

## The Transition to Online Teaching as Experienced by Nurse Educators

THELMA S. SWORD

C

HANGING ONE'S ROLE, "FROM AUTHORITY FIGURE TO FACILITATOR" (JOHNSON, 2008, P. 17), MAY BE A CHALLENGE FOR NURSE FACULTY STRIVING TO COMPLEMENT

EXISTING TEACHING MODALITIES WITH ONLINE LEARNING.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions, experiences, and needs of nurse faculty as they transition from traditional classroom instruction to an online teaching environment. It is hoped that using a phenomenological approach to understand and illuminate the "lived worlds" (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 52) of faculty, will lead to greater empowerment of nurse educators during the transition to online learning.

With the rapid growth of Internet accessibility, nursing programs are using a combination of approaches to instruction (Bargagliotti, 2006), and numerous examples of the growing use of online technology in higher education are discussed in the literature (Doutrich, Hoeksel, Wykoff, & Thiele, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Hill, 2009; Kreideweis, 2005; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). Many faculty approach the transition to online education with limited experience developing and teaching online courses (Barker, 2003; Jairath & Stair, 2004; Zsohar & Smith, 2008).

**Method** With these concerns in mind, a modified heuristic approach was used to discover, seek, and find the meaning of lived experiences of nurse faculty transitioning to online teaching environments. Six phases of heuristic research, as described by Moustakas (1994), guided the research design: "initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of research into a creative synthesis" (p. 18). The research culminated in a synthesis of common, repetitive themes, reducing the lived experiences of participants to a central meaning, or essence, of the experience (Moustakas).

**SAMPLE** Purposive sampling was used to obtain a sample of 20 nurse faculty from seven college/university schools of nursing in the Midwest who met the criteria of having taught nursing courses in the classroom setting prior to teaching online. After receiving institutional review board approval, personal telephone/email contact was made with potential participants. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each audiotaped interview session.

All participants were white females who held advanced degrees; 12 held doctorates in nursing or education and 8 were prepared at the master's level. Their ages ranged from 30 to 69, with 10 participants 50 to 59 years of age. The participants were seasoned educators; 14 had taught for 10 years or more.

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS** The interviews took place in person. Each interview began with the central research question: "What was your personal experience with transitioning from teaching in the classroom to online instruction?" Using NVivo7 software (QSR International, Doncaster, Victoria, Australia), the transcribed interview data were analyzed according to the six phases of heuristic research to uncover common patterns and themes. Participants were asked to review the transcript of their interviews to validate their responses.

**Findings** Research participants were asked to share their lived experiences of the transition from teaching in a classroom setting to online teaching. A pattern of progression can be noted in their combined experiences. Even with all their struggles, faculty made progress and adapted to online teaching.

**TAKING MORE TIME** The amount of time needed to teach in the new environment was the predominant theme, strongly expressed by participants. References to time and students' perception of faculty always being available are illustrated by this comment: "Online equals double my time." Participants spoke of needing and wanting more time to explore the online environment. Preparation time was described as essential: "Probably [pause] I had a misconception that teaching online was going to save me time and it was just the opposite, it actually takes more time to teach online than it does in the classroom."

**CHALLENGING WORK** Certain concerns were seen as representative of the challenges of transitioning to online teaching: technology was intimidating, with more support and training needed; teaching strategies of the past did not work online; students emailed many questions; and faculty engaged in self-questioning about the appropriate delivery of course content to students. Participants said: "It was like flying blind" and "It was almost like being a new nurse all over again, where I didn't have a clue what I was doing and yet it was my job."

**LOSING USUAL WAYS OF TEACHING** Transitioning involved the loss of familiar and usual ways of teaching for participants, which was stressful. The data revealed grief over the loss of creative lecturing, dynamic group work, imaginative activities (e.g., using big sticky notes with student-led discussions), and tailoring teaching after seeing the "puzzled faces for a sense of where the class discussions are going." One faculty member said: "I prefer classroom. I love to lecture, I just do. I'm a ham and I love to get up and make faces, tell jokes or whatever. You really can't do that so much online."

Most of the techniques previously used in the traditional class-

room did not readily transfer to the online environment. For these participants, their limited understanding of online pedagogy and their limited understanding of computers contributed to this gap.

**LOSING FACE-TO-FACE CONNECTIONS** Participants spoke of sadness and uncertainty about the loss of warmth and the connections made in the face-to-face classroom. Being present in the classroom allows faculty the opportunity to assess student understanding in their facial expressions and body language. This loss seemed to have the potential to hinder the camaraderie among students and faculty. Comments included: "Can't see the ah-ha moments in their eyes" and "I am a very visual person. You know, I like to look at the whites of their eyes. I like the head nod and the eye contact."

**LACKING RESOURCES** Making the transition to online teaching necessitated many resources, including mentors, administrative support, information technology staff, software platform support, policies and procedures, and peer faculty support. When asked about the availability of resources to help with the transition to online teaching, responses included: "No, that's been kind of a rocky area as well. I've done it all on my own" and "I did a lot of stumbling and they weren't there when I needed them."

**ADAPTING TO CHANGE** Woven into the theme of adapting to change were subthemes: *evolved with small beginnings*, *frustrated with online teaching*, and *overloaded with the technology*. The transition evolved best with small beginnings. Implementing online courses slowly helped faculty increase their comfort with the technological aspects of the online format. Faculty skills could evolve with the growing program. Participant comments included: "The first time I taught I kept it as basic as possible" and "You know, they gave me time and other people were new at it so I didn't feel like the only dummy."

Faculty experienced feeling frustrated with technology issues, the demands of transitioning traditional courses to online formats, and teaching online. Not feeling like the "only dummy" implies that others among the faculty were also frustrated, feeling inadequate to meet the new challenges of the online format: "I was actually getting to the point where I was going to request not to do online teaching anymore [laughter]."

Teaching online is a technical venture and faculty felt overloaded with all the technology they were required to use. Participants reported varying levels of computer expertise: "I never had any computer training [pause] never, I didn't even hardly know how to copy and paste" and "I was pretty much computer illiterate, so it was interesting that they wanted me to develop courses and teach them when I had difficulty turning on the computer."

**FINDING NEW WAYS** While many participants found the transition frustrating, for some faculty, the experience included elements of excitement and feelings of "pioneering." The following comments capture a glimpse of this part of the experience: "It

was exciting and innovative and I love a challenge, which it was, but it was also frustrating because I had no training" and "Felt like I was blazing a new trail doing self-orientation."

For participants, the transition to online teaching required the best of their adaptive skills. Feeling that one is "learning and teaching and being an expert all at once" can be overwhelming.

**The Essence of the Experience of Transitioning** Hidden behind the comments of the participants are messages of fear, disillusionment, and perseverance. If they are not handled satisfactorily, transitions in the workplace lead to fear and disillusionment with the organization. Lack of confidence in the new format of online teaching evoked expressions of fear for some faculty: fear of not meeting student needs, not covering essential course content competently, and receiving poor student evaluations. Personal doubt about whether their teaching strategies would be successful led to an initial experience for participants that was less than satisfactory. Disillusionment with the lack of or limited administrative support in terms of communication, resources, mentors, orientation, and professional development hindered a smooth transitional experience. Despite these feelings and concerns, faculty participants adapted and persevered, willingly investing their time and efforts to be successful in this new teaching format.

**Recommendations** A number of recommendations emerged from this study: a) Involve faculty at the beginning of online program planning, using change theory, to guide the planned change. b) Assess computer technology skills of faculty prior to transitioning to online teaching. c) Have formal orientation programs. d) Use mentors. e) Institute ongoing professional development for online teaching. f) Address time commitment and workload issues from the onset.

An intentionally planned orientation program with the use of mentors assigned to new online faculty can establish the support and peer dialogue needed for success in online teaching. Feedback from mentors can be used to identify the ongoing professional development needs of online faculty. A focus on best practices and new teaching strategies to replace those lost are needed during this transition.

This research study was undertaken to explore the lived experiences of nurse faculty transitioning from classroom instruction to online teaching. Suggestions for improved transitional experiences emerged from this research. In an era of nursing shortages and rapid growth in online nursing programs, schools of nursing are encouraged to listen and respond effectively to the voices of their faculty transitioning to online teaching. **NLN**

**About the Author** *Thelma S. Sword, EdD, RN, CNE, is associate professor, Graceland University School of Nursing, Independence, Missouri. For more information, contact Dr. Sword at [tsword@graceland.edu](mailto:tsword@graceland.edu).*

## References

- Bargagliotti, L.A. (2006). Flattening the nursing world [President's Message]. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 27(1), 2.
- Barker, A. (2003). Faculty development for teaching online: Educational and technological issues. *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 34(6), 273-278.
- Doutrich, D., Hoeksel, R., Wykoff, L., & Thiele, J. (2005). Teaching teachers to teach with technology. *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 36(1), 25-31.
- Edwards, P.A. (2005). Impact of technology on the content and nature of teaching and learning. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 26(6), 344-347.
- Hill, C. (2009). Giving part-time online instructors what they need. *Faculty Focus: Best practices for training and retaining online adjunct faculty*. Retrieved from [www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/best-practices-for-training-and-retaining-online-adjunct-faculty/](http://www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/best-practices-for-training-and-retaining-online-adjunct-faculty/)
- Jairath, N., & Stair, N. (2004). A development and implementation framework for web-based nursing courses. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 25(2), 67-72.
- Johnson, A. E. (2008). A nursing faculty's transition to teaching online. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 29(1), 17-22.
- Kreideweis, J. (2005). Indicators of success in distance education. *Computers Informatics Nursing*, 23(2), 68-72.
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2009). Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online studies. US Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ctl.sri.com/publications/downloads/EvaluationEvidenceBasedPracticeOnlineLearning.pdf>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Richards, L., & Morse, J. M. (2007). *Read me first: User's guide to qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zsohar, H., & Smith, J.A. (2008). Transition from the classroom to the web: Successful strategies for teaching online. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 29(1), 23-28.



## PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND LIFELONG LEARNING

### TECHNOLOGY'S TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

The NLN Seventh Annual Technology Conference

Washington State University College of Nursing

Spokane, Washington

October 19-21, 2012

Abstracts are due August 10.

*This conference will help you better prepare your students to function in today's technology-rich health care environments.*

**DETAILS ARE ONLINE:**

[www.nln.org/facultyprograms/Conferences/Technology/index.htm](http://www.nln.org/facultyprograms/Conferences/Technology/index.htm)

Copyright of Nursing Education Perspectives is the property of National League for Nursing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.