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Challenges in Global Health: Building a Virtual Community of Practice Model

Ever since the Biafran famine in 1967, to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, to the recent SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, global health has been a rapidly developing and dynamic field. Global health requires working in concert with local communities, established leadership, and trusted partners. It requires a clear set of methods and a scientifically developed mechanism for structuring ideas and framing issues and challenges. Global health is a process that starts with a clear understanding of how collaboration and partnership can build on established practices. It was under this assumption that the American College of Education joined forces with a group of global health professionals to form a virtual global connection, an international virtual community of practice, between two universities and their schools of nursing, to create a model program for training health profession students in Global Health. Globalization has highlighted health disparities around the world, and nursing is challenged to step up and meet the health needs of diverse populations. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing has established cultural competencies for training programs to prepare nursing professionals to contribute to the elimination of health disparities (AACN, 2009). One unique way to accomplish this is through the development of an international virtual community of practice.

A community of practice refers to a group of people who care about similar real-world problems or professional issues, who, on that basis, interact to learn from one another (Wenger, 2010). These social structures can promote engagement, knowledge sharing, and lead to understanding among participants (Pyrko, Dorfler, & Eden, 2016). It was with this in mind that a group of nursing academics, global health professionals, and health professionals came together to develop an innovative web-based community of practice model within an online RN to MSN program.

In 2017, the National League for Nursing developed a visionary statement related to the promotion of excellence in nursing education through the development of a diverse workforce to advance the health of our nation and the global community (NLN, 2017). In this statement, the NLN embraced the notion that nursing education must include engagement with multiple perspectives on global health issues and that becoming a global citizen is an integral part of the role of the professional nurse of today (NLN, 2017).

Despite the need for global engagement in nursing education, only approximately 10% of graduates in the United States participate in study abroad opportunities (Goodman, 2014). Travel abroad can be prohibited by cost, multiple responsibilities of adult learners, and more recently can be impacted by travel restrictions due to the pandemic. With emerging advancement in technology and the call for globalization in higher education, new opportunities for international collaboration are born. In this presentation, we discuss an innovative virtual learning model to connect nursing students in the United States with those of Perú to create a cross-cultural exchange to advance global nursing education.

Whether online or face-to-face, traditional reading and lecture teaching methods often fall short in generating enthusiasm for global health (Winskell, 2014). International, on-the-ground experiences are not often possible for adult learners who have chosen an online program (travel, expense, and multiple logistical responsibilities are significant barriers). During the development of the course, the authors considered innovative web-based strategies to expand the global context and promote student engagement and collaboration with international colleagues. One strategy envisioned was the development of a third space for learning using technology. The third space provided the context from which to design the international virtual community of practice experience.

Third spaces can be described as “in-between spaces” for innovative collaboration and shared learning (Dudgeon and Fielder, 2006). Haig-Brown (2008) suggested third spaces are alive, not static, and that they foster genuine cultural engagement and exchange. The third space allows students from the United States and Perú to collaborate in a neutral learning space, where all engage equally and learn collectively. From this exploration, the model for a virtual international community of practice was born.

The Community of Practice Challenges in Global Health course activities and case scenarios operated under a few explicit assumptions – (1) There is no simple solution to the challenges facing underserved and marginalized communities; (2) The simple solutions have already been applied; (3) The work of complex structural change requires complex solutions; and, (4) The course required students to work in collaboration with their colleagues from a different culture, to think through the comprehensive steps of addressing big, multifaceted, community-based challenges in global health. This course placed the learning focus on examining what it means to work with



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people from different backgrounds and cultures to address global health issues. This course helped students to gain greater insight into communities – working as equal partners and colleagues - can share, learn and grow from one another. The course immersed students in the core skills of the global health practitioner – yet encouraged students to move away from attempting to quickly solve a problem and toward a framework of thinking that allowed the notion of complexity, the connection to resources, ideas, innovations, and essential collaborative relationships.

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in the process of collective learning - a shared domain of human endeavor. A Community of Practice can look very different in accordance to the application. For example a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. Although very different in terms of the composition of group members – the core concepts and the context by-which the learner shapes new ideas and insights is the same across all these examples. In a nutshell, communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion – and seek a platform to grow in their knowledge and skills.

The virtual Global Health Project used the Community of Practice model to engage learners in collaboration and was planned and conducted entirely online. In today's globally connected world, building a shared understanding of global health is vital to the nurse. The Community of Practice group brought together nursing students to meet, review, and reference materials, and then respond to a Global Health Challenge case study scenario. The students did all of this in a Community of Practice framework – which means there is no one expert in the group, nor is there a specified outcome for the activity. Instead, all the learning participants are experts; and, the desired outcome for the Community of Practice is the process of coming together and sharing knowledge, passion, and insights.

A key concept to the Community of Practice model is participation. Everyone needs to be involved. So, the model seeks to engage and encourage universal participation. This means the Community of Practice framework is not only a learning and engagement model – but an equity and justice imperative. Transcultural nursing students working together in a shared virtual space, a third space of learning, allows for a leveling of educational equality. For many global health students – participation in an international global health immersion experience is unattainable due to travel, cost, and logistical challenges. This model fails to allow all students to participate equally in global health. The Virtual Community of Practice model allows students, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, to participate in a meaningful learning experience. Certainly, access to technology and Internet connectivity pose significant challenges toward equity learning experiences; and, the Virtual Community of Practice model can address these barriers will equity-based resource sharing amongst the universities participating in the Global Health course. Equally, Communities of Practice require peer-review. This means student learners should be open to the idea that our Community of Practice cohort will challenge what is said – in a Socratic manner – ask them to defend their thoughts toward the betterment of the conversation and community. A Community of Practice is an environment for growth and development based on a shared belief that learning best happens in community, in relationship. Our preliminary research findings have supported student growth and competency in culture and global health.

The COVID-19 globally pandemic has changed higher education in ways no one could have imagined just a few months ago . And, as online education moves from the exception to the norm, more and more programs will be looking for ways to connect nursing students to dynamic, evidence-supported learning experiences. Our team of multidisciplinary researchers brings a rich tapestry of knowledge, insights, and skills to help shape a model we believe has universal application in training health professions students.

The Global Health Virtual Community of Practice brings together the best of conventional nursing pedagogy, critical thinking, and a third space for learning. The developers of this project believe the virtual community of practice model can be a framework for health profession universities to advance knowledge and engagement in a way that emphasizes equity and encourages greater global connection. Expansion in the application of the virtual model, as well as research related to the project, continues.

For more information about this project and ways programs can implement a similar model, please contact us at:

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