Best Practices for Creating Social Presence and Caring Behaviors Online

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Abstract

AIM To identify best practices and evidence-based strategies for creating an online learning environment that encompasses caring behaviors and promotes social presence.

BACKGROUND Faculty who teach online classes are challenged to create a sense of social presence and caring behaviors in a virtual world in which students feel connected and part of the learning environment.

METHOD To extrapolate evidence to support best practices, a review of literature was conducted focused on social presence and caring online.

RESULTS Faculty messages that are respectful, positive, encouraging, timely, and frequent foster social presence and caring behaviors while also allowing for caring interactions, mutual respect, and finding meaning in relationships.

CONCLUSION A variety of measures to emulate caring online intertwine with social presence to promote a sense of caring and belonging. More research is needed to support the evidence for these strategies.

The Institute of Medicine (2011) recommends that nursing programs examine and update their curricula so that faculty are better equipped to adjust to changes in science and technology, patient care needs, and student preferences. In response to this call, innovative and creative nursing programs that incorporate technologic advances — in both synchronous and asynchronous formats — are emerging to address the unique learning styles of a diverse student population, including the millennial learner. Courses offering traditional, didactic, face-to-face learning are being augmented or simultaneously offered with online pedagogies that feature voice-over lectures and Internet discussions. Although some students and faculty find traditional classes appealing, online or distance learning attracts students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to attend nursing classes due to work and family demands (Mayne & Wu, 2011).

Students often state that their reason for choosing nursing as a career is based on a desire "to care" for people (Roach, 2008, p. 16). Caring has been a dominant theme in shaping nursing programs and a component of nursing student skills assessment. According to Watson (1988), caring is "the moral ideal of nursing," defined as a "value and an attitude that has to become a will, an intention, or a commitment, that manifests itself in concrete acts" (p. 32). Caring is the "heart of nursing," an ontology that is the ethical and philosophical foundation of the art of nursing, and it involves a deep commitment to the patients, families, and communities that nurses encounter. Students learn caring behaviors through faculty modeling and values in the traditional classroom setting (Watson); however, these behaviors are difficult to portray in the online environment (Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, & Killion, 2009).

If caring is viewed as the essence of nursing, can caring and social presence be demonstrated in a virtual environment where visual and verbal cues and behaviors are absent? One challenge that faces faculty who teach online classes is to create a sense of social presence where students feel connected and part of the learning environment. Mayne and Wu (2011) define social presence as the "degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication feel affectively connected to one another" (p. 111). Students often describe feeling isolated and disconnected when participating in online learning. Fostering social presence is a challenge for faculty because the feeling of presence is an emotion that conveys a connection of being wanted by others and being cared for. In the context of an online community, social presence has common characteristics with models of caring (Shen, Yu, & Khalifa, 2010).

An additional challenge in the online environment involves identifying ways to display the caring behaviors typically displayed in the traditional classroom setting, (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009) through behaviors, interactions, and role-modeling by faculty. In an online class, these behaviors are difficult to portray.

Numerous examples of nursing courses exist that address best practices on how to promote social presence to a diverse student body; however, there is a dearth of literature that addresses how caring and social presence can be conveyed in an online classroom. This article identifies best practices and evidence-based strategies for creating an online learning environment that encompasses caring behaviors and promotes social presence.

METHOD

A Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature search was conducted using a combination of key words, including *social presence, caring, online,* and *distance learning,* for articles published between 2006 and 2011. Articles that included the key words in the title or abstract and research that concerned all levels of online degree-focused programs were considered for this review; conference abstracts and other "gray literature" were excluded. The articles were read to determine their relevance in answering the question: What are the best practices and evidence-based strategies to create social presence and caring in an online environment? Commonalities were extracted and themes were identified to develop best practices.

The combination of the key words "social presence" and "online" yielded 22 results, but only four articles specifically addressed students and faculty in the online setting and focused on nursing (Cobb, 2011; Jones, Wilson, Carter, & Jester, 2009; Lahaie, 2007; Mayne & Wu, 2011). Two articles were found for other disciplines: clinical laboratory science (Esani, 2010) and computer technology and education (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Baker, Neukrug, & Hanes, 2010). A search using the key words "caring" and "online" generated 120 articles, but only four studies met

the inclusion criteria (Gabbert, 2008; Leners & Sitzman, 2006; Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006). "Caring" and "distance learning" yielded six potential articles for review; of these, only one article, which focused on an international distance-learning course for clinical research study coordinators and clinical research managers, met the criteria (Jones et al., 2009). In summary, 11 articles were used for this review.

RESULTS

Social Presence

Creating a sense of social presence in which students feel connected and part of the learning environment is a challenge faced by faculty when teaching online classes. Communication is guided by basic *Netiquette,* defined as the rules of online conduct, and text-based language that lacks voice and tone inflections (Lahaie, 2007). Students interact with names but no faces and miss the visual cues that help them derive meaning from discourse: facial expressions, body language, and eye contact (Esani, 2010; Mayne & Wu, 2011). In addition, students often must wait a significant time for their email questions to be answered (Esani; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009).

Online students have reported feeling isolated (Lahaie, 2007; Mayne & Wu, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006), not feeling "real" (Cobb, 2011), fearing they may have posted something incorrect (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009), and lacking a personal connection to faculty and fellow students (Lahaie; Sitzman & Leners). Social presence has been studied in the business and management literature (Shen et al., 2010) and in disciplines such as computer technology (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al.). Until recently, the nursing literature has focused on strategies to create social presence (Lahaie) and perceived learning (Cobb) in graduate nursing students (Mayne & Wu) and for those transitioning to online teaching (Esani, 2010).

The process of socialization and feeling connected to the group is a positive contributor to acquiring a sense of social presence.

Commitment to the group, supporting others, and developing a sense of belonging foster a sense of community that is reciprocal in nature (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009). Best practices for creating a sense of community include having students and faculty post photographs of themselves, writing biographies, encouraging interactions through teamwork, and posting communications and opportunities to share challenges (Esani, 2010; Gallagher-Lepak et al.; Mayne & Wu, 2011). Jones et al. (2009) fostered social presence in an international online course via videotaped introductions by the faculty in addition to student presentations to introduce themselves. Social presence was further heightened by the use of emails and video calls (e.g., Skype and FaceTime)**,** online chats, and discussion board postings. Jones et al. found that despite differences in language, time-zone changes, and cultural barriers, students valued these experiences and interactions with faculty and fellow students.

Results from the literature suggest that faculty who use greetings and praise, initiate discussions, and encourage students to express their points of view develop a sense of community and trust in their students (Cobb, 2011; Lahaie, 2007). Personal connectedness is enhanced by sharing stories and invitations to encourage discussion by, for example, joining a "virtual café."

Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009) found that emotional connectedness was a crucial factor in setting the tone for feeling a sense of community, decreasing isolation, and building confidence. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) developed the Social Presence Scale to study the effectiveness of social presence in predicting satisfaction in the online environment. Results of two studies using the scale revealed that faculty techniques can have a significant effect on the perception of social presence by students and lead to feelings of connectedness, trust, belonging, and comfort (Cobb, 2011; Mayne & Wu, 2011).

Discovering the best practices and evidence to create social presence in the virtual environment can be challenged by a lack of research on the concept. However, drawing on

the state of the science to date, social presence can be fostered by multiple, creative strategies. For example, online communications that use text-based techniques such as abbreviations (e.g., LOL, meaning "laughing out loud"), emoticons (e.g., smiley faces), and punctuation (e.g., exclamation points) can substitute for tone of voice and other social cues. Purnell (2006), on the other hand, found these forms of communication distracting, inappropriate for use in reflection, and disruptive to the process of deep thinking by students.

Simple, human phrases that convey caring and foster social presence are welcoming (e.g., hello, take care) and help connect students with one another (Lahaie, 2007). Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2010) found that combining synchronous and asynchronous communications fostered a significantly higher degree of social presence compared with the exclusive use of asynchronous communication. Opportunites for video calls allowed students to express themselves and alleviated feelings of isolation. Jones et al. (2009) described how international students overcame language barriers through the use of video chats. Faculty commented on the eager and respectful communication by students, and students remained in contact with faculty long after the course ended.

Shen et al. (2010) noted that "being with another" is associated with caring as well as social presence. The expression of caring behaviors is reciprocal. Being aware of the "other," fulfilling another's needs, and the feeling of intimacy with others through self-disclosure lead to the reciprocal exchange of information that translates to social presence.

Caring

Teaching a caring pedagogy has roots in feminism, phenomenology, and moral and ethical principles that are core principles of nursing (Emerson, 2007; Billings & Halstead, 2009). When nursing students witness their leaders embracing caring behaviors and supporting them in their nursing practice, they, in turn, feel cared for (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009), but the human connection vital to nursing is disembodied in the online environment.

Few studies focus on caring in online learning. A qualitative study by Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009) described the concept of community (connectedness and trust among group members) as a basis for implementing caring behaviors and fostering a sense of community in a virtual environment. The study found that written communications can convey attitudes of politeness, trust, concern for others, and respect. A similar study by Sitzman and Leners (2006) articulated the perceptions of baccalaureate nursing students about what constitutes a caring online environment and how caring is differently communicated in an online classroom. Some best practices to convey caring in the online classroom follow.

Faculty who display caring behaviors via online responses use expressions of concern, politeness, respectful communication, and convey trust in their written word (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009). Leners and Sitzman (2006) found perceptions of caring similar for master's and doctoral nursing students during an online class. Students noted that timeliness (prompt responses), empathy (demonstrating concern, seeing the other's perspective), tones of appreciation (affirmation and encouragement), "being the best I can be" (encouraging), and "finding a cord of harmony" (being viewed as an individual) were positive behaviors demonstrated by faculty.

Sitzman (2010) used a mixed-method research design to determine online generic and RN to BSN nursing students' perceptions of important behaviors demonstrated by faculty to convey feelings of caring. Themes identified included empathetic presence, clarity/expertise, timeliness, and fully engaged/accessible. The most important faculty behavior identified by students was writing clear instructions that helped students be successful.

In an environment that is mutually respectful, where faculty take advantage of all opportunities to demonstrate caring behaviors, nursing students become aware of themselves as caring individuals and learn how their own spiritual and psychological beliefs

can be incorporated into caring toward others (Emerson, 2007). Purnell (2006) developed a model of nursing education grounded in caring, based on the "nursing as caring" theory of Boykin and Schoenhoffer (1993, 2001) for online nursing education. With this model, caring language is embedded in all texts, modules, and student-faculty exchanges. It is centered on respect and valuing the other's contributions in a safe learning environment.

Caring in the online environment is conveyed by written expression, and each unique learning experience is enhanced through dialogue, a variety of ways of knowing, and professional examples and reflection. Leners and Sitzman's study of preceptions of caring by graduate nursing students (2006) states that efforts to create caring in an online setting lead to higher retention rates and a boost in student self-esteem and perceived competence. Their exploration of how faculty convey caring uncovered eight themes, with prompt feedback by faculty the first response. The other themes overlap with fostering social presence in an online classroom and include timeliness and consistency, the reciprocal process of support, trust, and respect, developing a personal connection and empathy, making expectations known, making faculty available, and the importance of feedback. Knowing that they were not alone was an important aspect of feeling cared for by faculty.

Cobb (2011) found that it was important for faculty to use introductions to encourage discussion, to facilitate discussion, and to encourage students to express their points of view. Mayne and Wu (2011) pointed to the importance of setting boundaries for confidentiality and professionalism online and creating a safe environment built on trust while encouraging students to post biographies and pictures and ask questions. Billings and Halstead (2009) write of the need for faculty to be flexible and manage diversity, ambiguity, and conflict.

DISCUSSION

No research was found on the combined concepts of social presence and caring in

Table: Best Practices to Create Social Presence and Caring in an Online Environment

Caring language in all text, modules, and student-faculty exchanges, for example, respecting and valuing each other's contributions (Purnell, 2006)

Discussion board postings (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2009)

Encouraging interactions through teamwork (Esani, 2010; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Mayne & Wu, 2011)

Encourage responses/ask questions (Cobb, 2011; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Lahaie, 2007; Mayne & Wu, 2011)

Encourage students to express their point of view (Cobb, 2011; Lahaie, 2007)

Frequent contact (Leners & Sitzman, 2006; Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006)

Initiate discussion (Cobb, 2011; Lahaie, 2007)

Introductions to enhance and open discussion (Cobb, 2011)

Messages that are respectful, positive, and encouraging (Leners & Sitzman, 2006; Sitzman, 2010)

Open dialogue/opportunities to express oneself/share challenges (Mayne & Wu, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2010)

Posting communications (Esani, 2010; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Mayne & Wu, 2011)

Prompt feedback (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009)

Providing opportunities to share challenges (Esani, 2010; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009)

Safe environment (Mayne & Wu, 2011)

Supporting others (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009)

Timeliness (prompt responses) (Leners & Sitzman, 2006; Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006)

Tones of appreciation (affirmation and encouragement) (Leners & Sitzman, 2006)

Using human phrases for greetings and praise (hello, take care) (Cobb, 2011; Lahaie, 2007)

the online setting, but similar and overlapping themes for each construct were found in the literature. Practices to promote caring and social presence were found in both qualitative and quantitative studies, and best practices were identified from data analysis, feedback from participants, satisfaction scores, narratives that reinforced feelings of being cared for or a sense of belonging, and behaviors that promoted social presence and caring. (See *Table.*)

Faculty who teach online classes are challenged to create caring social engagement through interactions that promote a sense of belonging and a sense of community. This perspective actualizes the human potential of interpersonal relationships, the trust of self and others, and awareness of others' feelings. Sitzman and Leners (2006) report that students in a traditional classroom recount caring traits and behaviors of their teachers as "honesty, respect, understanding, kindness, compassion" and "positive reinforcement" (p. 255), as well as praise, sensitivity to needs, and positive role-modeling. Similar themes are present in Sitzman's (2010) qualitative study, which describes how faculty manifest caring by sending messages that are respectful, positive, encouraging, timely, and frequent. Students see caring as reciprocal. Caring messages begin with trust and respect and the use of polite and encouraging language. Prompt feedback promotes trust and confidence (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009).

Mutual attributes of caring and social presence are: honesty; being responsive, respectful, and open; freedom from retribution; and the ability to freely express thoughts and ideas (Billings & Halstead, 2009). Caring behaviors and social presence as perceived in the traditional classroom setting can be successfully incorporated into the online environment by intentional caring of the faculty. Faculty who make a conscious effort to support others, build confidence, trust, and a sense of belonging, and demonstrate respect in online discussions will have positive outcomes and increased retention (Sitzman & Leners, 2006).

Billings and Halstead (2009) stress the need to use multiple strategies to create social presence and demonstrate caring in an online classroom. They emphasize the need for active participation by students and student-teacher interactions with the sharing of stories, personal reflection, problem solving, and understanding the significance of these experiences. Faculty messages that are respectful, positive, encouraging, timely, and frequent add to feelings of social presence and the reciprocal feelings of caring among students. Timely feedback, responding to students' questions, and displays of empathy or support by faculty help students feel connected to the class, promote student interactions, and integrate caring and social presence into student course work. Emerson (2007) states that caring, as a partnership between the student and faculty, is a commitment and foundation for good teaching practices.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to continue to seek ways to advance social presence and caring in the online environment through research. For example, what specific communication styles do faculty use to enhance social presence and caring? To what extent do caring behaviors learned in the online environment transfer to the patient care setting? And, importantly, if caring is viewed as the essence of nursing and uniquely expressed in nursing, then to what extent can caring be expressed in an

environment where presence and sense of self are perceived through the written word? And what are the consequences of uncaring behaviors in the online setting? How can faculty discern and identify nonverbal, unspoken cues by students that may lead to feelings of not belonging or not caring?

The patient-nurse perception of caring is an important consideration culturally. Research is needed to help students understand cultural means of caring to improve interactions within the online community and with patients. Caring requires judgment, moral values, and ethical insight, underpinning diverse approaches of the knowledge required to implement caring in diverse populations (Watson & Smith, 2002).

Cobb (2011) found a strong correlation between social presence, satisfaction, and instructor performance. Valid and reliable instruments are needed to evaluate these concepts to advance the state of the science. Further exploration of the Social Presence Scale (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) is needed with regard to online communication, instructor performance, and satisfaction with the course (Cobb, 2011). Evaluation of caring and social presence should be built into the curriculum program evaluation. Social presence has been highly correlated with student satisfaction and learning (Cobb). More clarity is needed to understand how positive outcomes can be further achieved in the online setting through the intentional engagement of faculty.

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KEY WORDS

Nursing Education – Social Presence – Caring – Online and Distance Learning

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