

Distance Education in Nursing

Second Edition

Jeanne M. Novotny, PhD, RN, FAAN
Robert H. Davis, MSN, RN
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Springer Series on the Teaching of Nursing

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Springer Publishing Company, Inc.
11 West 42nd Street
New York, NY 10036

Acquisitions Editor: Ruth Chasek
Production Editor: Jeanne Libby
Cover design by Joanne Honigman
Typeset by International Graphic Services, Inc., Newtown, PA

05 06 07 08 09 / 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Distance education in nursing / Jeanne M. Novotny and Robert H. Davis, editors. — 2nd ed.

p. ; cm. — (Teaching of nursing series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8261-4694-5

1. Nursing—Study and teaching. 2. Distance education.

[DNLM: 1. Education, Nursing. 2. Education, Distance. 3. Organizational Case Studies. WY 18 D6138 2006] I. Novotny, Jeanne. II. Davis, Robert H. (Robert Henry), 1961- III. Series: Springer series on the teaching of nursing.

RT73.D56 2006

610.73'071'1—dc22

2005020835

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

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Preface

This second edition of *Distance Education in Nursing* is intended for every nurse educator from novice to expert. It addresses issues that cut across a wide spectrum of concerns related to distance education. The focus is on the impact of technology on the way that we practice nursing and, in particular, the effect of technology on how students learn. The chapters in this book give a cross section of ideas from various nursing programs across the country, as well as basic information for those who are thinking about applying some part of technology to their educational, clinical, and research endeavors.

This book has three sections. Chapters in Part 1 focus on faculty, students, and teaching strategies. Part 2 describes the experiences of specific programs, and Part 3 discusses the future of distance education.

The chapters in this second edition demonstrate the progress made in understanding the use of technology in nursing education and even more importantly the questions that need to be asked about the use of technology in the educational process. We continue to see the application of technology in our work and everyday lives and know that we could not live without it, but how we use it to improve the education of our students and the accessibility of knowledge and new competencies acquired at a distance are still questions that need answers. It is evident from the information in this book that our sophistication in the application of technology has grown immensely in the last five years.

Nurses are assuming demanding professional responsibilities related to technology in their work. These responsibilities raise important questions about the application of technology in education, clinical practice, and research for all health care professionals. Electronic information has become a central component of the practice of nursing and represents a set of challenges that, although exciting and futuristic, often seem overwhelming and frustrating. Where are we headed and what do we

want from the application of technology in our educational programs, practice sites, and research endeavors?

Every nurse has a part to play in the use of technology and must be familiar with the essentials of educational formats that depend on advanced information technology. The common goal for educators, practitioners, and researchers is to expand the frontiers of knowledge in the application of technology to advance nursing science. Technology is not the focus. Rather, the use of technology to access information and knowledge that was previously inaccessible is the focus.

The content of the chapters will be useful to those interested in distance education and those who want to find ways to incorporate technology in the classroom. Research related to educational strategies and the use of technology will foster continued growth for how we educate students. We hope that you will enjoy this book and be successful in the use of technology in your teaching.

Jeanne M. Novotny
Robert H. Davis

Introduction

Susan M. O'Brien

A few days ago I was late to a statewide nursing conference. Embarrassed at being late I moved quietly, trying not to disturb others. I was surprised to be given a very warm smile by a woman already seated. Comforted by that smile I sat down, forgot my embarrassment, and became engrossed in the morning agenda. At break, my smiling neighbor leaned close to me and said, "I'm your student." Immediately my eyes dropped to her name tag. Her name opened the way for us to communicate about her work and her recent graduation from our online RN to BSN program. The conversation was warm and familiar as we discussed her plans for graduate school and her chosen area of study. Although we had never met face-to-face, we assumed an interest in each other. Another woman seated between us joined our conversation by stating she could never attend an online class because she would miss the classroom interaction. My student laughed and said that online education had more interaction than she could handle sometimes. The third woman then stated that online still would not be for her because she needed the structure of a classroom. My student confidently and expertly explained the structure of the online syllabus, the use of discussion groups, and the detail of the required assignments. The third member of the conversation listened carefully and then sighed softly. "I guess I am just old-fashioned because to me school has classrooms and people that I can see." My student then became serious and said to her neighbor and to me, "Without this online program I could never have earned a BSN. Online education made it possible to for me to go to school and juggle my many other responsibilities."

I share this story because to me it captures both the lingering attitudes toward distance education and its future possibilities. Although clearly not for everyone, distance education can open the door to lifelong learning for those who need or prefer it. Distance education has been defined as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance” (United States Distance Learning Association, 1998). For approximately 100 years, innovative nurse educators have sought new ways to meet the changing needs of students who were unable to attend on-campus classes. Nursing students have been taught by correspondence, telephone, video, CD-ROM, and Web-based learning. Much in the way that we as nurses have used our knowledge and strong assessment skills to diagnose and treat patients, we as nurse educators also continue to diagnose, assess, and develop innovative approaches to deliver excellent nursing education. We have customized that education based on our students’ needs, available proven technology, and institutional resources. And equally important, we have maintained academic rigor.

Although nursing today remains rooted in traditional curriculum models, we are beginning to embrace new methods of curriculum design and delivery. Distance education is no longer only for those who are unable to get to campus but rather is offered, as a choice, for those who prefer it. As this modality gains momentum, we will continue to examine the characteristics of successful distance learners and evolve newer distance learning strategies. It is the online students of the last 10 years—true pioneers—who will develop and implement the evolving state of the art. In addition to learning from the learners, successful faculty will be studied and the teacher competencies required for distance education will be clarified, while barriers to, and incentives for, nursing faculty to teach via distance learning technology continue to be identified. Schools of nursing will take advantage of the practicality of sharing distance courses, become more flexible in transfer credit policies, and identify fairer ways to evaluate teacher effort and performance in distance learning when considering tenure and remuneration. The new “cybergogy” will encourage us to develop faculty sharing relationships among institutions of higher learning, and networks and consortia will be developed to make distance education possible for state, national, and international nursing use. Education will become more global and schools of nursing will utilize these consortia according to their individual needs. As dean of an online nursing program who has recruited a faculty made up of independent contractors from other institutions and educated them in online education, I am impressed by their teaching skills and talent, and especially by their dedication to our students scattered throughout the country. I am

encouraged by watching them learn and implement technology while handling students who themselves are also learning this technology. With few exceptions, these educators came with little or no knowledge of online education. They were, however, experienced faculty, confident in their ability to teach nursing students and willing to learn a new teaching methodology. In doing so, they have demonstrated a level of professionalism that is both admirable and heartwarming. And after becoming familiar with the principles and best practices of distance education, they have brought these newly honed skills to their home schools and added distance learning to their traditional classrooms, thereby increasing the pool of nursing educators prepared in the pedagogy of distance education.

Distance education should not be considered a threat to traditional education, but rather an option in a list of ever-expanding choices that will encourage lifelong learning in the new millennium. The future of distance education and nursing is limitless and hard to imagine. I am confident, however, that we will do as we have done at each turning point in the past: continue to educate ourselves to meet the technological and societal challenges of the twenty-first century, maintain the rigor of the nursing curriculum, and continue to serve the needs of our students both near and far.

CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Distance Education and Web-Based Courses

Jeanne M. Novotny and Tami H. Wyatt

In a small town in rural Michigan, Jan, a 32-year-old advanced practice nurse and working mother, carries groceries from the car into her house. It is late afternoon and after putting the groceries away Jan sits down at her computer and logs in to a continuing education class. She takes a quiz to see if she got the main points of the last session. Jan then downloads a recommended reading that impacts the care she is delivering to one of her oncology patients. Next, she goes into a chat room and asks for specific information related to one of her patients from an expert and from other practitioners who are also enrolled in the same asynchronous continuing education program.

Tom, a 38-year-old registered nurse with an associate's degree, comes home from the evening shift at a large medical center in Atlanta. He has a midnight snack and logs on to his computer. Tom is taking a nursing theory class from a well-known professor. This class is one of the requirements for his baccalaureate degree. Tom accesses the library collection and downloads one of the required readings. A message comes across his computer screen from one of his classmates, who lives in Alaska. The

two communicate in their virtual chat space. Although they have never met face-to-face, they have become friends and plan to graduate at the same time.

These examples demonstrate how the Internet is revolutionizing nursing education. Jan and Tom have opportunities for continuous professional development because of the Internet and the distance education programs that are available. These are students who would not be found sitting in a traditional classroom. They are receiving a quality education that would be unavailable to them otherwise. Today, whether students enroll in a traditional learning experience or learn at a distance, the Internet will influence the way they learn because learning experiences are either Web-based, Web-enhanced, or Web-supported (Robley, Farnsworth, Flynn, & Horne, 2004). The purpose of this chapter is to review briefly the background of distance education, compare and contrast traditional and Internet instruction, and discuss the ways that the Internet is changing the classroom.

WHY DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Technology provides practicing nurses and nursing students with the opportunity to learn, share information, and collaborate with colleagues throughout the world. A distance education format will not meet the needs of all learners; however, it is ideal for the individual who is motivated, needs flexibility, and wants to maintain professional accountability through self-evaluation and ongoing education. Internet-based education is a learning option based on the assumption that students will become a part of a community of learners even as they work separately from each other and their instructors. Nurses not interested in using the Internet for educational purposes will also feel its effects because technology is changing the traditional classroom in subtle and profound ways.

Degree-granting institutions and continuing education programs are facing critical challenges. It is important to understand these challenges in order to understand why Internet education will become increasingly important in the twenty-first century. In order to remain viable, educational programs must do the following:

- Provide first-rate leadership and instruction in rapidly developing new areas of knowledge and specialization
- Meet the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population

- Hire faculty that are flexible and have the ability to incorporate research findings and technology into everyday instructional practices
- Ensure quality learning standards and accreditation criteria that are comparable to face-to-face formats (Rosseter, 2003)

Because of these challenges, new ways of addressing the way we teach and how we learn are of the utmost importance. As universities, associations, private providers, and others compete in the marketplace for formal and continuing professional education, increasing numbers of learners will turn to the Internet as a convenient, satisfying, and economically prudent way to save time and money in order to keep current in their field. The Internet not only delivers online classes, but also creates “virtual communities” where professionals can communicate, get current information, and conduct business on a daily basis.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Nurses have a rich history of seeking the latest method of getting the education they need to remain current. The evolution of American educational technology is slightly different from the technology used historically in nursing education. During the early 1900s, the American visual instruction movement and the radio movement established innovative forms of learning (Saettler, 1990), but it was not until the late twentieth century that the nursing profession began using film or video and radio technology as a form of distance education. The concept of using communication tools that are unbounded by time and space to bring education to learners far and wide began with print media and correspondence studies. This method required sending and receiving assignments via mail. The use of radio in education began as early as the 1920s and is still being used in developing countries. Only now, radio broadcasting for instructional purposes is computer-based radio (Nwaerendu & Thompson, 1999). By World War II, educators in the United States were more interested in television technology. Television technology became popular in the 1960s when a variety of video-based initiative television systems became available. This form of broadcast uses asynchronous transfer mode (ATM) via videoconferencing equipment. Typically, programs use ATM videoconferencing equipment with televisions, connecting two or more classrooms to one another with an instructor in one of the locations. This technology is still used today because of its close resemblance to the traditional classroom but this costly method is gradually being replaced

with other technology-rich methods of instruction (Reiser, 2001). Some nursing programs combine various forms of distance education modalities to attract students in far-off places. These programs, known as external degree programs, use video or film technology, print media, videoconferencing technology, and the Internet to deliver instruction. They differ from traditional programs because the learning experience does not offer a prescribed method of learning. The learning is not merely a transfer of material from the classroom to the Internet. Instead distance education uses different methods of delivery, reinforcement, and communication with classmates and the teacher; and the learning is independent (Hyde & Murray, 2005).

Computer technology for distance education has leaped to the forefront partly because of technological advances and educational reform as well (Armstrong, Gessner, & Cooper, 2000). According to the 2001 National Survey of Information Technology in U.S. Higher Education, 56% of college and universities offer full online courses (Escoffery, Miner, & Alperin, 2003). This statistic does not include colleges or universities that offer portions of a course online. The Internet is the most versatile distance education vehicle of the information age, with users becoming information seekers. In fact, because of the Internet and the information age, learners are bombarded with information and must evaluate the validity of the information. This was not necessarily the case prior to the information age. Information was limited and required extensive seeking and research skills to obtain little information. Because of the Internet and advancing technology, all aspects of nursing will be affected, including opportunities and approaches to learning.

The need for degree completion, skill acquisition, continuing education, and certificate nursing education will continue to proliferate. A shift in restructured health care environments to an emphasis on primary and ambulatory care provided in clinics, community, and other settings, requires additional knowledge, skills, and expertise. Nurses seeking to remain competitive in the health care market will need the community assessment, problem-solving, and clinical management skills that are taught at the baccalaureate level (Beason, 1997). Historically, nursing always has been able to evolve continuously in its methods, structure, and educational approaches to meet the changing health care needs of society. Distance education can meet the health care challenges of society and the profession in a way that is both clinically relevant and educationally viable because distance education can be delivered through Web-based technologies, interactive videoconferencing via Internet, and pre-recorded media (Dudding & Purcell-Robertson, 2003).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND INTERNET INSTRUCTION

Distance education is defined as planned learning that occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring interactive technology in real time or delayed, and a course design supportive of distance education (Escoffery et al., 2003). The two basic models of distance education are synchronous and asynchronous modes of interactivity (Table 1.1). In synchronous learning, the teacher and the student interact in real time, similar to traditional classroom settings, but this method decreases flexibility. It requires all students to be online, in a videoconference, or in a virtual classroom at the same time. Asynchronous learning occurs when individuals access the educational materials independently and at times and places of their choice. Asynchronous activities allow students to take as much time as they want to read the materials and compose responses or messages. It also allows time for reflection and may result in thoughtful discussion. The use of asynchronous technology extends the reach of education to previously underserved populations as well as to those who prefer a more self-directed learning environment (Lewis, 2000). It is the most flexible and friendly way to use the Internet for formal degree programs and continuing education.

Distance learning offers new opportunities for nurses who are seeking basic or advanced degrees, certificates, or lifelong learning for professional development (Billings et al., 2001). The advantages to using the Internet are many. First, convenience and easy access are the cornerstones. The course work may be self-paced and asynchronous, and the student has easy access to online libraries, databases, and learning resources. The ability to network with colleagues in specialty areas without any geographic limitations is unlimited. There are several disadvantages. First, the student needs a computer, modem, Internet service provider, and basic computer literacy skills (Novotny & Murley, 1999). Second, bandwidth and connectivity to the Internet are issues that continue to exist in Internet-based education. This is especially true for individuals who rely on modems to connect to the Internet versus students with broadbandwidth connections (i.e., DSL, cable, satellite). Third, individual learners must recognize their personal learning style and determine if Internet-based education is appropriate. The work in developing and implementing a quality distance education program occurs before students ever begin. The spirit and potential of distance education can best be realized by programs that are specifically designed and implemented on the basis of the needs of the identified population of learners for whom the program is intended.

TABLE 1.1 Asynchronous Versus Synchronous Distance Learning Methodologies Via the Internet

Learning Methodology	Asynchronous	Synchronous
Video	Prerecorded Webcasts, videoconference, or presentation to be viewed at student's convenience	Real-time videoconference streaming: One-way videoconferencing: learner can see and hear the conference but cannot interact with the speaker. Two-way videoconferencing: learner can see, hear, and interact with the speaker by typing responses, or by voice and video with videoconferencing technology
Document Sharing/ Assignments	Sending documents or assignments via e-mail, listservs, or threaded discussion or storing documents on Web page	Sharing of documents using courseware management systems, or other applications that allow real-time document sharing
Discussion	Listservs, threaded discussions, newsgroups, e-mail	Chat rooms, real-time videoconferencing
Presentations	Multimedia or electronic presentations, case study, video tutorials, Webcasts, text-based tutorials, interactive tutorials	Real-time videoconference streaming, audio/document sharing
Evaluation	Online surveys, tests, threaded discussions, newsgroups, listservs, document sharing of assignments via e-mail	Real-time document/audio sharing, videoconference streaming

The advantages of a distance education program are

- Individualized pacing with active student involvement
- Instructional assistance during and outside of regular class times
- Multiple media formats resulting in greater interactivity
- On-time assessment, feedback, and reinforcement
- Individualized and collaborative learning
- Optimal use of instructor's expertise
- Information linked to student pace and performance

Understanding the differences between traditional learning and Internet learning is essential before undertaking an online program of any kind because students and educators who embark on a distance education program must change their thinking about how they learn or teach. Regardless of the technology used, certain instructional functions must exist (Heinich, Molenda, Russell, & Smaldino, 1999):

- Instructor presentation of content using multimedia-rich technology with supporting printed material
- Student-teacher interaction such as discussion, assignments, or testing
- Student-student interaction in small groups, pairs, threaded discussions, or group projects

IMPORTANT THEMES

There are several themes that shape online education and the future direction of learning and teaching. These themes, developed by Kearsley (2000), are all interrelated and overlapping but are important for the potential student.

1. *Collaboration*: The single biggest change that the Internet brings to education is the increased collaboration between students and teachers, which includes diverse individuals in all parts of the world. Many activities and projects involve information-sharing activities. Even when there is not specific intent to collaborate, it often happens anyway because it is so easy to interact online.

2. *Connectivity*: These activities include discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, conferences, and group projects. Students and instructors can easily connect across time and geographic location. Another important aspect of connectivity in nursing education is that students can interact directly with experts in their field of study. This is especially important in advanced nursing practice where current protocols frequently reside on the Internet. Efficient connectivity and response times are crucial for effective learning. There are three important limits to consider with respect to response times and connectivity: (a) a learner feels connected if he or she is able to retrieve information or access a page within one tenth of a second; (b) a learner's flow of thought will be interrupted if connection takes more than 1 second; (c) a learner will stay focused on a text-based dialogue only if the interruptions between the discussion are less than 10 seconds (Nielsen, 2001).

3. *Student-centered*: When experienced nurses return to school for further formal education, they respond well to a program that is based on adult learning principles. These principles, developed by Malcolm Knowles (1980), are based on the assumption that the student is a capable decision-maker and is an active participant rather than a passive receiver in the teaching-learning process. Teachers must recognize the value of a less hierarchical learning environment and embrace the role of facilitator as their primary function. One of the most important contributions of this work is to increase awareness of the learner's rightful place at the center of the instructional process.

4. *Unbounded*: The Internet offers online education that eliminates the walls of the classroom. It gives students access to information and people anywhere in the world. Online education removes boundaries having to do with where and when students learn as well as who can be a learner. This is especially important for continuing education for professional nurses.

5. *Virtual Community*: A sense of community is important, whether it is the community of learners defined by a particular school or continuing education program or a physical community such as a town or city. The Internet makes it possible to define virtual communities around common interests and work-related activities. A community is only possible if a sense of presence is created. Audio and sound are important in creating presence.

6. *Exploration*: The Internet allows learners to integrate knowledge into their own behavior and belief system and to create new knowledge and insight that can only come when there is the

adventure of discovery. Many online activities involve adventure or discovery learning. Problem-based learning is an example of this type of learning activity.

7. *Shared Knowledge*: Nursing professionals and students can tap into a vast knowledge network and they can contribute as well. Information on the Internet is immediately available to anyone in the world at any time. Sharing knowledge is the core of education but prior to computer networks this was only accomplished in limited ways.

8. *Multisensory Experience*: Learning theories tell us that learning is more effective when it involves multiple sensory channels such as visuals, color, movement, sound, voice, touch, and smell. For example, Edgar Dale's classic cone of experience theory suggests that individuals learn approximately 10% of read material, 50% of observed demonstrations and material read, and 80% of material that is interactive (Dale, 1969). Multimedia technology is available on the Internet and can provide most kinds of learning experiences except for touch and smell. Although these experiences may not be perfect, they are often much better than traditional learning activities that are primarily based on lectures.

9. *Authenticity*: Internet education is highly authentic in nature. Students can access actual databases and experts. This gives the educational experience relevance to the learning needs of the student. The Internet provides direct access to major repositories of research information, a critical component of nursing.

Since distance education methods penetrated nursing education in the 1990s, there has been ample research examining these themes. Overwhelmingly, distance education experiences that promote community building and interactivity among the students and with the instructor are key elements to more positive student experiences with greater perceived learning opportunities (Hyde & Murray, 2005; Robley et al., 2004).

WHAT TO EXPECT WITH ONLINE LEARNING OR TRADITIONAL CLASSES CONNECTED TO THE INTERNET

Until now, the primary function of a teacher has been to transfer knowledge, with the student in a passive role. A majority of teaching and learning is passive and most students find this style of learning very safe and comfortable. Distance education students and teachers need to be

prepared for a change in this approach. When the Internet becomes the primary vehicle for learners to receive information and skills, classes that primarily transfer information become obsolete. Instead the student becomes an active participant in the process. The role of the instructor is to make the information meaningful, create a positive learning environment, integrate knowledge into the learner's own belief system, and create new knowledge and insight that come only when three or more learners are engaged in intense discussion and exploration.

In some programs, clinical skills are evaluated by connecting students to instructors, using portable videoconferencing devices such as Webcam technology with two-way videoconferencing. Firefighters, pilots, and even nurses are learning skills through simulated virtual-reality videos and manikins. Those teaching in online learning environments must be prepared to deliver instruction with various online learning modalities in order to meet the diverse learning styles of individuals, similar to the preparations that are adopted in the traditional classroom setting for students with various learning styles. Teachers and students must also be prepared to create a "community" of learners by encouraging discussion, participation, and presence that may require the use of more advanced technology such as audio capability.

Technology and the Internet specifically are changing the way individuals learn and gather data. Nursing students are using more Internet resources to support clinical decisions, access information, and plan care. Furthermore, teachers are using the Internet in traditional classroom settings to access information, demonstrate processes or mechanisms (i.e., animated blood flow through the heart), and promote in-class small-group learning activities with wireless mobile technology. Tablet PCs with handwriting-recognition features and personal digital assistants are used in many progressive classroom settings. Students may access drug databases electronically during lectures or use medical calculators for more complex algorithms while learning fluid and electrolyte disturbances in the patient who is immunosuppressed.

In conclusion, the academic quality and legitimacy of well-designed and well-executed distance education programs have been proved (Lewis, 2000). Don't be afraid to reach out and teach or enroll in a distance education course. In fact, if you plan to teach an online course, become an online course learner first. You will be embracing an important skill that will prepare you for nursing practice in the twenty-first century.

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