

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Sudden Transition of a Health Policy Course to Virtual Learning During COVID-19: Identifying and Implementing Strategies for Successful Learning

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everything, including the educational system, as faculty and students transitioned from face-to-face learning to the virtual format. The significance of this research is to document the successful sudden transition of a health policy course to remote learning as a result of the resilience of faculty and students, to demonstrate that course outcomes could be met despite the switch in teaching format, and to show that the transition in learning can be replicated by other nurse educators. **Objective:** To describe the successful utilization of a health policy assignment as a vehicle for supporting undergraduate nursing students' learning, while transitioning from face-to-face instruction to the virtual setting. **Methodology:** A mixed methods case study research using an exemplar health policy assignment for 96 students was introduced to guide the development and organization of a well-constructed argument for a chosen public health issue. Online class time after the transition to the virtual setting included a weekly lecture, followed by an active working period for students and faculty. Follow-up meetings occurred between weekly sessions by phone or Zoom. **Results:** Despite the sudden transition from face-to-face learning to the virtual setting, this health policy course was successful in meeting course objectives and outcomes, with consistent faculty feedback and support in maintaining the learning process. Although there were unexpected challenges, faculty and students remained resilient, engaged, and committed to the importance of health policy during a period of a heightened sense of health awareness. The exemplar assignment prepared students to think, read, research, write critically, and offer and receive feedback in the midst of the pandemic. **Conclusion:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, students had an amplified sensitivity to learning more about health policy. In this health policy course, faculty aided student learning by focusing on quality teaching, student support, and resilience. The consistent faculty dialogue concerning compassion, resilience, and commitment to education was intentionally modeled in this course and recognized by the students.

Keywords: COVID-19, virtual learning, nursing education, nursing students, policy development, policy analysis

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The Sudden Transition of a Health Policy Course to Virtual Learning During COVID-19: Identifying and Implementing Strategies for Successful Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the educational system but faculty and students adapted so that learning did not cease. By March 2020, many in-person classroom experiences transitioned to a virtual setting. Faculty adapted teaching methodologies for use in the online environment to ensure students' learning and academic requirements were met. In a Health Policy and Leadership Course for senior nursing students, faculty and students utilized the transition in learning mode, the focus on public health, and the increased interest in health policy to advance students' knowledge in policy development and advocacy. This research describes the sudden, yet successful, transition from the face-to-face implementation of a health policy course to virtual mode and how adjustments were made to achieve the course objectives. The mixed methods case study describes the course content, project assignment, importance of the course topic (policy development), and clear communication with students to assist in their successful adaptation to a virtual learning environment.

Purpose of the Study: The Policy Matrix Project

A course on health policy and leadership is fundamental because it is essential to incorporate policy and politics into nursing education. The growing number of nurses in government and administrative positions highlights the need for a strong health policy curriculum. Furthermore, the current COVID-19 public health crisis sheds light on the intersection of policy, politics, and public health. The Institute of Medicine's report on the future of nursing called for more nurses in the policy-making sphere (Altman et al., 2016), but this cannot happen without proper education at the baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels. However, there are barriers to the implementation of policy curriculum including a lack of clinical faculty experts (Heiman et al., 2016), lack of policy curriculum, as well as disinterest among faculty and students (Anderson et al., 2020). As nurses are the mainstay of the public health workforce (Beck & Boulton, 2016), nursing education must include a curriculum that incorporates the development and analysis of policy and advocating for more equitable and safe care.

Previous literature described suggestions for integrating policy and advocacy work into nursing education. Preparing baccalaureate level nurses, specifically, to engage in policy requires carefully planned coursework. As suggested by Ellenbecker et al. (2017) the baccalaureate stage should encourage buy-in and self-interest, but during COVID-19, faculty felt especially challenged on how to achieve buy-in and interest when classes flipped to online learning. Suggestions for content dissemination include group projects (Byrd et al., 2012), service-learning or immersion experiences (O'Brien-Lavivee, 2011), simulation (Ellenbecker et al., 2017), case studies, and guest speakers. During COVID-19, many faculty were faced with limited technological resources while teaching from home (Morin, 2020). Students and faculty dealt with internet issues, broadband width, and computer access. Thoughtful conversation and reimagining of select nursing

courses must occur to best meet the needs of faculty and students and this requires thought and purposeful planning.

This mixed methods case study research describes how a traditionally in-person policy course, that suddenly transitioned mid-semester to a virtual format, encouraged, supported, and championed buy-in and interest during a very challenging time for students and faculty. The significance of this study is not only its successful transition to remote learning, but to share the successful outcomes and resilience of faculty and students despite the circumstances presented by the pandemic. Identified and emphasized are the pedagogical approaches that the faculty adopted to sustain student interest and motivation that contributed to successful course completion. The subject matter of public health policy and the importance of acquiring the skill to read, understand and learn policy cannot be overstated. The authors aim to share and encourage fellow educators to consider the adaptation of traditional teaching methodologies to achieve course objectives while accommodating students' needs in light of COVID-19.

Methods

The Assignment: Our Vehicle for Successful Growth and Learning

Students were introduced to a tool that guided the development of a policy matrix concerning a public health issue. During class meetings, students participated in small groups to work on a faculty-approved public health policy. The students' tasks were to complete the assignment using the matrix and present their work at the end of the semester.

Assignment Details – Part I

The transition to virtual learning in the spring of 2020 resulted in the adjustment of course assignments. Faculty and students in this policy course agreed not to alter the commitment to the course's core values, including nursing, leadership, public health, and health policy. The community of 98 members (96 students and 2 faculty members) agreed, during a class discussion, that this assignment could be challenging to complete remotely. The students committed to the required coursework and both faculty members worked with the students to make the assignment happen.

Students were introduced to a matrix to guide the development and organization toward making a cogent argument for their chosen policy issue. Online class time included a lecture by a faculty member followed by an active working period for students and faculty. During the online collaborative sessions, students worked in small groups to research sections of their policy interests. Nineteen groups of 4-6 class members each were formed based on student self-selection according to their area of policy interest. Many of the policy areas selected were from the American Public Health Association's website "*Topics and Issues*" section (American Public Health Association,

2021). The matrix incorporated headings, including a problem statement, background (including history, evidence, and ethics), and landscape (including stakeholders, budget, and politics). The students composed three options to resolve the problem - each option needed to include feasibility, workforce, logistics, and cost. The final step on the matrix included making a well-defined recommendation to stakeholders while offering a rationale for that endorsement based on practicality, feasibility, and a cost-benefit analysis.

During the group working sessions, faculty were available for consultation and group appointments via Zoom. The appointments were intended to engage and hold group members accountable, evaluate the project's progression, discuss and apply group dynamics, and allow students to experience and value teamwork. During the group meetings, the faculty facilitated students' identification of areas where they felt stuck, brainstormed the next steps, and set future goals. The students were encouraged to break the project into sections to share the workload and complete weekly reviews of each member's contribution. The faculty modeled and encouraged frequent delivery of constructive recommendations to improve peer-to-peer feedback and enhance student policy development. In addition, faculty established a caring and supportive environment, and discussed the relevance of resilience. Students were advised that the expectation for the finished matrix should be between 7-12 single-spaced pages, with an additional page for references

Assignment Details – Part 2

Part 2 of the assignment was to present the finished project via Zoom to faculty and peers. Each team was required to make a 10-minute PowerPoint presentation (7 for presentation, 3 for questions) during the final two weeks of class. The presentations needed to include a summary of the issue, background, ethics, landscape, policy options, and recommendations. The faculty offered presentation tips, including slide creation, the importance of rehearsal, deciding which group members would speak, and how to present on Zoom. At this point during the pandemic, Zoom presentations were relatively new to many students.

The grading rubric, a sample matrix, and PowerPoint were shared and reviewed with students during the course's early weeks. Students were regularly reminded that a collective grade would be given to all group members for both assignment parts.

Results

First Four Weeks of the Semester

Students selected their groups according to their public health policy interests during the first week of the semester. During the initial working period, key issues included encouraging students to identify a unique problem, drafting a policy statement, and beginning the research process. Of the 19 groups, only one group needed to adjust their initial topic because it was addressed in a recent federal policy initiative. Students needed encouragement to research their topics both in and outside class sessions. Although this cohort of students had completed a research course that included the tools to conduct a literature review, they required

a recollection of the databases housed on the University's server and how to make a virtual appointment with the librarian. The students also needed an introduction to government websites, including how to locate past and proposed bills at the local and federal levels.

Second Four Weeks of the Semester

During the second four weeks of the semester, students added to their matrices by researching and filling gaps in their findings. Students engaged in writing, editing, and lively conversations during working group sessions in order to establish a final recommendation. Students' decision-making incorporated concepts from lectures, meetings with faculty, and readings.

Final Four Weeks of the Semester

The concluding four weeks involved refining the final recommendation, polishing the finished product, and producing the oral report. Students created slides, rehearsed, and decided between having one spokesperson speak or dividing the slides and having multiple speakers.

Lessons Learned

Resilience and Commitment of Students and Faculty

Mid-semester, class sessions shifted from a weekly in-person collaboration to remote learning, which required resilience and commitment of all involved. The lecture occurred via Zoom at the assigned time to create a sense of routine. It was also recorded via VoiceThread and posted on the Blackboard course site for those who were ill, had Wi-Fi issues, family obligations, or needed to hear it again to best promote their learning. A schedule was created and shared for groups to convene a weekly 20-minute meeting over Zoom with the faculty. Meeting times evolved to include early morning, evening, and weekends due to the novel nature of working from home. Additionally, many students had various obligations and needed to share educational resources, such as computers, with other family members. The faculty was committed to the students' optimal experience regarding the learning process, crisis support, and the importance of modeling resilience and commitment (Reyes et al., 2015). Post-course evaluations supported these goals, with students reporting that the faculty was "supportive," "understanding," "positive," "inspiring," "encouraging," "helpful with feedback," "organized," and "offered clear expectations."

Compassion and Dedication to the Subject

All 19 groups submitted finished matrices on topics ranging from housing insecurity at the local level, school-based health issues at the state level, to gun violence prevention at the federal level. Because faculty and students read drafts and offered ongoing feedback as the semester progressed, the finished products were excellent. The level of excellence produced by the finished products demonstrated that weekly check-ins between faculty and students were key to the project's success. The students indicated feeling supported by the group's commitment to the project and the frequent faculty check-ins, which advanced their commitment, passion, and learning about the topic. Students reported that small

group meetings encouraged “collaboration” and the “avoidance of procrastination.”

It should be noted that week-to-week encounters did not always go as planned, which may have been a function of remote learning. However, as a group led by course faculty, we acknowledged the work involved and discussed that we should expect bumps along the way. Faculty reiterated with students that they would offer assistance and modeling regarding timelines, assigning project sections to work on, clarifying expectations regarding next steps, and offering compassion concerning group or group member’s struggles. Some groups either requested or required more frequent check-ins via email, phone, or Zoom. This type of teaching and learning experience is translatable to real-world life situations and one that these faculty-authors will continue to encourage in all future courses, whether teaching virtually or in person.

Implications for Nursing

Importance of Policy

Public health advocacy in nursing education is valuable and important (Morris et al., 2019). Health care providers can and should advocate to protect their communities from preventable health threats but are often unsure how to do so. Involvement in public health policy must address ongoing public health concerns and include access to care, funding for services, and eliminating health disparities. The conversion from an in person public health policy and leadership course to an online format took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this background, faculty and students had a heightened sensitivity to learning more about policy and how they could translate their nursing and health policy skills to positively impact their communities. This was an opportune time for students to learn about advocacy and policy development. The faculty believed that the students were much more passionate about this class and assignment due to the pandemic and that they felt they could be change agents. There were many unexpected challenges regarding students’ successful completion of the course. However, the students appeared to be aware of the importance of health policy and the impact that they could play in addressing it during this time of heightened public health awareness. While this course began as an in-person class, students voiced that they were appreciative of faculty flexibility with the shift to remote learning.

Importance of Engagement and Collaboration

In a policy course guided by dedicated faculty, students are educated on analyzing and explaining significant issues and trends affecting policy, especially involving clinical areas of interest. Along with working on policy, students learn to incorporate and discuss leadership and management and how it applies to nursing, health services, and course goals. Particularly in a course with a focus on public health policy, faculty and students must continue to consider and hold conversations about nurses’ engagement and collaboration in professional associations and how these opportunities might involve policy development (Anders, 2021). The faculty need to ensure that students gain knowledge in laws and regulations that govern nursing practice, including the scope of practice and professional performance. By the end of the

semester, students should be able to describe advocacy, health system change, and the legislative and regulatory processes.

The exemplar assignment for this course allowed students to gain a basic understanding of budgeting and managing financial resources in their areas of interest. While working virtually as group members, supported by faculty modeling, students developed strategies for successful team building. As is the case when the class is held in person, the virtual presentations allowed students the opportunity to engage in public speaking. As a group, members decided what they wanted to include in the presentation, how they wanted to say it, what they wanted to share visually, rehearsing on how to respond to press conference-style questions, and practicing the art of listening, collaboration, and professionalism.

Faculty Reflection

The pandemic brought a heightened sense of compassion and humanity that may change higher education in the near future. Faculty committed to having the final project grade reflect group effort, teamwork, and adherence to the assignment, with students’ participation observed during small group meetings that were held on Zoom throughout the semester. Based on the student reports at the Zoom small group team meetings, faculty observed that students effectively divvied up the work in between these meetings. Faculty also pledged to students that all course standards, objectives, and outcomes, as established by the course syllabus, would be met in the remote environment and that faculty would remain transparent with any changes during the semester. Faculty felt that they could best support students’ learning and compassion for their policy areas by adding themselves into the groups to model teamwork, patience, accountability, and resilience. Although many of the digital platforms that were used were not new, we were very grateful to the Center of Teaching and Learning at our University for supporting faculty use of the available technology. Faculty felt that the best way to support students’ learning and compassion for their policy interests was by adding themselves into the groups to model teamwork, patience, accountability, and resilience.

Students were held accountable by frequent virtual faculty and group check-ins. Students became accustomed to reading drafts and offering feedback to peers. Initially, some students were inconvenienced by the check-ins as this required systematic research, writing, and editing. The students shared with faculty that they were unaware of the amount of consistent work required for the project; however, they were appreciative of this work as it contributed to thorough project completion and meeting course outcomes. Through course evaluations, students shared that the editing, drafting, and consistent feedback made them “better writers” and more “active learners.”

Faculty committed to accommodating changes that group members needed. The original teaching plan did not include Saturday morning or late evening meetings, but many students needed these accommodations during the early stages of the pandemic. As a result, it is suspected that the flexibility and accommodation of faculty during the pandemic improved the students’ commitment to the project and enhanced their engagement and learning. While faculty and students were committed to making the transition to virtual learning and are now

aware that the mix of lecture, small group work, and meetings can be successful in a virtual environment, students and faculty-authors are eager to return to collaborating in the classroom. There was a considerable amount of administrative planning that was involved in teaching virtually. Once in-person assembly returns, faculty are hopeful that more time will be allotted to conversing, debating, writing, and researching versus making appointments, logging on and off virtual platforms, and concern about Wi-Fi connectivity.

Conclusion

This public health policy course, utilizing the sudden transition from face-to-face learning to a virtual educational experience, can be easily replicated. The curriculum and major assignment prepared students to think, read, research, write, offer and receive feedback critically, and present their outcomes in large and small groups. The nature of the interactive faculty feedback and support offered to students not only produced excellent final projects but supported course objectives, and most importantly, the learning process of our future nurses. Faculty focus on quality teaching, student support, and resilience, the latter a hallmark of nurses, made this course successful for this single cohort of 96 students despite the pandemic. The pedagogical strategies to which all course members committed, along with the course assignment, made the transition to online learning for a successful policy course that was much more meaningful than may have been the case if the course was held in its more traditional, in-person manner.

The COVID-19 crisis presented educators and students with unique challenges and opened all stakeholders to reflect on other possibilities to traditional teaching methods. Educators can design, create, and evaluate strategies to teach in a variety of modalities. It is hoped that this teaching exemplar used in a senior nursing leadership policy course will encourage fellow faculty to evaluate and remain flexible regarding their teaching methodologies. Students are ready to be the next generation of nursing leaders, and the faculty is confident that students have the skills to become involved in policy work. The dialogue surrounding compassion, resilience, and commitment in education can go very far, particularly when modeled well.

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