CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE ONLINE TEACHING STRATEGIES: FACILITATION FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

Facilitating an online course in today's student population requires an educator to be innovative and creative and to have an impactful online presence. In the current online learning environment (also known as e-learning), keeping students' thoughtfully engaged and motivated while dispensing the required course content necessitates faculty enabling a safe, nonjudgmental environment whereby views, perspectives, and personal and professional experiences are encouraged. The educator must exhibit an educator-facilitated active, student-centered learning process, whereby students are held accountable for their active participation and self-directed learning while balancing a facilitator role to further enhance the learning process. This article explores one educator's reflective practice process that has been developed over numerous years as a very early adopter of online education. It will explore the organizational aspect of teaching-facilitating a dynamic robust online course.

Keywords: transformative teaching/learning practices, educator reflection, online education

INTRODUCTION

Facilitating an engaging online course requires educators to develop strategies that enhance student participation and build a sense of community. This leads to collaborative learning and developing relationships and fosters educator feedback while facilitating independent networking and self-directed proactive learning (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Hammond & Wiriyapinit, 2005; Kanuka & Garrison, 2004; Mann, 2014; Melrose & Bergeron, 2007; Munich, 2014; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Rogo & Portillo, 2015). In addition, educators' need to enhance and encourage complex-reasoning skills while assisting students' in developing a sense of reflective self and a personal and professional ethos that eventually translates into increased confidence (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 2009; Elledge, Houltaon, Hacektt & Evans, 2018; Chadha, 2017; Peisachovich, 2016; Peisachovich, Murtha, Phillips, & Messinger 2016). All educational disciplines expect students to translate content to work-related environments.

Learning should be transformational and provide students with opportunities to explore and reflect upon their assumptions, to critically analyze their beliefs and judgements, and to integrate new thought patterns into their personhood. By sharing ideas and personal and professional values, new knowledge can develop and become translational in practice.

There have been numerous studies that explored various aspects to virtual online learning, such as:
- student perceptions of online courses (Papillion & Aaron, 2017);
- faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of online courses (Cherry & Flora, 2017);
- students preferred online instructor caring behaviors (Mann, 2014);
- academic integrity in the online learning environment (Azulay Chertok, Barnes, & Gilleland, 2014; Tayaben, 2014); and
- teaching the practice of compassion (Hofmeyer et al., 2016).

Faculty development is needed to further enhance the integration of e-learning. Not only do students need to be aware of the time commitment and comfortable with technology, but faculty need to be educated regarding the pedagogical methods appropriate for an online course (Kowalczyk, 2014). Faculty members and programs that utilize e-learning need to be cognizant that the educators' online presence is essential to fully disseminate the course content and that prompt and frequent feedback and faculty interactions are vital, as is detailed guidance to students' questions regarding assignments and course process (Gaudine & Moralejo, 2011; Mann, 2014). Collaborating with students in discussions and encouraging peer-to-peer collaboration is an important feature to an engaged virtual learning dynamic. Peer interactive design promotes collaboration and facilitates a sense of community (Chadha, 2017). Attention to detail and clarity of the course, the syllabus, and the criteria to succeed is mandatory. For a student to accomplish course objectives and outcomes, faculty need to be organized and structured in their online content development, and they need to establish clear and defined deadlines and participation and course expectations. Otherwise, students may perceive their online learning to be less than they would if they took the course face-to-face in a classroom (Gaudine & Moralejo, 2011). The outcomes of the instructional design process (Baker, 2010; Kim & Hannafin, 2011), as defined by the educator, who dictates the interaction and engagement with the students while promoting regular communication, are essential to facilitate online teaching-learning success (Carter, Hanna, & Warry, 2016). And as with all learning outcomes and course assessment, measurement is based on the university's evaluations.

Faculty need to expand their educational processes to integrate technology as a tool and not as a pedagogical methodology. There needs to be a focus on providing quality educational learning experiences for students while integrating online educational design practices (Kowalczyk, 2014). As in any classroom environment, the educators' awareness of diverse types of learning styles is important and even more so with online learning. Varying the learning strategies can be an effective tool to providing a broad base for different learning styles. Typically, an online course is asynchronous, yet it may have aspects of synchronous real-time interfaces, such as specific deadlines for assignments and engagement, online quizzes/examinations, and specific content pertaining to weekly discussion. Varying this flexibility of online teaching activities by blending these defined strategies can be helpful in promoting learning outcomes and experiences.

This article discusses the process of one educator who was an early adopter of online teaching. Its purpose is to provide an overview of this educator's experience, process, teaching style, and creative diverse teaching/learning practices that have led to successful online participation. By incorporating proactive and collaborative pedagogical practices, students' engagement, motivation, commitment, and "reflection, knowledge acquisition" is encouraged and supported, thus nurturing the learning process (Freeman et al., 2014; Peisachovich et al., 2016, p. 114).

TEMPLATE FOR ONLINE COURSES

A detailed learning design process, with various active learning activities leading to student engagement and development of current ideas, skills and knowledge, is the challenge for all educators. Developing an e-learning course that does not overwhelm students but provides them with opportunities to glean the essence of the material and internalize the knowledge to eventually translate that knowledge to practice is the ultimate outcome. To achieve this outcome, an effective design and implementation of the learning process to promote and inspire positive experiences for the student, and educator, is fundamental (Carter et al., 2016).

As a nurse educator, this author has taught a variety of courses, beginning with the typical brick and mortar classroom. Flipping the classroom to the online community over a decade ago prompted this author to begin developing virtual course template processes. With each passing semester, design and implementation of the e-learning template became more detailed, tailored, and structured. Needless to say, this educators' learning curve was steep in the beginning as an early adopter of online teaching. With over a decade of revising, refining, and organizing an instructional teaching process for virtual facilitation, a template was successfully developed. This author has utilized this e-learning template in a variety of courses,

such as a prelicensure baccalaureate nursing course in Women's Health, a graduate course in Therapeutic Counseling Modalities: Advanced Nursing Perspectives and Practice for psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner students, and a graduate/Doctor of Nursing Practice course in Clinical Genetics.

Educator's Experiences and Learning Curves

One of the first learning curves was redesigning the syllabus. An online course syllabus requires more details, instruction, and structure. The author learned that repeating information in the syllabus and with online platform application announcements helped to organize the course for successful student outcomes. Being extremely clear on the required assignment deadlines, to the exact minute that an assignment would be considered late, was essential. It is necessary for the educator, as well as the student, to be able to adapt to expected and unexpected situations that may arise throughout a course. Yet, having clearly defined criteria and expectations are the ground-work for achieving success. Transparency in any environment is paramount to provide guidance regarding assignments, learning activities are briefly discussed in the syllabus with extensive material posted on the learning platform.

In addition to mandated inclusion content per university policy and procedures, providing comprehensive information pertaining to online examination, such as tips for taking an online exam, helps students to prepare in advance by testing their browser compatibility and computer skills. This is obvious for technologically savvy students in undergraduate education courses; however, advanced degree students or nontraditional students require additional information to alleviate anxiety with an e-learning format. Tips such as rebooting/restarting their computer before taking the examination has shown to be effective in helping students to close numerous browser webpages. Also, inform students in advance about little quirks of online testing. For example, if a question asks for a numerical answer, use the actual number and do not spell out the number, such as 50, not fifty, as fifty will be marked incorrect. And do not put any other descriptor, such as % sign next to answer, as 50% will also be marked incorrectly. As the educator who has reviewed countless online examinations, informing students in advance of these quirks has decreased stress for both the student and the educator.

Development of An Online Course

The online community.

Based on the university's learning platform, designing the online community is essential for student success. At this authors' university, Blackboard is the educational learning platform (www.blackboard.com), but any learning platform would provide the same functions. An entire semester of content must be disseminated via e-learning that promotes critical thinking, reflection, and active participation, and that thoughtfully engages collaborative learning. This is a tall order for any educator, hence the need for a structured course development process. Organizing the course in advance deters from last minute distractions for the educator. Setting up virtual office hours, implementing the 24- to 48-hour rule of responding to email for students and educator, and providing as much clarity and transparency of course requirements and criteria for success are extremely positive steps for all involved. Regular communication via announcements and class emails provides more guidance and keeps students on track for weekly expectations and course criteria that needs to be met.

Keeping a community in a large class.

This author has facilitated online courses ranging from 7 to 119 students and the process for group dynamics remains the same. Group dynamics are a part of all relationships, which is why grouping five to seven students in each group is sufficient to have a thoughtful and engaged dialogue. Grouping together fewer than five students does not promote a robust discussion while more than seven tends to lead to an overwhelming experience. An educator needs to know what works for their course and content and how to assist students to glean the knowledge that the class is presenting. Over years of experience with online teaching, this author has grouped students in a variety of manners, ranging from 5 to 10 students. To allow for a natural organic flow of students' dialogue, 5–7 students proved the best for active, deliberative peer discussions with educator facilitation while coproducing content within the group discussion. The larger the group, the more arduous it was for students and educator to fully engage with each other. An e-learning

collaborative course with student interactive engagement promotes reflective peer discussions to meet the envisioned pedagogical learning needs and outcomes for any course (Chadha, 2017). One of the fascinating aspects of online teaching is the minimization of the quiet student who typically would not engage in a face-to-face classroom dynamic. Shy, quiet students are obligated to engage in a group discussion. There will always be dominant voices online, but e-learning has provided a venue for the quieter student to voice his/her opinion, thoughts, and ethos. The author of this paper has tried two ways of structuring groups, either allowing students to form their own groups or randomly assigning students to a group. Each process has its own merits, but, after experimenting with these two processes, the author believes that randomly assigning students to a group is more beneficial. The rationale for random selection of students is that it facilitates meeting different people that students may not typically engage with provides a wider range of insight (as friends characteristically have similar beliefs and philosophies) and permits for enhanced group diversity (such as culturally, intellectually, dominant vs quiet voices). As an example, the author allowed a cohort of prelicensure baccalaureate nursing students [119 students] to preselect their groupmates. At the end of the semester, the students were asked if they would have preferred being randomly assigned to a group. Interestingly, the majority of students said they would have preferred being assigned, commenting that they stayed in groups with their friends and felt that if they have diversified, they would probably have gained more insight into the topics discussed.

Another strategy for communal building is a concept that this author refers to as "questions from a colleague." Within the first several weeks of an online course, the author requests that groupmates first ask each other for assistance in clarifying any questions. When a student requires further clarification, the author posts the question on the learning platform announcement page with a subject heading of "question from a colleague." The assumption from this educator is that if one student has this question, then others do as well. The question (without the name of the student) and the answer are posted for the community to learn from.

Learning Modules

Weekly content is organized into individual learning modules (under Course Materials, for example) with a title for that module that correlates to the syllabus week. This educator learned that titling the weekly learning module to the syllabus provided additional organization. Considering the various learning styles of students, repetition is a beneficial tool. Labeling a learning module Week 11 does not provide the same clarity, and intellectual connection to content, as Week 11: Psychopharmacology and Psychotherapy. As shown in Figure 1, within each weekly learning module there are numerous items and files pertaining to the topic (Screen Capture of Module Week 11—Psychopharmacology and Psychotherapy). PowerPoint presentations cannot be

Figure 1. Screen Capture of Module Week 11- Psychopharmacology and Psychotherapy
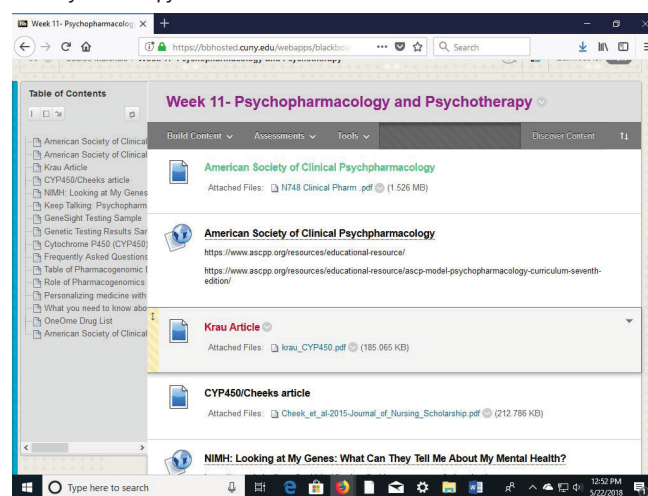
considered the sole teaching apparatus, as they tend to disengage students (Peisachovich et al., 2016). However, providing PowerPoints presentations still holds merit as a teaching tool for dispensing the basic material to be covered. In addition to PowerPoints, social media platforms, such as YouTube and Ted Talk, are useful apparatuses for synthesizing and distributing information to students that enhance experiential learning and facilitate further insight into the topic (Green & Hope, 2010; Sharoff, 2011). Utilizing voice thread and screen capture provide additional learning strategies, and uploading exemplary articles and resources adds to the depth of disseminating knowledge. As all educators are aware, tapping into various learning styles and resources is essential to help students successfully achieve the learning outcomes.

Online Group Forums

For each group, the author created separate forums, and within each forum, created two individual threads: Answers and Discussion, as shown in Figure 2 (Screen Capture of a Group Discussion Board). The recommendation to have

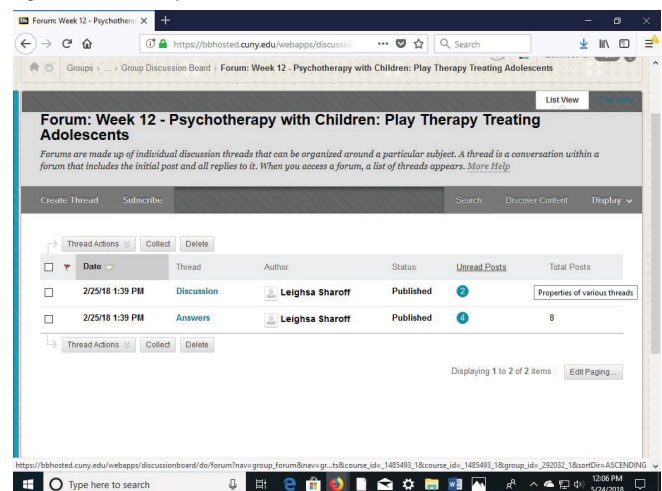Figure 2. Screen Capture of a Group Discussion Board Page
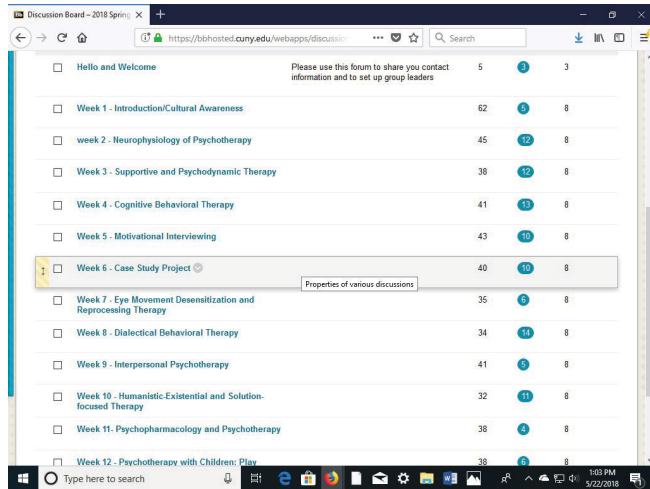
two separate threads to further organize the process was suggested by a student in the authors graduate Clinical Genetics course. For each individual week, the author developed specific facilitated guided questions based on the content. Students are expected to submit their individual answers under the Answer thread. For example, class begins on Sunday at midnight and answers are due by Monday at noon. Submitting answers before or after the stated deadline results in a Final Discussion Board (DB) point deduction. The authors' experience has demonstrated that if students submit early, a level of competition develops within the group. A student who always submits late is referred as a habitual late responder. In either event, a weekly point deduction will ensue based on the criteria developed. This process allows students at all levels to learn accountability and responsibility for their actions and consequences. The Discussion thread is utilized for the general discourse of the material. Students are expected to read the answers by their groupmates and a discussion to examine the material in a deeper manner begins. The discussion aspect routinely begins no later than Monday midnight and continues through Thursday 11:59 p.m. As the course facilitator, the author has access to all the groups. As such, the author will post additional questions to further the discussion,

which allows the groups to organically progress in their own way and gently guides them to make certain that aspects of the content are explored for a deeper understanding. Students are informed via the syllabus that in the Group DB they should not create additional threads to the discussion. In other words, they create their own thread in Answers when uploading them but reply when in the Group DB (shown in Figure 2). This process allows for an even flow of discussion without having to click in and out to read responses. Furthermore, as course facilitator, noting the date and time a student responds permits the author to determine if a student is a habitual late responder. Per DB Point Deduction Criteria, a student can lose points off their Final DB grade if they are habitual late responders, they post all their responses on the last day of the content week, or they embed responses. Finally, an important aspect to teaching online, which the author of this paper had to learn, is the loophole of students not completing the work but passing assignments. As such, every e-learning syllabus for this author clearly states that students

must achieve the equivalent of a "C" or 70% in your Final Group Discussion Board grade to receive a passing grade in this class. Meaning, the Final Discussion Board grade must be 70 or better to pass this class. Students will automatically receive an F for the course if they fail the Discussion Board aspect.

Through trial and error, this educator has become aware of the many loopholes of learning

Figure 3. Screen Capture of Module Week 12

to teach online (Figure 2; Figure 4, Excerpt from a Syllabus; and Figure 5, Screen Capture of Course Information).
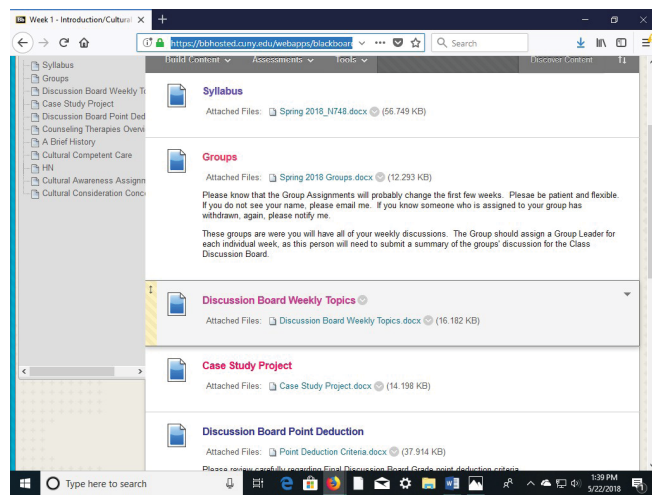
Figure 4. Screen Capture of Course Information

Figure 4. Excerpt from a Syllabus Regarding Discussion Board Participation

Class & Weekly Blackboard Case-Based/Practice Question Participation (50%)

Activity on discussion board and interactive learning activities. Each week's discussion board {DB} will be graded and the cumulative grade will be the 50% for activity on discussion board and interactive learning activities. You are expected to answer ALL the DB questions.

[Per Rubric: you must have a minimum of 3 DB postings, which DOES NOT include your answers to the DB questions. REVIEW RUBRIC FOR POINT **DEDUCTION CRITERIA**

Please Keep to the Schedule of Classes…this way, we are all on the same content topics together.

Each group will engage in their online discussion [in their Group Discussion Board]. All answers are to be uploaded in the thread marked 'Answers'. The Discussion aspect goes in the thread marked 'Discussion'. Remember, your Answers must be uploaded between Sunday 12midnight through Monday 12noon. The first person who goes into that Content Week should create a thread for 'Answers' and a separate thread for 'Discussion'.

Summaries of each week's Group Discussion must be uploaded by the Friday of that week, by 12pm please in the Class DB. *Please put your Group Number in the Subject Heading.* I suggest that you decide on who will be the Group Leader [GL] for each individual week. If the Summary is not uploaded between 12midnight and 12non on the Friday of that content week, then that Group Leader will receive a 5-point deduction from their overall Final Discussion Board grade. Thereafter, the entire group will receive a 1-point deduction for each day that the summary is late.

The week's summary should be a clear, concise and succinct overview of what your group discussed based on that weeks' content, including but not limited to the YouTube videos, Case study assignments and any

other reflective aspects.

Remember, it's the Quality, not the Quantity of your postings. However, you must have a minimum of 3 postings in the Discussion Thread. Initial Answers should be uploaded in the Thread marked: Answers. Answers are to be uploaded between Sunday 12midnight through Monday until 12pm of the beginning of the content week. Online discussion should be in the Thread marked: Discussion. The Content Week's discussion concludes on Thursday 11:59pm. Summaries are due on Friday by 12pm in the Class Discussion Board, with the Group # in the Subject Heading. Finally, everyone is expected to read and comment on the other groups' discussion board summaries under Class Discussion Board. You do not have to comment on every group for each summary, you are expected to make at least ONE comment. If you do not participate in this aspect of the class, then 5 points will be deducted for not commenting on Group Summaries. This is an integral part of our dialogue, as this is how we will learn what our colleagues were discussing in their individual groups. This aspect of the course brings us back together as a learning community, this way, we can fully glean what all our colleagues were saying.

Do Not upload a word document for our weekly discussions, please cut/paste your weekly DB answers and summary so everyone can easily read it

Please refer to Discussion Board Weekly Topics handout on BB for the *Case Study Project*, you must upload your individual assignment as a Word Doc. This is the only assignment that can be uploaded as a Word Doc [your case study paper, not your summary].

You must achieve the equivalent of a "C" or 70% in your Final Group Discussion Board grade to receive a passing grade in this class. Meaning, your Final Discussion Board grade must be 70 or better to pass this class. You will automatically receive an F for this course if you fail the Discussion Board aspect.

*Discussion Board Rubric Evaluation – please see Blackboard/Rubrics*

Bringing a virtual class back together as a community requires creative thinking on the part of the educator. This author requires each group to decide on their own who will be a Group Leader (GL) for each week. That individual is expected to provide a clear, concise summary of the group's weekly discussion with the group number in the subject heading and post that on the Class Discussion Board between Friday midnight and noon. This is an important aspect as it brings the class back together as whole after being separated into their individual groups. Every student is expected to read and submit at least one comment on another groups' discussion board summary under Class Discussion Board. It is integral for an online course to unite students as a learning community so the class as a whole can fully understand what their colleagues were discussing. As noted in Figure 2, the first forum is Hello and Welcome, which is a

forum for groupmates to organize their GL roles and share contact information.

Resources

Providing an abundance of online resources gives students an avenue to further explore the material. From this authors' experience, students tend to explore on their own and forward links for articles and additional web-based resources. As the facilitator of the course, I post these student-found resources (once legitimacy and relevance to the course are verified) in an announcement acknowledging the student with a subject heading "shared by a colleague." This further promotes an active collaborative learning process. Resources specific to weekly content (including articles, mashups, weblinks, video links, and Flickr photos) are uploaded in the corresponding module. Generalized resources for the course are uploaded at the beginning of the semester to allow students to peruse them on their own time, as can be seen in Figure 5 (Screen Capture of Course Resources for Graduate Clinical Genetics).

Figure 5. Screen Capture of Course Resources for Graduate Clinical Genetics
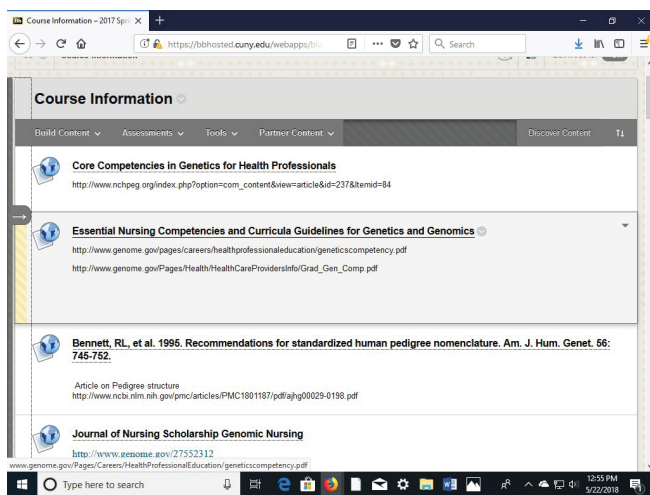
EDUCATOR REFLECTIVE PROCESS

The overall objective of online education is the same for face-to-face didactic methodology: provide students with an excitement to learn, engage, and seek knowledge. Unique issues arise with online learning that require the educator to be creative and innovative in meeting pedagogical objectives and outcomes. Creating individual and group assignments can be a successful integration that assists students to learn both independently and collaboratively. The course content orchestrates the type of assignments with majority of work in an e-learning course being independent with an infusion of collaboration. Individual completion of work assignments allows students to learn at their own pace, while the discussion helps to further the understanding of the material by a sharing insights and viewpoints.

Not only is it important for students to receive instructor feedback, but as the online facilitator, it is essential to learn what most hinders and/or enhances the learning process to be able to continue to improve the teaching-learning collaboration. Asking students to provide feedback, not just in the basic summative teacher evaluation but in a formative suggestion for enhancement and improvement, is worthwhile. The author of this paper has received plentiful feedback, usually on the structure of the online course, such as: "I like the way you structure the class and your involvement," while another student wrote:

I just wanted to tell you that I really have enjoyed being part of your class and have gathered knowledge that will help me in my future classes. I have also seen that you have asked for feedback, so I think that what helped me learn the most was when you would connect what we were learning in class to your own experiences as a nurse.

Giving students an opportunity to share their thoughts can provide valuable insight into how one educates and continues to grow professionally. Student feedback regarding this authors' online class process has encouraged this authors' continued development of e-learning courses. Given the positive feedback this author has received, not only have the learning outcomes been achieved but the continuation of enhancing e-learning promotes the collaborative engagement that this author has set out to achieve. Meeting students' learning needs, through creative and innovative teaching/learning pedagogical processes, is the goal of any educator.

Being able to have an active presence, guide students through the learning process, and enhance their comprehension of the content while fostering a sense of proactive and student-centered learning is the true essence of teaching. Committing to this ideal in an online course requires organization, structure, clearly defined boundaries, and transparent criteria for students to achieve success.

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