

Professional Nursing Students' Attitudes on Cheating in Online Courses

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Abstract

Online course delivery is an educational modality where academic integrity may be compromised among nursing students. With the explosion of online educational programs in nursing, especially those at the graduate level, it is concerning to educators that students would participate in dishonest behaviors such as cheating. The purpose of this study was to examine nursing student's attitudes regarding coursework and cheating in online education. Sixty-three (n=63) students enrolled in an online nursing course participated in the study. All participants in the study were registered nurses who were admitted to advance their education at the baccalaureate or graduate level via an online program of study. Our findings revealed that students do admit to cheating and 25% of students surveyed reported using notes, a textbook or someone else doing their work during an online examination.



Academic dishonesty, including cheating and plagiarism are considered violations of academic integrity in higher education institutions (International Center for Academic Integrity, n.d.). Academic integrity is defined as a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Center for Academic Integrity [CAI], 1999). The CAI recommends that institutions of higher education develop a strong program for academic integrity. One of the seven recommendations is that institutions be “alert to trends in higher education and technology affecting academic integrity on its campus” (CAI, 1999). Online delivery of coursework using instructional technology is a teaching modality where academic integrity may be compromised.

We teach at a midsize, rural state university in the southern United States that recently moved the core courses for all of the Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) degree programs and specialty courses for the Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) program to an online format. The RN to BSN program has been delivered in an online

format for six years. This change in delivery of courses brought about concerns with online cheating. A major concern was whether students in online courses would cheat in an effort to be successful, make the highest grades and complete the program. More importantly, our nursing school organizing framework includes the professional nursing values of altruism, autonomy, human dignity, social justice and integrity. Practicing with integrity is also a component of our nursing school's vision. Outcomes of our organizing curriculum framework are the roles and attributes-modeler of professional role and ethically and legally grounded. The vision and organizing framework for our nursing school was an impetus for us to examine academic integrity in online courses. As educators in the nursing profession, we must also adhere to the provisions in The American Nurses Association (ANA, 2010) Code of Ethics that address integrity. In fulfilling the obligation of adhering to academic integrity, we conducted a pilot study to examine nursing students' attitudes regarding online coursework and cheating in online education.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature was conducted to determine the need for a survey of graduate nursing student's attitudes about cheating in online courses (Boykins & Gilmore, 2012). Empirical and theoretical literature were reviewed to include the topics, online education, online compared to face-to-face or traditional course delivery, online coursework instructional features, and student's attitudes regarding online courses and cheating in online education. After reviewing the literature, an online survey was developed by the graduate master's program coordinator and administered to nursing students in online courses in order to determine students' attitudes regarding coursework and cheating in online education.

Students' Attitudes

Previous studies have shown that students are satisfied with online education. In a mail survey, nontraditional or older (age 26-50) agricultural students preferred distance education to face-to-face educational delivery (Minton & Willett, 2003). Kenny (2002) in a qualitative study explored undergraduate nursing students' experiences with online learning. The students reported that they felt comfortable with online learning but

recommended that health informatics coursework and information technology be integrated throughout all of their coursework (Kenny, 2002).

Online Coursework

Delivery of online coursework is often referred to as distance or online education while traditional courses are courses that meet face-to-face and hybrid courses are courses where content is delivered both online and face-to-face. According to previous studies, online course content delivery was found to be as effective as traditional (face-to-face) and hybrid courses (Campbell, Gibson, Hall, & Richards, 2008; Scheines, 2005). Scheines (2005) found that online students in a statistical and causal reasoning course did as well or better than traditional students in the same course. On the other hand, Zhao (2005), in a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of distance education, found no differences in the varied methods of course content delivery. In a study conducted by Croy (2010) that examined academic quality (student's attitudes, performance, learning), hybrid teaching methods were preferred to traditional and online course. Another study investigated the quality of online courses and looked at 470 graduate and undergraduate students' satisfaction with the online course, difficulty of the online course, and cheating. Eighty-two percent of the students were satisfied with the delivery of online course; 59% described the difficulty the same as lecture courses and 59% reported that cheating happens sometimes. Finally, 38% of the students preferred to take courses completely online (Foster, 2009)

Online course content may be delivered either synchronous (real-time communication) or asynchronous (communication occurs anytime and the student works independently). A meta-analysis conducted with distance education research literature compared achievement outcomes in asynchronous to synchronous delivery of coursework. The meta-analysis revealed that asynchronous delivery was preferred in online courses and synchronous delivery was preferred in traditional classrooms (Bernard et al., 2004). Wang (2000) found that predictors for positive outcomes among students in a traditional classroom were higher scores on the final exam. Three web-based sections of the course, Psychological Statistics, were compared to three face-to-face sections of the same course. A comprehensive final exam was completed

individually with no collaboration for both groups whereas examinations given to both groups prior to the final exam were open note or open book exams.

Instructional Features

Several studies have examined instructional features such as examinations, discussion forums, and assignments in online courses and in comparison to students' performance in face-to-face instruction. In one study, a comparison of face-to-face to online asynchronous discussion assignments was examined (Campbell et al., 2008). Post-graduate nursing students in the online research methods course had higher scores on the online discussion assignments than students participating in face-to-face discussions. Participation was determined by the number of discussion board messages read. In another study, the majority (69%) of students preferred non proctored examinations rather than proctored examinations in online courses (Minton & Willett, 2003). Graduate nursing students taking a Pharmacology and Pathophysiology course were satisfied with computer based testing in online courses. Difficulties reported by the students were Internet connection problems and the testing clock used while taking the computer based test (Caudle, Bigness, Daniels, Gillmor-Kahn, & Knestrick, 2011

Cheating

Stephens, Young, and Calabrese (2007), in an online survey administered to undergraduate students at a private and public university, looked at six areas of cheating. Perceptions about cheating, the seriousness of cheating, and cheating behaviors were reported. Nearly one-half (45.6%) of the students reported cheating behaviors such as plagiarism and cheating in traditional and online course assignments and examinations. Similarly, Grijalva, Kerkvliet, and Nowell (2004) found that cheating is the same in online and traditional classroom instruction. The authors sent an e-mail to the students with a link to the survey on academic integrity. The survey was completed by 1021 students taking online undergraduate courses.

Students taking core criminal justice and legal studies courses reported that cheating occurs more in online courses than face-to-face courses. The study was conducted over two years at a state supported university (Lanier, 2006). Caudle, Bigness, Daniels, Gillmor-Kahn, and Knestrick (2011) found that nearly half (49%) of graduate nursing students in a pharmacology and pathophysiology course felt that

computer based testing increased opportunities for cheating. The graduate nursing students reported that they had used computer based testing prior to taking the two courses. In another study approximately one-third (36%) of students reported, in a survey, that they provided help to someone when taking an online examination. The question asked in the survey was “Have you ever cheated? (Lanier, 2006). In fulfilling the obligations to academic integrity, we conducted a pilot study to examine nursing students’ attitudes regarding cheating in online education. The study examined cheating in online courses with respect to whether students have ever cheated in a course or on an exam, reasons for cheating, and knowledge of other students who have cheated.

Methodology

After the study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board, students in online nursing courses were recruited via the university’s electronic mail system to participate in the study. Once the semester ended, students enrolled in online nursing courses at a mid-sized state supported university in the southeastern United States were recruited to participate in the study during three separate semesters in 2010 and 2011 (Fall 2010, Spring 2011, Fall 2011). After receiving final grades, potential participants were recruited using student university e-mail addresses. An e-mail was sent to 184 RN-BSN, RN to masters of science in nursing (MSN) and graduate nursing students in the family nurse practitioner (FNP), psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner (PMHNP), and nurse executive programs. The e-mail requested participation in an anonymous survey using Survey Monkey. Potential participants were assured there would be no identifying data on the survey should they agree to participate in the study. The voluntary nature of the survey was stressed to the students. The students were provided a link to Survey Monkey. The informal survey consisted of six items measuring self-reported cheating, three items related to online courses, and demographic data regarding age and gender. The questions required the participants to answer with pre-determined multiple choice selections (categorical) and dichotomous (yes/no) responses. There were no open ended questions. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Refer to Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics	n	%
Age in years		
18-23	6	9.5
24-30	23	36.5
31-40	22	34.9
41-50	10	15.9
51 or over	2	3.2
Gender		
Male	7	11.1
Female	56	88.9

Findings

We received a 53% response rate from the survey. Sixty-three (n=63) students enrolled in an online nursing course participated in the survey. All participants in the study were registered nurses who were admitted to advance their education at the baccalaureate or graduate level via an online program of study. Tables 1 and 2 present the demographic characteristics and online coursework responses provided by the sample. The majority (88.9%) of the respondents were female and 11.1% were male. Most participants were between 24-40 years old (25, 61.4%), 24-30 year olds (n= 23, 36.5%) followed by 31-40 year olds (n= 22, 34.9%). Slightly over half (n= 36, 57.1%) of the respondents had taken at least six online courses prior to the survey. 25% of the respondents rated the online course difficulty level equal to that of face to face classroom courses.

Table 2

Online Courses	n	%
Previous online courses		
1-5	8	12.7
6-10	36	57.1
11-15	19	30.2
Online course difficulty compared to face to face		
No difficulty	4	6.3
Somewhat difficult	15	23.8
Difficulty equal to face to face	25	39.7
Very difficult	19	30.2

The first consideration is self-reported admission of cheating or perceived cheating in online courses compared with the traditional face to face courses the participants had completed in their basic nursing education. Nearly three-fourths (n= 47, 74.6%) of the respondents reported they had never cheated and 93.7% (n=59) reported they never used work other than work they created. Over half of the respondents reported the main reason for not doing their own work was not enough time to complete the work without help (n=26, 59.1%) and nearly one-half (n=19, 43.2%) responded the importance of grades as the reason for not doing their own work. Interestingly, only eight (18.2%) respondents reported the online environment promotes cheating because no one would know if they did their own work. Table 3 displays results of students' responses regarding cheating in online courses.

Table 3

Attitudes Related to Cheating	N	%
Reasons for not doing own work		
Grades are important	19	43.2
Work is too difficult to complete without help	15	34.1
No one will know if I don't do my own work	8	18.2
Not enough time to complete the work without help	26	59.1
In a face to face course, would you have someone else do your work?		
Yes	1	1.6
No	62	98.4
Have you used notes, textbook or had someone else do the work in an online examination?		
Yes	16	25.4
No	47	74.6
Have you used work other than work you created in an online course?		
Yes	4	6.3
No	59	93.7
Do you perceive it easier to cheat in an online course?		
Yes	28	44.4
No	35	55.6

Discussion

Despite the fact that some students do admit to cheating, there was a relatively low rate of self-reported cheating. The overall rate of cheating was lower than findings in earlier studies (Caudle et al, 2011; Lanier, 2006). A limitation of this study is that it is unknown which nursing program or emphasis area the students were enrolled in. In future studies it would be helpful to know if the students are undergraduate RN-BSN or FNP, PMHNP, NE, or RN-MSN graduate nursing students. Regardless, all participants in this study were professional nurses. Even though the rate of cheating is low, it is disturbing that professionals would admit to some degree of dishonesty. However, it is redeeming to know that while 55.6% of the respondents perceived it easier to cheat in an online course than in a face to face course, only 25% responded they had actually used their notes, textbook or had someone else do the work. Another limitation of this study is that an examination of the relationship between the age of the students and cheating was not determined. Future studies should examine the relationship between the age and attitudes of students regarding cheating in online courses. In one study, older students were less likely to cheat in online courses than younger students (Lanier, 2006).

In a study by Croy (2010) of student's attitudes regarding course delivery, hybrid teaching methods were preferred over online and traditional methods. In this study, although nearly two-thirds of the participants had taken six to ten online courses prior to the study, perceptions of the difficulty of online and traditional courses was equal among one-fourth of the students. On the other hand, nearly 60% of students in another study reported the difficulty of online and lecture course equally and nearly 40% of the students preferred online courses (Foster, 2009). Implications for future study should determine nursing students' attitudes regarding the preference for and difficulty of hybrid, online, and traditional courses.

The survey administered in this study was designed to examine professional nurses' attitudes related to academic integrity in an online environment. Digital communication is an important and integral part of every aspect of education and the workplace for nurses. As we prepare nurses at all educational levels, faculty should

recognize student's potential for continued growth and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning incorporates instructional technology with learning and teaching strategies that ensure academic integrity. However, all nurses are expected to apply the professional nursing values of altruism, autonomy, human dignity, social justice and integrity in decision making. The decision to cheat, plagiarize, or commit academic dishonesty comes from an individual's own belief and value system. The CAI (1999) defined academic integrity as a commitment to the fundamental value of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Nursing, on the other hand, views honesty and integrity differently. Integrity is interpersonal, "a self-concern and self-regarding duty" (ANA, 2010, p. 66), and preservation of integrity is a duty to self in concert to personal and professional values. Intraprofessional integrity incorporates the goals, values, and ethics of representative professional groups and increase awareness of the Code of Ethics. Awareness of the Code of Ethics should start with nursing education (ANA, 2010).

Our study reminds educators of the importance of integrating academic integrity and ethical behavior as an essential component of the curriculum and online course content. Several researchers have examined ways to reduce cheating in online courses (Chiesl, 2007; Kasprzak & Nixon, 2004; Rowe, 2004). Our challenge is not so much to change instructional strategies to decrease cheating in online courses but to measure outcomes of our organizing curriculum framework related to the student as a modeler of the nursing professional role while exhibiting the attribute of being ethically grounded. In this study, students perceived a lack of time to complete the required assignments. Implications for online nursing education programs include weaving the relationship of all actions, including academic dishonesty into and ethics course. Consideration should be given to the evaluation of assignments with regard to the number of assignments and pedagogy, the perceived value of the assignments with respect to practice and meeting course objectives, the emphasis on grades, and flexibility of scheduling so that students have time to complete the assignments.

Conclusions

Since many nurses are working full time, online education and distance learning will continue to be a venue for them to obtain a higher degree. Questions yet to be

answered are the role of the faculty in deterring cheating in online courses and the role of the institution in deterring cheating in online courses? Is it within the realm of higher education to teach values and standards to practicing nurses? Future considerations for further study include determining if a relationship exists between academic dishonesty and professional ethical behaviors. These are questions raised by the findings of this pilot study that require further investigation of academic integrity in online nursing courses.

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