

Beyond the Screen: Debunking the Myth that Online Education Means Being Alone

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Abstract

Background: Nursing education has shifted to online learning environments due to rapid advancements in technology and the COVID-19 pandemic. Some nursing educators and students misunderstand that online learning is isolating and lonely.

Method: This literature review explores the impact of online learning on students' emotional well-being and challenges the belief that it is inherently lonely. It examines global events, the growth of online nursing programs, and the myth of online nursing education as isolating and depressing.

Results: Online learning is a popular and effective education method that caters to diverse learners and contexts. The instructor's role is crucial in ensuring student satisfaction and engagement, fostering community and interaction among online learners.

Conclusion: Online learning is a rich and rewarding experience, with supportive instructors. This series will explore ways to break the myth of loneliness and foster community in the online environment.

Keywords: online learning, virtual, technology, student collaboration, lonely, isolating, online community

Introduction

Nursing education has evolved significantly in recent years, shifting from traditional classroom settings to online learning environments due to technological advancements, student flexibility, and the COVID-19 pandemic's challenges. However, some nursing educators and students still perceive online learning as isolated and lonely, lacking community

and collaboration. This article aims to dispel this myth and demonstrate how online learning can foster a rich and engaging learning community for both students and educators. Strategies and tools are used to facilitate communication, interaction, feedback, and support. The article addresses the evolution of online education and the misconception that it is isolating and lonely and provides recommendations for online doctoral of nursing practice(DNP) programs.

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Impact of Global Events on the Demand for Online Learning

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant shift in education, with colleges transitioning from face-to-face to online learning platforms. This impacted one billion learners, with 89.4% enrolled in higher education.¹ Online tools were used to produce, deliver, and manage learning content, allowing for a two-way interaction between students and teachers.² The flexibility of online learning has been praised by students as it fosters resilience and prepares them for future changes.³ Virtual clinical learning requires robust instructors to foster student engagement, participation, collaboration, and critical thinking.⁴ Students appreciate the pandemic-resilient educational standard and the potential benefits of online work, despite the increased cost. Instructors used audio, visual, and written online tools to create unique learning experiences, fostering student collaboration and patient care like an in-person clinical day.⁴

Historical Growth of Online Nursing Programs

Nursing education has evolved significantly over the years, with online programs becoming a crucial part of the curriculum. The internet's popularity began in the 1990s, leading to the establishment of the first online doctoral program in 1997.⁵ The e-learning market in the United States grew to \$6.22 billion between 2017 and 2022, with 59% of the market share coming from content-related online learning products.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic forced nursing schools to shift to almost fully online classes in 2020. Today, over 30% of American students are enrolled in at least one online course, and the number of undergraduate and graduate-level enrollment has increased from 15.6% in 2004 to 27.3% in 2016.⁷ Technology investment in the United States has already superseded \$13 billion and learning management systems (LMS) are expected to evolve to provide more social online learning experiences.⁸ Videos have become a standard part of online learning, with over 60% of students finding technological advancements in the classroom to improve their grades and learning process.⁹ Online education has a transformative impact on learners, fostering a sense of community across geographical boundaries. Platforms like online learning platforms

allow learners to engage in discussions, collaborate on projects, and support each other's learning journey.¹⁰

Online Nursing Education is Isolating and Lonely

Online education has gained popularity due to its flexibility, time management, and the ability to work at one's own pace.¹¹ However, it also presents challenges such as technical difficulties, time needed to adapt to new technology, and lack of training for students to become adept at learning management systems. Students may struggle to understand course content and lose track of the learning process due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. The pandemic has further impacted students, with 24.9% of college students being anxious about moving to online learning due to the outbreak.¹² However, today's digitally driven generation has desensitized them to the technical hiccups of online learning, allowing them to maintain focus and efficiency in their studies. To be successful and satisfied in online learning, students must benefit from having an online community.

Online communities have rules of conduct that help students understand how to behave in an online environment, building trust and comfort within the community.¹³ The role of the instructor is crucial in the development of an online community, and student satisfaction with their instructor is directly related to their perception of the online learning environment. Six conditions lead to community development among students in the online learning environment: (1) the instructor models expected behaviors; (2) sufficient time for online discussion and interaction is provided; (3) similarities are identified between online participants; (4) students feel a need to be part of a community; (5) students prioritize class interaction; and (6) students are engaged in class dialogue.¹⁴ Face-to-face communication is now secondary, but it can still enhance the student experience. A study by Richardson and Swan (2019) found that 59% of students indicated that feedback and acknowledgment by their instructor in the online environment were the most beneficial to their learning.

Engaging Students in Online Learning

Christopher et al.'s (2020) study emphasizes the importance of 'online caring presence' in online

education, focusing on the mutually present and engaged relationship between faculty and students.¹⁶ The study also investigates nursing students' perceptions of the level of care teachers provide online, finding that students highly appreciate their relationships with professors and identify distinct reactions to online courses. Students reported enhanced connectivity and increased engagement with teachers through online platforms compared to in-person encounters. Instructors also conveyed the same views and saw a deeper understanding of students online than in-person interactions.

The shift to online learning, particularly in nursing and related healthcare fields, has led to the development of innovative approaches to foster community and teamwork among learners. Interactive tools and platforms have become crucial in online nursing education, enhancing student outcomes, community engagement, peer support, and mentoring. Learning management systems (LMS) like Blackboard and Canvas serve as the foundation for communication between students and teachers, assignment changing, and the dissemination of course materials. Video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams facilitate synchronous connections, reducing geographical isolation and promoting a more individualized learning environment.¹⁷ Project management and collaboration platforms like Trello and Slack enhance interpersonal communication by using structured communication channels and visual task management interfaces.¹⁸

Virtual simulation platforms like SyncSim and vSim for Nursing offer learners' access to simulated clinical settings, improving clinical judgment and team problem-solving skills. Social networking and community platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Messenger, and YouTube provide peer support, networking, and mentoring in the nursing profession.¹⁹ Specialist mentorship networks like NurseMentor and MentorNet connect nursing students with seasoned practitioners, offering structured mentorship relationships that improve learning outcomes and create opportunities for professional growth.²⁰

Wagg and Morgan's (2022) case study "explore a unique approach to practice placements, focusing on virtual practice experiences led by clinical

practitioners". The study concludes that virtual practice days can enhance interpersonal connections by incorporating intentional bonding activities and more on-camera discussions. Chat rooms and discussion boards are crucial for creating an engaging learning environment, enabling synchronous and asynchronous discussions. Online platforms with discussion forums and chat tools allow real-time communication and facilitate questions, answers, and discussion of course materials.

Online nursing programs provide group assignments that mimic teamwork in healthcare settings, enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. Giroux and Moreau's (2022) exploratory qualitative case study investigated the use of social media by nursing students in formal and informal learning contexts. Results showed that individuals use social media platforms for both official and informal educational purposes, particularly to enhance their learning beyond formal institutional frameworks.²³

Peer-led learning is facilitated by online study groups, which let learners gain knowledge from one another. Online activities like webinars and guest lectures offer chances to network with peers and experts, introducing learners to real-world experiences and viewpoints in nursing and healthcare.²⁴ Personalized individual attention and virtual office hours are essential for meeting each student's unique learning needs.²⁵ Online tutoring services deliver supplemental academic support designed to cater to various learners' diverse needs and learning styles.

Online nursing learners benefit from comprehensive support services, including academic advising, technological assistance, and mental health counseling. Virtual campus communities provide platforms for social and professional activities, fostering a sense of belonging and community. Alumni networks and mentorship programs connect recent graduates with current students, offering career assistance, professional development, and mentorship.

In conclusion, online nursing education requires a positive learning environment and enhanced student motivation. Digital platforms like social media can

be used to recognize milestones, implement virtual recognition systems, and host online ceremonies. These strategies adapt traditional celebratory practices into the digital realm, enriching the online educational experience for nursing students.²⁶

Embrace the Christian Spirit of Serving

Research emphasizes the benefits of teamwork in remote nursing education, highlighting the importance of engaging and nurturing virtual spaces. This enhances academic achievement, prepares students for the team-based nature of healthcare, and ensures they have the necessary skills to provide excellent patient care in a world embracing digital technology. Online nursing schools can provide dynamic, encouraging, and highly connected learning communities, defying the belief that these settings encourage isolation. Educators must promote inclusive, friendly environments guided by Christian ideals of compassion and empathy. Effective communication techniques, such as social media, discussion forums, and video conferencing, are necessary to build a cohesive online learning community and reduce feelings of loneliness. Online nursing programs can also improve students' capacity for time management and self-discipline, enhancing their education and equipping them for the demands of the nursing profession.²⁷ Incorporating Christian principles into online education can spur career success, personal development, and academic success.

Learner Success

Online learning success is influenced by course appeal, suitability, and user-friendliness.²⁸ While online nursing courses have a positive impact, traditional face-to-face learning remains preferred. Students perceive success as connecting learning to their professional lives and feeling confident in their abilities. Self-directed learning and managing satisfaction are crucial for academic achievement. Factors like self-directed learning, online class flow, and happiness contribute to academic achievement. Common themes influencing satisfaction include internet access, self-discipline cultivation, and effective resource utilization.

Future Trends in Online Education

The future of online education is expected to evolve with continued technology integration, enhancing accessibility and effectiveness. Personalized learning, which caters to individual students' needs, preferences, and abilities, is expected to improve learning outcomes and student engagement.²⁹ This approach differs from the traditional one-size-fits-all approach, recognizing and accommodating diverse learning styles and paces.³⁰

Artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing online learning by providing personalized feedback and adaptive pathways. It helps learners navigate course materials and concepts without face-to-face interactions, generating valuable insights for educators. AI systems can identify trends, learning gaps, and areas for improvement, ensuring engaging and responsive online learning experiences.³¹ AI also addresses loneliness in nursing programs by enhancing social connectedness and teamwork through remote collaboration tools, fostering virtual communities of practice and mitigating feelings of loneliness and isolation.³²

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies are revolutionizing online education by providing immersive simulations and experiential learning opportunities.³² These technologies foster a sense of community and camaraderie among online learners, promoting knowledge sharing, teamwork, and collective problem-solving skills. In online nursing education, VR and AR can create collaborative learning environments that simulate real-world healthcare teams, allowing learners to interact with peers, instructors, and virtual patients.³³ AR-enhanced collaborative tools enable virtual collaboration on patient case studies, treatment plans, and research projects. These technologies also reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness among online learners, enhancing social interaction and professional networking.³⁴

Real-Life Application

A Western university's DNP program is implementing recommendations to foster relationships with students despite distance barriers. The faculty aims to develop a sense of community and address the online loneliness myth by providing

multiple methods for face-to-face interaction. PICOT Mondays is a weekly meeting where students can work in small groups with a faculty member to review literature and wording before submitting for a formal review process. This allows for connection, asking questions, and developing relationships with faculty.

Monthly course meetings are another option for students to meet faculty, ask questions about the class, and seek extra assistance if they struggle. A mandatory seminar is held before project implementation, conducted via Zoom, once a month. This allows students to engage with faculty, ask questions, and receive immediate feedback and support. A bi-monthly Zoom meeting is also offered to interact with the course lead, obtaining additional feedback, help, and support needed for continued document and project development before entering the project courses. The university offers twice a week institutional review board (IRB) meeting, allowing learners to review their IRB documents prior to submission, ask data collection and analysis questions, and address any other concerns with the quality improvement (QI)/IRB lead.

Interactive workshops are hosted on different aspects of the IRB application process, including hands-on sessions on writing consent forms, developing data collection tools, and understanding privacy laws related to healthcare research. By using real-world examples and allowing students to work on sections of their own IRB applications, learners gain practical insights and immediate feedback. Student success and support are paramount to the university. One full-time faculty member oversees learner success, paired 1:1 with students who are leaving after an extended absence or struggling. This support results in meetings on Tuesdays, emails, and phone calls. Other full-time faculty attend these meetings as an additional level of support to ensure student success.

Feedback Fridays is another platform for students to log into Zoom to discuss whatever concerns they have. Topics range from obtaining PICOT approval, finding literature and implementing projects to supporting peers at different points on their educational journey. Successful faculty are essential for having successful students. The university

provides a mentorship program for adjunct faculty, offering weekly meetings and regular updates on curriculum changes.

Conclusion

Online education is a rapidly changing educational paradigm that fosters community, collaboration, and personal growth. Its transformative potential is evident through success stories, case studies, and future trends. Understanding the online learning experience is crucial for empowering learners and enhancing educational outcomes. The shift from isolation to community in online education creates a more inclusive and accessible learning environment. Continuous innovation and exploration of new possibilities are essential for improving education and empowering learners worldwide.

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