectures for a face-to-face course was concerned about how students would comprehend her explication of very abstract, complex concepts in the web-based environment. This faculty member found it difficult to let go of lecturing as a teaching strategy because she thought that students would be unable to acquire knowledge without her explanations and comments on the required readings.

The majority of the participants agreed that to teach in the web-based environment effectively, they had to rethink their philosophies of teaching and learning. One spoke of the need to ask questions in contrast to delivering information: "That was the biggest change for me, learning how to ask the questions that would stimulate exploration of a topic, versus doing it with my content and my interpersonal style. It was a huge shift for me."

Participants found it difficult to adjust teaching methods based on student understanding in web-based courses. "If you get to a [face-to-face] class period and find out there is a gap in knowledge, then you can change your plan for the classroom. It is much more difficult to go back and change a web-based course."

Some of the participants spoke of the difficulty they experienced developing effective models of classroom interaction for their web-based courses. Others expressed concern about the lack of face-to-face interaction: "Those personal, one-to-one kinds of things are something that I miss. You get to see people, you see their faces, and you know if they are struggling. That's important." However, one participant stated that lack of face-to-face interaction is offset by the higher caliber of discussion in the asynchronous environment.

Several participants felt that their time commitment increased significantly while teaching web-based courses. Others described a restructuring of their time: "The time commitment is different; I don't know that it's more or less, but it's different because of how you have to schedule your time." Participants agreed that the up-front preparation in a web-based course was extremely time consuming. However, one participant proposed that any increased time required to develop and teach web-based courses is offset by the freedom and flexibility that come with teaching in this environment.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT Learning how to develop and teach web-based courses proved to be a challenging experience for all participants. Eight (66 percent) reported that they had been students in web-based courses and had acquired insight into online learning from the student perspective. Their prior experience allowed them to identify effective teaching strategies as well as techniques to avoid.

All agreed that it was beneficial to collaborate with faculty members who had experience in developing and teaching web-based courses: "The mentorship cannot be duplicated. Someone who has a lived experience [of teaching web-based courses] is a valuable resource." There was also an identified benefit to going online and viewing other faculty members' courses.

Some of the participants were teaching courses that other faculty members had developed, while others had constructed courses that colleagues were now teaching. One faculty member found it difficult to hand over her course: "I designed the course and then it was handed off to someone else to teach, and I find it troubling that parts of it were removed. I wonder how the decision was arrived at. Was it the best for the course and for the students, or was it the best for the faculty teaching the course?"

Participants also expressed the need for collaboration with

administrators, who often make the decision to implement web-based courses but do not understand the time commitment involved and the resources needed to make an effective transition. One participant stated: "The people who do time and load management do not understand the time involved in developing or teaching a course. It takes an enormous amount of time to teach online successfully."

Several participants spoke of the influence of their own learning style preferences on their ability to teach in the web-based environment. One described her difficulty with the absence of visual cues: "In the traditional classroom you get to see people, you get to see their faces, you know if they are struggling. In the online classroom you miss those visual cues. You can't get the same kind of interaction. Personal one-to-one contact is something that I miss a lot." Another participant said, "I'm more of a verbal person, so for me to go and sit down and type in all of my thoughts, rather than just discuss it with somebody, feels like a barrier to me."

A faculty member who described herself as an introvert reported that web-based teaching suited her personality: "Teaching, in some respects, is like being on stage. I mean, a huge stress for me, as a novice teacher in a face-to-face class, is that it takes a great deal of energy to sort of go on stage and a piece of it is like performing. Although I can enjoy that to some degree, it is very draining and I think it is much easier for me, given my makeup, to teach online on my own terms when I feel like it and how I feel like it." Conversely, a participant who identified herself as an extrovert said that it would be difficult for her to teach web-based courses exclusively: "I'm really a strong extrovert, so it would be hard for me to only teach online. I would be lonely and I would have to find other ways to meet my needs."

STUDENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES All of the participants agreed that in the web-based environment, students must assume more responsibility for learning. One described a "natural evolution from classroom to online learning."

One participant stated that students are consistent in revealing positive attitudes about the opportunity to discuss things, in depth, on their own terms: "It has been less threatening for them to think about difficult content, struggle with it, and then formulate a response that they can feel good about and then post for everyone to see. For students who may be reluctant to speak up in class, web-based learning is a real plus."

Most participants felt that the web-based environment is supportive of critical thinking. In courses where the bulk of the content is theory, they thought the online format forced students to think and participate at a higher level.

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS The participants agreed that interactivity is of prime importance in the web-based course and that lack of interactivity can lead to students feeling isolated. They reported that relationships with students changed in the web-based environment. "I find myself trying and really having to be intentional about developing relationships with students because we are so isolated from each other."

One faculty member proposed that it is easier to know students better in the web-based environment because of "forced communication." Others felt that their relationships were much more distant.

THE FACULTY ROLE Participants agreed that the faculty role changes in web-based teaching, and some expressed feelings of anxiety. They stated that the transition from practicing as a nurse in the clinical setting to being effective as a nurse educator had taken them several years, and this new assignment has created challenges for this population. One faculty member described the process: "I'm really learning more and more about teaching as I go along. I do not have a good handle on teaching credibility in online education and hope for the best. Our good solid knowledge about how to teach goes right out the window, because it takes a lot of trial-and-error to see what works. One of the things that I have left behind [in the transition to web-based teaching] is a solid foundation of teaching credibility."

Participants who taught courses in which students were expected to demonstrate competency in psychomotor skills, such as physical assessment, described a loss of control resulting from having clinical preceptors evaluate the mastery of skills. But one participant described a positive change in her perception of the faculty role: "I am delighted to not have the sense that somehow I am responsible for delivery of specific content. I am delighted to give that up. I don't feel a sense of loss in any sense of the word."

Discussion Delegation of supervision of graduate nursing students is a nationally accepted standard. For example, the National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties' (NONPF) *Criteria for Evaluation of Nurse Practitioner Programs* states that faculty supervision of students in clinical sites may be direct or indirect (11). Nevertheless, some faculty participants spoke of a loss of control in their role that resulted

from having preceptors evaluate clinical competencies.

All participants agreed that to teach effectively in a web-based environment, they had to rethink the processes of teaching and learning. Some reported that although they were initially fearful of having to abandon conventional teaching strategies, they were able to transfer some of these teaching methods to the web-based environment. Likewise, as they gained experience in the online classroom, they were able to transfer newly learned web-based teaching strategies to the face-to-face classroom. The observation by some that teaching in a web-based learning environment resulted in a paradigm change in their philosophy of teaching was also a principal finding in the Ryan et al. study (2).

MOST PARTICIPANTS felt that the web-based environment is supportive of CRITICAL THINKING. In courses where the bulk of the CONTENT IS THEORY, they thought the online format forced students TO THINK and PARTICIPATE at a higher level.

Several participants spoke of the visual cues that come with face-to-face contact with students as something they missed and one of the downfalls of web-based teaching. According to Lynch, this reaction is common; lack of visual cueing has become a "rallying point for resistance and fear of transitioning to online classrooms" (6, p. 67). Some participants proposed that lack of face-to-face contact was offset by the more intellectual and stimulating student discussions that took place in the web-based environment. They observed that the asynchronous learning environment provided students an opportunity to reflect critically on their thoughts prior to posting responses to discussions. Palloff and Pratt (12) also suggested that the online environment encourages the development of critical thinking skills.

Many participants expressed concerns about the increased time commitment for web-based teaching. The perceptions of those who were more experienced with online teaching were consistent with the findings of Thompson (13) and Johnson, Posey, and Simmens (14), who reported that the time spent teaching online was not greater, but the "chunking" of time was quite different.

Since the transition to web-based teaching was a relatively recent event for the majority of the participants in this study, they were able to accurately recall their transition experiences and describe their individual concerns in detail. Based on their recent experiences, they offered several recommendations for successful course development and an effective transition to teaching online. Three experts were seen as essential to the team: a content expert (the faculty member), a web-based pedagogy expert, and a technology expert. The recommendations of participants in this study corresponded to the findings of Ali and colleagues (15), who also identified that faculty partnerships were an essential component of the faculty development process.

Ownership of web-based courses, an issue raised by participants, was also a concern among participants in the Ryan et al. study (2), who asked how much freedom they had to revise the delivery of course content. In the current study, some participants were teaching courses that other faculty members had developed, and some had constructed courses now taught by others.

Even though this group of nurse educators was relatively inexperienced in web-based teaching, they were able to recount how their own learning style preferences affected their teaching in the online environment. It is important that faculty who plan to make the transition to web-based teaching engage in self-assessment of learning style preferences and determine how their personal preferences will affect their ability to teach in the online environment. As proposed by Barker (5), Lan (16), and Ali and colleagues (15), faculty development programs for an innovation such as transition to web-based instruction must meet the perceived needs and priorities of the faculty involved.

Participants also recognized that learning style preferences of students should be taken into consideration when developing and teaching web-based courses, and that student personalities may influence preferences or abilities to learn in the online classroom. The literature supports the supposition that graduate nursing students are adult learners who benefit from self-directed, relevant learning activities that incorporate a variety of learning style preferences (17).

Implications for Nursing Education The findings of the study support the conclusions of previous research, that nurse faculty members who make the transition to web-based instruction experience considerable change in their role and teaching responsibilities. Most of the participants in this study, seasoned faculty members or relatively inexperienced teachers, indicated that they did not feel adequately prepared to teach in the online setting.

One of the most beneficial experiences for this group of faculty members was their participation as students in web-based courses. Participants agreed that all faculty who plan to teach web-based courses should have similar experiences. Participants also recommended that faculty members who are planning to develop and teach a web-based course for the first time work one-on-one with a faculty member who is experienced in this teaching milieu. The opportunity to access and review exemplary web-based courses was also recognized as a valuable experience.

Graduate nursing education promotes analytical skills, enhances graduates' abilities to articulate different positions, integrates theory with practice, and increases skills in a nursing specialty (18). Development of these higher-level critical thinking skills must be incorporated into web-based graduate nursing education. Even though web-based education changes the way in which content is delivered, nurse educators are still responsible for upholding the traditional educational principles of graduate nursing education (18). The conceptual framework, program outcomes, and student learning objectives do not change in web-based education. Students can acquire and synthesize new knowledge in this environment much as they do in a face-to-face classroom. NLN

About the Author *Arlene E. Johnson, PhD, RN, CPNP, is an assistant professor, Clemson University School of Nursing, Clemson, South Carolina. For more information, contact Dr. Johnson at aejohns@clemson.edu.*

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