


2016

Nursing Distance Learning Course Comparison of Assignments and Examination Scores

Jennifer Mundine
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Jennifer Mundine

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

Nursing Distance Learning Course Comparison of Assignments and Examination Scores

by

Jennifer Mundine

MSN, University of Phoenix, 2010

BSN, University of Texas at Arlington, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

July 2016

Abstract

Nursing programs have embraced distance learning in their curricula, but discussion is ongoing about course assignments and grading criteria to increase examination scores in nursing distance learning courses. Because course examinations are a predictor of success on the postgraduate licensing examination (NCLEX-RN), the purpose of this study was to determine whether differences existed in student examination scores between nursing distance learning courses with and without points aligned to assignments. The theoretical framework was Knowles's theory of andragogy, which highlights adults' motivation and self-direction to succeed. The quantitative causal comparative study included a convenience sample of 164 students to compare archival data of 4 examination scores between 2 nursing distance-learning courses. Data analysis included an independent-groups one-tailed *t* test. No significant differences were found between the 2 courses, suggesting that students do not achieve higher examination scores with course points aligned with course assignments. Nursing administrators and faculty in nursing programs with a distance learning component will benefit from the findings of this study. Findings may be used to draft, revise, and implement assignment criteria and point alignment for nursing distance learning courses. Social change will occur when nursing distance learning faculty use problem-solving and critical thinking assignments, including case studies, discussion boards, group assignments, concept mapping and NCLEX-RN style testing in each nursing distance learning course. Because point alignment to course assignments do not significantly improve examination scores, implementation of problem-solving and critical thinking assignments is necessary to promote student learning and examination success.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to Elizabeth Ables. Elizabeth was my best friend for over 35 years and was an avid advocate for education. She was an educator for special needs children for most of her career, and excelled in building confidence and knowledge in her students each day. Elizabeth's life was cut short before pursuing her graduate degree, but she would be excited about my completion of my educational goal.

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Section 1: The Problem

Distance learning has been a growing format for delivery of nursing courses in established nursing program curricula. “Distance learning is considered a promising approach to replace or supplement conventional nursing instruction” (Du et al., 2013, p. 167). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2007) requires that all nursing program distance learning courses meet the same rigor and academic standards as face-to-face delivery nursing courses to meet accreditation criteria. Because of rigor and paralleling academic standards, students in nursing distance learning courses are part of a well-planned curriculum for academic progress and graduation approved by the state board of nursing and accrediting agencies. However, questions remain regarding distance education and best practices that contribute to higher examination scores in nursing distance learning.

The local area college (LAC, pseudonym) nursing program is part of a local area college district (LACD). The LACD has a distance learning virtual campus that manages distance learning in all disciplines within the district. The virtual campus trains all distance learning faculty and ensures all federal, state, and local requirements are met when each distance learning course is developed and implemented. The LACD virtual campus also provides ongoing training, technology updates, and professional development for faculty teaching in the distance learning environment. To ensure continual compliance with distance learning requirements, the LACD virtual campus audits distance learning courses during each semester. The LACD does not require specific student assessment, faculty feedback, or grading criteria for distance learning

courses; however, because distance learning in nursing must meet additional requirements set forth by the state board of nursing and accrediting agency, a distance learning committee was developed by the director of nursing at the LAC to address ongoing issues in nursing distance learning courses and recommend solutions to the problems for distance learning nursing faculty.

The LAC nursing programs offer face-to-face courses, along with distance learning options for each course throughout the program. The LAC associate's degree nursing program curriculum is an outcomes-based curriculum driven by disease processes; the program's course objectives and content increase in complexity based on Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Bloom's taxonomy "emphasizes the use of the framework to plan intended learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment methods to achieve alignment of cognitive categories" (Su & Osisek, 2011, p. 321). Students receive an associate's degree of nursing (ADN) upon meeting all course outcome requirements for graduation and are eligible to take the national licensure examination (NCLEX-RN) to be a registered nurse (RN). The theoretical framework for learning in the nursing program is constructivism, which focuses on active learner-centered experiences and the construction of new knowledge (Sasikam, Sang-arun, & Pohthong, 2010). Evaluation of student learning progress each semester is based on Bloom's taxonomy cognitive domain using knowledge and application (Weigel & Bonica, 2014). Students are evaluated each semester for each course, whether face to face or distance learning, based on meeting the

student learning outcomes on Bloom's taxonomy learning hierarchy expectations through course content examinations.

The nursing distance learning committee at the LAC researched and discussed literature to determine best practices for learning activities and evaluation of nursing students enrolled in distance learning courses. The literature review indicated that case studies are an effective learning method for nursing students to build knowledge and apply that knowledge in the patient setting (D'Antonio, 2014; Utterback, Davenport, Gallegos, & Boyd, 2012; Yousey, 2013). Other learning and evaluation methods including discussion boards, group assignments, and quizzes are used in LAC nursing distance learning courses (Dacanay, Vaughn, Orr, Andre, & Mort, 2015; Reed, 2013). The adult complex nursing distance learning course at the LAC includes case studies, group activities, and discussion boards as learning activities. The activities serve as learning tools for the students to enhance knowledge based on constructivist practices because nursing is far more than memorization (Brandon & All, 2010). All of the distance learning courses provide weekly assignments for students to facilitate learning, but the adult complex distance learning course did not have points aligned with assignment completion in the fall semester of 2014. The adult complex distance learning course scoring structure was changed the following spring semester of 2015 so course points aligned with assignment completion. Neither semester of the course required completion of the assignments. The committee wondered whether point alignment with assignments contributed to higher examination scores because nursing students are motivated and self-directed to be successful (AG, RM, GM, JG, BC, LT, & MB,

pseudonyms, personal communication, February, March, & April, 2014). Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to ensure confidentiality of personal communication. In Section 1, I present the definition of the problem, the rationale, definitions, significance, guiding research question, literature review, and implications of the study.

Definition of the Problem

Student success in distance learning as defined by the LACD is 70% or higher on examinations and course grades in college courses. The LAC nursing program also uses 70% or higher on examination and course scores as the definition for success, but recognizes that students who make higher scores are more likely to pass the NCLEX-RN examination (Simon, McGinniss, & Krauss, 2013). In distance education, students are self-motivated learners (Azaiza, 2011; Davis, 2015). Harper and Ross (2012) found that marginal students will excel when given responsibility and guidance toward their success, and adult students like having an end in sight. Because nursing students are self-motivated and responsible for their success, discussions occurred within the committee whether the assignments within the nursing distance learning courses should have points aligned to encourage student completion, provide additional motivation, and create higher examination scores. The committee agreed that assignments are essential to provide guidance and promote student learning, but varied in opinion regarding course point alignment for assignments and the relationship to student learning and success (AG, RM, GM, JG, BC, LY, & MB, personal communication, February, March, & April, 2014).

Many nursing distance learning faculty (GM, NK, & LT, personal communication, April 25, 2014) at the LAC stated they believed course points should be

derived from examinations only, whether the course is face to face or distance learning. However, all nursing distance learning faculty stated they believed distance learning courses should have assignments as part of the course work, but varied in opinion regarding whether assignments points should be aligned with course assignments (RM, AG, & MB, personal communication, April 25, 2014). Even though discussions frequently referred to other nursing programs' point alignment in distance learning as justification for having points aligned with assignments in the LAC nursing program, the distance learning committee wondered what best practice to improve learning is and examination scores in the LAC nursing program. Because distance learning educators use assignments throughout the courses to provide formative evaluation of the students, faculty questioned whether points associated with assignments lead to improved outcomes on course examinations because the student would get instructor feedback on submitted course assignments.

The argument for examination scores as a basis for determining course grades is based upon the NCLEX-RN. Each student must take this examination after completion of nursing school to gain licensure to practice. "To ensure public protection, boards of nursing/regulatory bodies (BONs/RBs) require a candidate for licensure/registration to pass an exam that measures the competencies needed to perform safely and effectively as an entry-level nurse" (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2014, para. 2). Because LAC Nursing Program examinations are formatted to reflect the NCLEX-RN examinations, many faculty who teach nursing at the LAC believe the nursing program should evaluate students with only NCLEX-RN based examinations. With a growing

number of nursing students using distance learning instead of face-to-face instruction, understanding techniques for successful learning and whether points aligned with assignments helps students pass the NCLEX-RN examination was essential to the LAC nursing program.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Among the distance learning courses in the LAC nursing program, the adult complex distance learning course includes case studies, group activities, and discussion boards as the assignments in the courses, and included varied course grading criteria over two semesters. In the fall semester of 2014, the adult complex distance learning course did not require completion or have point alignment to assignments, but assignment completion was strongly recommended for students to receive faculty feedback (Local Area College RNSG 1443 Course Information Document, 2014). In the following spring semester of 2015, the adult complex distance learning course did not require completion of assignments for the course; however, assignments were aligned to course points. In the adult complex distance learning course for both semesters, feedback by the faculty member was only given if the student turned in the assignment, and feedback was based on the rubric (BM, personal communication, April 30, 2014). Pecka, Schmid, and Pozehl (2014) discussed the use of rubrics by faculty to clarify course standards and grading expectations, to objectively evaluate the student's ability to think critically, and to facilitate communication between the faculty and student for each course assignment. All faculty teaching distance learning courses for the LAC nursing program stated they

gave feedback to students who turned in assignments through established rubrics and comments within the learning management system (AG, RM, GM, JG, BC, LT, & MB, personal communication, February, March, & April, 2014).

One cohort of students in an adult complex distance learning course without point alignment to assignments expressed frustration with the number of assignments within nursing distance learning courses, and explained that they completed the assignments only if they believed they benefited from the content being studied. The students stated the assignments did not contribute overall to their examination success, and they did not read faculty feedback if they did turn in an assignment. These students also expressed that they searched and used various ways to learn content based on their individual needs (CM & LH, personal communication, November 2014). Another group of nursing distance learning students in a course without point alignment to assignments expressed satisfaction with receiving faculty feedback on assignments and felt it helped them to be more successful on examinations. These students expressed that they would also use other resources to contribute to their examination success (KS & AP, personal communication, April 2015). The distance learning committee established best practices for assignments with rubrics and faculty feedback but was unable to determine whether points aligned with course assignments influenced student success on course examinations and whether students were self-directed and motivated to complete the assignments without the external motivation of point alignment to enhance their learning.

Evidence of the Problem From The Professional Literature

In reviewing multiple nursing programs course information documents (CID) for distance learning courses offered, I noted variations in assignments, requirements for completion of assignments, and course point alignment of assignments and examination grading. At the University of Texas at Arlington (2014), a review of multiple CIDs for the distance learning academic partnership nursing program revealed multiple assignments were used for learning experiences throughout the course, the assignments were a percentage of the total grade, but completion of assignments was not required to pass the course. The University of Florida College of Nursing (2014) distance learning course NUR 3069C CID stated that health shadowing activities are a percentage of the course grade, activities can be made up within 48 hours after the due date for half the activity score, but activity completion is not required for course completion.

Participation points are 10% of the grade in the course, but participation is not required to complete the course and will not count for a portion of the grade if the student does not receive a comprehensive examination score of 75% in the distance learning nursing course at Palm Beach State College (2014). The CID also encourages students to participate and complete course assignments to enhance examination success (Palm Beach State College, 2014). Nursing distance learning CIDs list assignments in each course and encourage student participation and completion of these assignments to promote student success on examinations, but do not require assignment completion to achieve completion in the course.

The professional literature at the LAC and other nursing programs (CIDs) indicates variations in course point alignment with assignments in distance learning nursing courses. Course assignments are used in each distance learning course, whether at the LAC or other nursing programs. However, within the distance learning courses at the LAC, courses vary in point alignment with assignments. Variations in point alignment with assignments occur in other nursing distance learning programs, as well. The purpose of this study was to determine whether significant differences were evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance-learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance-learning course without course point aligned to assignments.

Definitions

The following definitions were used in this study:

Case study: A case study is complex patient scenario in which students must write patient assessment data, nursing actions, reason for patient symptoms, medications to administer to the patient, interpretation of patient laboratory data, nursing interventions, and prioritization of nursing interventions (Gibbs, Trotta, & Overbeck, 2014).

Course information document (CID): The CID is a document, also known as a syllabus, which provides course specific guidelines, readings, assignments, examination, and scoring in each nursing course.

Course points: Course assignments (case study, discussion board, group work) in the fall semester of 2014 without point alignment and the spring semester of 2015 with point alignment is the independent variable to be used in this project.

Discussion boards: Discussion boards are an asynchronous learning tool that promotes critical thinking and in-depth student engagement (Philippi, Schorn, & Moore-Davis, 2015).

Examination scores: Examination scores of the adult complex nursing distance learning course in the fall semester of 2014 without alignment of course points and spring semester of 2015 with alignment of course points is the dependent variable used in this project.

Group assignments: Group work or collaboration refers to assignments that improve communication and teamwork, which is essential in the health care environment (Adelman & Nogueras, 2013).

National Council Licensure Examination- Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN): The NCLEX-RN examination is taken by a student after completion of a state accredited nursing program to gain registered nurse licensure to practice the profession of nursing.

Outcomes-based curriculum: An outcomes-based curriculum demonstrates nursing student competency in designated areas, such as meeting course outcomes by showing competency in meeting course objectives (Kim, 2012).

Self-directed learning: Self-directed learning is a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Levett-Jones, 2005).

Student success: Student success at the LAC is defined by a score of 70% or higher on examinations (LAC Student Handbook, 2014).

Significance

This quantitative project was conducted to determine whether significant differences were evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. The LAC nursing program varies in course point alignment with assignments in distance learning courses; therefore, evaluating the influence of course point alignment was needed to create a blueprint for nursing distance learning courses in the future. Student learning and success in nursing distance learning courses is the goal of the LAC nursing program. Other local universities have aligned points with each student assignment in the distance learning nursing courses, but do not require the students to complete the assignments. Additionally, because adult learners, especially nursing students, are self-directed and motivated to be successful, nursing distance learning courses may not need course points aligned with assignments to increase course examination scores.

Because course examinations are written based upon the NCLEX-RN blueprint, student success within distance learning nursing courses provides the opportunity to achieve passing rates for graduated nursing students taking the NCLEX-RN examination. A rubric with points for learning assignments in distance learning courses is another mechanism for instructors to evaluate student learning. The Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN, 2013) requires evaluation of student learning with

other evaluation tools besides the single program outcome of passing NCLEX scores.

With success in the course and NCLEX-RN, the nursing students will meet the safety and competence expectations in providing nursing care within the community. “To ensure public protection, boards of nursing/regulatory bodies (BONs/RBs) require candidates for licensure/registration to pass an exam that measures the competencies needed to perform safely and effectively as an entry-level nurse” (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2014, para. 2). Positive social change occurs when best practices for student learning and success in nursing distance learning influence nursing curricula, program outcomes, and higher competency in the science and art of practicing nursing.

Guiding/Research Question

The research question guiding the project addressed whether assignments with or without point alignment in nursing distance-learning courses optimize learning and promote higher examination scores. Nursing distance learning courses are primarily asynchronous learning environments, and completion of assignments ensures students receive instructor feedback according to the rubric and other comments provided in the learning management system for student consideration and additional guidance of learning. The research question helped determine whether significant differences in student examination scores were evident in a distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. Because examination success is directly tied to NCLEX success and RN licensure, this determination was essential to enhance content delivery and course expectations in nursing distance learning courses.

The research question (RQ) that guided this project study was as follows:

RQ: Are significant differences evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments?

H_a: Examination scores are significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments.

H₀: Examination scores are not significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature showed there is no research on assignment grading and its relationship to student success or higher examination scores. In review of andragogy and self-directed learning, the literature supports that adult learners are motivated to succeed. Students, especially nursing students, are found to be self-directed and will seek out opportunities to learn information to meet personal goals. Motivation literature supports that adult learners are motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, and those who are more intrinsically motivated perform better than those motivated by extrinsic reasons. Nursing students are considered motivated, self-directed learners by the amount of work and success in prerequisite courses required to be accepted into a nursing program. The literature review showed that nursing programs, along with other educational disciplines, have a wide variety of requirements for assignments, point

alignment, and grading criteria in distance learning courses. Specifically, in nursing distance learning courses, examination scores are a high percentage of the course grade and assignments have little to no impact on the overall course grade. Additionally, some nursing distance learning courses do not allow assignment points to be given in the course if the student does not have a cumulative grade of passing for the course from course examinations. However, literature does support the need for assessment and feedback to enhance student success and engagement in the course. This section presents a review of the literature and consists of andragogy, self-directed learning and motivation, and assessment and feedback.

Organization of the Literature Review

The strategy used to research and gather information on grading, point distribution, andragogy, self-directed learning and motivation, and assessment and feedback consisted of searching databases from Walden University Library and the University of Phoenix Library. Databases included CINAHL, Medline, ProQuest, ERIC, and Sage. The following key words were searched in the databases: *motivation, points, assignments, grading, distance learning, nursing, student success, self-directed learning, andragogy, and adult learning*. A combination of the words was also used in the search engines to find peer-reviewed literature from 2010 to 2015. The literature review is organized below according to andragogy, self-directed learning and motivation, and assessment and feedback.

Knowles's Theory of Andragogy

Knowles's theory of andragogy is based on unique adult education methodology (Knowles, 1970). According to Knowles (1978), theory separates pre-adult learning (pedagogy) from adult learning (andragogy). Childhood learning progresses through developmental stages based on the principles of pedagogy (Knowles, 1978). Adults also go through developmental stages throughout life; however, adults in various stages of development are independent and "have the capacity to assume one's internal directedness" (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010, p. 41). Knowles initially made four assumptions (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) including independence or self-directedness, having a reservoir of experiences to create new knowledge, readiness to learn, and immediate application with performance centeredness (Darden, 2014). Andragogy is the theoretical basis of this study to explore adult learning assumptions of previous experiences, motivation and self-direction, and the possible relationship between assignment point alignment and examination success in nursing distance learning courses.

Andragogy: Previous Experiences

The LAC nursing curriculum is based upon the theory of constructivism, which involves building upon previous experiences and creating new knowledge (Sasikam et al., 2010). Course material in the adult complex distance learning course is built upon previous foundations courses in nursing and adult health content. Knowles's theory of andragogy establishes the difference between child and adult learning. One major assumption of andragogy, stated by Chan (2010), includes use of previous experiences to

build new knowledge, which aligns with the LAC curriculum. Chan used these assumptions to provide applications for use in teaching and learning. Chan recommended the use of andragogy in the context of the learner's environments in which they have previously created experiences. Cahmetzky (2015) investigated how to engage students in the online environment. Cahmetzky recommended that student engagement be increased with course material that is practical and can be woven into the student's life experiences. In the same way of engaging students through life experiences, assignments can be structured and used within the course to build upon previous experiences, with faculty as facilitators of adult learning.

To study the needs of adult learners, Schultz (2012) performed a case study on a newly implemented certification of online instructors based on andragogy concepts. One concept that was important was allowance of adults to learn in relation to their own experiences and putting content in practical learning applications. The adult complex distance learning course has a clinical experience attached to the course, which provides hands-on experience of content learned with the distance-learning course. Schultz found through the case study that instructors were considered facilitators in the online environment, not teachers of content and concepts. Case studies, debates, and group discussions are recommended to facilitate student reflection of previous experiences in context of the current material being learned by the student (Palis & Quiros, 2014). Even though assignments in distance learning build upon course objectives, Bloom's taxonomy, and prerequisite courses, students may have experiences that do not contribute positively to learning.

When considering the assumption of building on previous experience, faculty must consider barriers to adult learning that could include previous negative experiences. Clapper (2010) identified that adult learners may have barriers to learning, such as previous bad experiences. Focusing on assessments, not the final evaluation, to improve practice and learning in nursing programs is the key to optimize adult learning and overcome potential barriers adult learners may face (Clapper, 2010). Despite barriers to learning from previous negative experiences, students can overcome these barriers. In keeping with adult learning concepts, Leigh, Whitted, and Hamilton (2015) developed a decision matrix for preceptor experiences for students with an RN license, but who were seeking a bachelor's degree in nursing. Learning experiences were based upon andragogy concepts and were formatted based on the student's individual needs for learning from previous experiences. Students reported purposeful learning experiences when given choices for direction of the learning experience.

Adult learners are able to build upon previous life experiences and apply new learning based upon those previous experiences, as described above. The LAC curriculum is based upon constructivism, which involves learning from past experiences students gained as nursing students. Assignments that include discussion boards, case studies, and group work within the distance-learning courses of LAC employ Knowles's andragogy of learning by building upon previous learning experiences of students.

Andragogy: Self-Directed Learning and Motivation

Motivation and self-directed learning are other assumptions of andragogy. In a qualitative study, Hassankhani, Aghdam, Rahmani, and Mohammadpoorfard (2015)

studied the relationship between learning motivation and self-efficacy of nursing students. Hassankhani et al. used a competency and motivation questionnaire with nursing students enrolled in the local university. Hassankhani et al. found that student motivation was a predictor for students meeting outcomes by achieving objectives of nursing school. Rose (2011) sought to understand nursing student motivation to succeed in nursing programs through a literature review. Rose noted that each nursing student might have intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to succeed. Intrinsic motivation may include a student wanting to succeed because he or she always wanted to help people. Similarly, Bengtsson (2010) noted that most of the students were intrinsically motivated to succeed in their course of study because they had a deep desire to help others and care for people. In a study of nursing and medical students to understand their motivation to attain knowledge, Bengtsson performed a qualitative study that included interviews, semi-structured questions, and content analysis. Themes noted in the analysis included extrinsic factors of motivation such as faculty inspiration, student inspiration, and course organization that contributed to success and self-directed learning (Bengtsson, 2010). Intrinsic factors included the student's view of his or her ability and interest to succeed, and the overall motivation to succeed contributed to self-directed learning during the program of study (Bengtsson, 2010). Even though Bengtsson noted intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in students, nursing students are considered highly motivated by intrinsic factors.

Nursing students are considered motivated and self-directed due to the high expectations when entering a nursing program. Students are likely to direct learning

experiences on their individual learning styles. Kim and Frick (2011) performed a quantitative study of self-directed learning in the distance-learning environment. Kim and Frick surveyed over 300 self-directed distance learners and found the motivation for learning occurred before and in the beginning of the course. Learners reported higher motivation and self-directed learning when they had a clear purpose for the course. Navidad (2013) examined nursing student motivation to learn math during a nursing program. Navidad gave a pretest and posttest, along with a motivation survey to students in a nursing math course. Navidad allowed students to develop their own learning strategies. Navidad found significant improvement in academic achievement and motivation for the nursing students who were able to develop their own learning strategies. Songunro (2014) stated that motivation “sustains and evokes effective learning” (p. 22). Using a mixed-methods approach, Songunro used focus discussions, one-on-one interviews, and Likert scale survey questions to investigate motivation factors in students. Intrinsic factors were found to be the defining predictors for motivation, along with self-directedness (Songunro, 2014). Sussman and Dutter (2010) examined scores and assignments from students enrolled in the same course and compared the results of face-to-face and online learners. Both groups were evaluated on a writing assignment and their final grade point average for the semester. Online students who had higher grades reported having strong discipline, task organization, and time management. Adult learners were found to have intrinsic motivation, self-direction, and time management, as well as motivation when understanding why they are learning content; however, other factors such as personal beliefs, self-regulation, cognitive engagement,

and the desire to make higher grades can also be considered motivation.

Parlett (2012) expanded the understanding of motivation by studying associate's degree and bachelor's degree nursing students. Using the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire, a valid and reliable motivation tool, Parlett examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of nursing students. No significant difference was found in students' reported motivation between the associate's degree nursing students and bachelor's degree nursing students. Parlett concluded through the overall study results that students with self-efficacy, personal learning beliefs, and self-regulation motivation have success in the nursing programs. Joo, Andres, and Shearer (2014), through qualitative comparison of courses and comparison of grades in two courses with varied assignments, found that cognitive engagement in the online environment motivates students the most to achieve success in courses. In studying the relationship between self-regulated learning and student success in distance learning, Radovan (2011) surveyed students in the distance learning environment. The survey explored motivation during exams and frequency of assignments. Radovan looked at the average of students' grades, which showed that students with intrinsic motivational goals achieved higher test scores. Valuing learning and ability to successfully accomplish academic goals was also found in students with higher examination scores. Self-regulation was found to be essential for student success in the distance learning environment for the students surveyed. Although the literature shows that motivation and self-direction aligns with student success, some barriers may exist to motivation of adult learners.

Endler, Rey, and Butz (2012) studied distance learning course difficulty with student motivation. Students with low expertise, anxiety, and motivation tend to do more poorly than other students in the course. Also, students with high expertise and low course difficulty develop boredom, which can lead to low learning success. Time constraints to complete assignments or study content for examinations may also provide a barrier for learning with adult students. This barrier could possibly affect motivation and self-direction. Nursing students reported through a Likert scale, log keeping, and final questionnaire of the number of hours spent on studying of content and critical thinking in a nursing program, was an average of 128.4 hours per course (Snelling, Lipscomb, Lockyer, Yates, & Young, 2010). Snelling et al. found that those with employment or other commitments have less time to study for a course. Even though barriers existed to motivation, in a quantitative *t* test comparison with a significant difference (*p*-value 0.039), Cavanaugh, Lamkin, and Hu (2012) found students turned in online course assignments in a timelier manner when prompted and the instructor sets expectations. Cavanaugh et al. did not examine success on the assignments, but did recognize that students may be more motivated and self-directed when prompted to complete assignments.

Motivation and self-direction in adult learning, a concept of Knowles's theory of andragogy, is found throughout the literature as discussed above. Nursing distance learning students must be more self-directed since asynchronous learning occurs at various times and days throughout the course. The ability for LAC nursing students to stay organized and time management is addressed through course outlines with

assignment due dates and times provided to the students by faculty the first week of the nursing distance learning course. With motivation and self-direction, literature review found that nursing students have intrinsic motivation and are self-directed to succeed; however, those students with anxiety and low difficulty assignments may not have motivation and self-direction within courses. Providing direction to the students by nursing distance learning faculty at the LAC motivates the students to overcome anxiety; however, extrinsic motivation may occur through points aligned with completion of the assignments within the course. If extrinsically motivated, combined with intrinsic motivation for success, course points aligned with assignments could promote self-direction of higher level of learning with the course.

Assessment and Feedback

Feedback to students is considered core competency for nursing faculty. Wood, Moskovitz, and Valiga (2011) explored faculty feedback to students in the online learning environment. The feedback must be prompt, of quality, and encourage student-faculty interaction. Personalized instructor feedback to students was found to engage learners and promote critical thinking. Wood et al. surveyed students about the impact of audio feedback and found that students preferred audio to written comments and faculty feedback impacted student learning. Wheeler, Anstey, Lewis, Jeynes, and Way (2014) found through qualitative research that students' confidence improved through distance learning in regards to caring for older persons, through instructor feedback. Assignments included reflection, case studies, and patient assessment within the course. Faculty

feedback promotes higher learning, but students need feedback from faculty to promote timely assignment completion, as well.

Cavanaugh et al. (2012) discussed that instructors must have strategies and tools to achieve students' personal goals. Cavanaugh et al. conducted research through a quantitative approach with a control group to determine assignment completion, and thus faculty feedback, of students who did and did not have assignment checklist to guide timely completion. Because distance learning is mostly asynchronous learning, students who may be inexperienced or have little experience in distance learning may not remember to complete assignments. Developing a checklist for students to keep up with assignments, instructor feedback, and assignments expectations are essential for students to achieve their academic goals. With organization and timely assignment completion, faculty must also provide timely feedback through rubrics and assignment expectations to students to promote higher learning.

Reed (2013) studied best practice for new faculty in nursing distance education. Reed found that frequent assignments were necessary to give feedback to students often. Frequent assignments allow the student to have guide learning. Another tool for student success is timely feedback to the student. If the students know the guidelines for feedback, they will anticipate the feedback within that time frame from the instructor. Shipman, Roa, Hooten, and Wang (2012) discovered that students must have guidance and clear expectations to evaluate their performance. Additionally, clear expectations, as those given through rubrics, provide the students feedback and prepare them for nursing.

In general education adult courses, Mo and Zhao (2012), studied evaluation methods effective in distance learning. A grading structure within the course with ongoing formative evaluation methods, engages students and increase student learning. Online discussions were thought to increase critical thinking of the students. Discussions, along with other assignments were used to increase interaction, enhance learning, and allow students to receive instructor feedback. Mo and Zhao found that students had better course performance with ongoing assignments and feedback from the instructor and other students. Using a survey with a Likert scale, students rated the importance of feedback in relation to learning within the online environment (Baleni, 2015). In this study, Baleni implemented an immediate feedback system in online learning, along with discussion forums with feedback from peers to evaluate students' learning perception with the feedback. Baleni discovered students rated the feedback importance as high as it relates to shaping studying and learning for further concepts to be introduced within the online course.

Faculty assessment and feedback are factors found in the literature view to promote student success and learning. Faculty of the nursing distance learning courses at the LAC provide feedback to students at least weekly, if not more often, when students submit assignments. Assignments without course points aligned may not be turned in by students; therefore, assessment of learning and faculty feedback cannot occur. However, assignments with course points aligned, students are able to receive course points, along with getting faculty feedback regarding the assessment, which may produce higher learning.

Implications

After completion of nursing school, students take the NCLEX-RN examination to obtain registered nurse licensure to practice the profession of nursing. Understanding adult learning, self-direction, motivation, and the impact of assessment and feedback for nursing students in distance learning courses is essential to maximize success throughout the nursing program. Distance learning is still an evolving delivery method of nursing courses and still requires rigorous planning and implementation to meet course and program outcomes. This study may provide data to assist distance-learning faculty and programs where distance learning is a course delivery option for nursing students a foundation to build requirements and expectations for the course, along with optimizing learning to produce higher examination scores. Anticipated findings of the study and data analysis may support andragogy concepts of motivation and self-directedness, along with faculty assessment and feedback, of students and that points aligned with course assignments may have higher examination scores. The project deliverables for this study could have included a policy recommendation position paper regarding nursing distance-learning course point alignment with assignments based upon course examination scores and study statistical results. In Section 3 I will discuss the project, which is included in Appendix A.

Summary

Section 1 introduced the problem of point and no point alignment with course assignments and which contributes to higher examination scores for students. This section included the definition of the problem, evidence of the problem at the local level,

rationale for the study, definitions, significance of the project, guiding research questions, review of the literature, and implications for social change. In this study I investigated student examination scores in nursing distance learning courses with or without point alignment to assignments. Understanding if students are adult learners, motivated and self-directed to succeed and complete assignments with or without course point alignment could provide a blueprint for future distance learning nursing courses to maximize student success. Section 2 of this project will discuss the methodology of a quantitative casual comparative study design. This project examined student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments.

Section 2: The Methodology

In Section 1, review of the literature supports that nursing students are motivated and self-directed learners. The literature also supports instructor feedback as important for student learning. No literature was found to support or not support course point alignment and higher student examination scores. The purpose of this study was to determine whether significant differences were evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments. This section presents the research design, setting and sample, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, assumptions, limitations, scope and delimitations, and participants' rights.

Research Design

A quantitative approach was needed to examine student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments. A causal comparative quantitative research design was most appropriate for this study because it allowed me to compare nursing distance learning student groups without manipulation of the independent variables of a course with and without points aligned to assignments in the fall semester of 2014 and spring semester of 2015 adult complex distance learning course (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Because nursing students must meet the same requirements for entry into the nursing program, such as grade point average, a Health Education System, Inc. (HESI) score of 75 or

above, and completion of core science courses, these extraneous variables were controlled. Additionally, the adult complex distance learning course occurs in the last semester of the program, giving the nursing students previous experience with taking NCLEX-RN reflective course examinations, which was also a controlled extraneous variable. Other quantitative research designs were not appropriate because no manipulation of the setting and variables occurred, and causal comparative research is used to compare groups with different experiences and to measure how the experiences affected the groups (Lodico et al., 2010). Because the purpose of this study was to examine student examination scores using archival data, and the nursing students who took the examinations had graduated from the nursing program and were no longer accessible, qualitative designs were not appropriate because I could not collect data through observations, interviews, or document analysis (Lodico et al., 2010).

Setting and Sample

Setting

The LAC is an associate's degree nursing program (ADN). Students accepted into the nursing program must meet prerequisite requirements that include biology and anatomy courses, a grade point average above 3.0, and a score of at least 75 on the HESI (LAC, 2014). After being accepted into the nursing program, students are enrolled in core nursing courses. Each course has multiple face-to-face delivery options and one distance learning delivery option. Students are not enrolled in a distance learning course if they prefer a face-to-face delivery. Students included in this study had successfully passed previous courses and were in the last semester of the nursing program, the adult

complex course. After successful completion of the adult complex semester, the students were eligible to take the NCLEX-RN examination for registered nurse licensure. Student participants had already taken and completed the adult complex distance learning courses for the fall and spring semester to be analyzed, and therefore were not recruited for the project study.

The adult complex distance learning nursing course is 16 weeks in length. The adult complex distance learning nursing course has five examinations and 12 varied assignments (discussion board, case study, and group work). The first four examinations are adult complex content related, and the last examination is a program cumulative examination developed by HESI. The adult complex distance learning nursing course does not require students to complete assignments to receive course credit in any semester. The fall semester of 2014 of the adult complex distance learning course did not have course point alignment, but the spring semester of 2015 did have course point alignment with assignments. Both semesters of the adult complex distance learning course were delivered through a learning management system, included rubrics for student feedback, and had objectives built upon Bloom's taxonomy. The adult complex distance learning nursing course's four examinations contained 50 questions, 100% being at application or above level of Bloom's taxonomy.

Sample

Students in fall semester of 2014 and spring semester of 2015 of the adult complex distance learning nursing courses were adult learners and met all requirements of entrance into the nursing program. It was unknown which students had previous

distance learning courses in adult education or the nursing program; however, students had the option to transfer out of distance-learning nursing courses into face-to-face delivery within the first 10 days of the beginning of the course. Because the adult complex distance learning course is the last semester of the nursing program, all students in the courses had experience with nursing examinations that were reflective of the postgraduate NCLEX-RN examination.

The sample of students was considered a convenience sample because the data were archival in nature and the enrollment into the studied courses had already occurred. The fall semester of 2014 course had 19 students, and the spring semester of 2015 course had 22 students. Each student took four examinations; therefore, the fall semester of 2014 course examination scores from the nursing distance learning course with no course points aligned to assignments had 76 examination scores, and the spring semester of 2015 course examination scores from the nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments had 88 examination scores. As a result, the total sample size was 164 ($N = 164$) examination scores. Because data analysis in this study involved an independent-groups one-sided t test, Cohen power primer analysis was used to determine the required sample size for this data analysis method. When using a one-tailed test, the level of significant difference to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) can be $\alpha = .05$ when using the $\alpha = .1$ two-sided test on the power primer table (Cohen, 1992). The statistical significance ($\alpha = .05$) is the low probability that scores will be observed if the null hypothesis is true. The effect size (ES) “identifies the strength of the conclusions about group differences or about the relationship among variables” (Creswell, 2012, p. 195). In

a t test, the ES is the difference between independent means (d) with the population standard deviation (Cohen, 1992). A medium ES is set as .50. “The statistical power of a significance test is the long-term probability, given the population ES, α , and N of rejecting the null hypothesis (Cohen, 1992, p. 156). Power is standardly set as .80. Using Table 2 of Cohen’s power primer analysis for this study, $\alpha = .05$, power of .80, and medium ES (.50), each group (n_1 and n_2) requirement size must be 50 or $N = 100$ (Cohen, 1992). With the study sample size of $N = 164$ and required sample size of $N = 100$, the sample size for this study was sufficient for reliable and valid statistical results.

Instrumentation

Archival data were used for statistical analysis. The archival data of the four examination scores were included on two spreadsheets, one for the fall semester of 2014 and one for the spring semester of 2015. The NCLEX-RN style examinations were given throughout each of the semesters to evaluate student learning based upon course content. Each examination was given electronically under a proctored setting to protect academic integrity. The questions on each examination were statistically analyzed to ensure validity and reliability by the faculty member of record for the course. Because statistical analysis of distractors, Kuder-Richardson Formula 20s (KR20), and overall percentage of success scores on each question item indicated the examinations to be valid and reliable in the fall semester of 2014 examinations, the same examinations were given during the spring semester of 2015. The fall semester of 2014 examinations included 50 questions worth a total score of 100 percentage points. The spring semester of 2015 examinations included 50 questions worth a total score of 95 percentage points. The points for the

spring semester of 2015 examinations were less due to the addition of course points aligned with assignments in the course. For this study, the spring semester of 2015 examination scores were converted from 95 percentage points to 100 percentage points for accurate comparison of examination scores and means analysis.

Archival data were kept on spreadsheets that were stored at the end of each semester for each course on the LAC nursing program private database server. Each faculty member for each course downloaded end of semester grades from the learning management system (including all assignments and examinations with points aligned in the course), and turned these into the course coordinator who submitted the spreadsheets to the information technology director for the LAC nursing program. The information technology director stored the documents electronically to meet federal and state requirements of data storage. Paper data were stored in a locked file cabinet, and did not include student names or other identifiers to protect participants' identities. Electronic data were stored on a personal computer that is password protected.

Data Collection

The learning management system used at the LAC retains student records for each course. The adult complex distance-learning data were retrieved from the information technology director after approval of the director of nursing at the LAC. A data use agreement and letter of cooperation were signed by the institution. Only the grade book from the learning management system, which included assignment completion in the spring semester of 2015, points aligned with assignments in the spring semester of 2015, and examination scores from the fall semester of 2014 and spring semester of 2015 were

requested with names of the students excluded. Students who withdrew from the course by Week 12, per the LAC district guidelines, were not included in the data used for comparison and analysis.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, v22.0) was used to analyze the data and examine statistical significance. An independent-groups one-tailed t test was used to analyze data. This statistical analysis was appropriate because it was used to compare the performance of two independent groups, the course with point alignment and the course without point alignment to assignments (nominal data), to evaluate significant differences in examination scores (interval data). The significance ($\alpha = .05$) was divided in half to determine the independent-groups one-tailed t test. Once the archival data were obtained, the raw scores were entered into SPSS and frequencies run to confirm the integrity of the data and to identify and address any missing data issues. Sample sizes variation (n_1 and n_2) can be considered equal if the larger group is not more than one and one half times larger than the smaller group (Morgan, Leech, Gloeckner, & Barrett, 2004). The mean of examination scores from a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned was compared with the mean of examination scores from a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. Data analysis did not include comparisons of the HESI program examination and the cumulative grades of students because the HESI was not developed by the LAC and the spring semester cumulative student grades included assignment points. To answer the

research question, an independent-group one tail t test was run, using $\alpha = .05$ for level of significance.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

The students in this project were nursing students who met the requirement for entry into the nursing program. I assumed that students wanted to earn higher examination scores because their goal was to pass the NCLEX-RN examination after graduation to practice professional nursing. Students had the ability to drop the adult complex distance-learning course by Week 12 if extraneous circumstances or current cumulative grade was less than 70%; therefore, I assumed the students wanted to be successful in the course. Inability to determine the students' previous experiences in distance-learning course prior to taking the adult complex distance learning nursing course was a limitation to this project. Lack of experience in a distance learning environment may have affected student success and assignment completion in each course. I am a nursing distance learning faculty member with experience in nursing distance learning courses, which may have created a limitation of the study due to my previous experiences and personal views on nursing distance learning courses. The scope of the study is applicable to nursing programs with distance-learning course components, as well as other college programs with rigorous entrance requirements.

Delimitations included the comparison of only two semesters of the adult complex distance learning courses. The adult complex distance learning course was chosen for this study because the faculty member, assignments, rubrics, and course expectations remained the same for the fall semester of 2014 and spring semester of

2015. The boundaries decreased extraneous variables that could affect the study. Other nursing distance learning courses at the LAC had varied instructors, expectations, or rubrics. The adult complex distance learning course at the LAC was chosen for the study due to ongoing discussion with the distance learning committee and questions regarding points with assignments and best practice in the distance learning committee at the LAC. My ability to study the assignment completion between the two courses was limited due to record keeping by the learning management system; therefore, assignment completion was not included in this study. I assisted in answering the question at the local level presented by the LAC distance learning committee, which addressed whether significant differences were evident between student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments and scores from a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments. Using results from this study, the LAC will be able to identify the best practice for promoting higher examination scores, which in turn could lead to more nursing graduates who pass the NCLEX-RN examination to practice professional nursing.

Protection of Participants Rights

I submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application at the LAC and the project study was found to be exempt from IRB approval and oversight under 45.CFR46.101(b). This study was exempt because information used for the project study did not include student identifiers. When retrieving the data from the information technology director, student names and gender were not included. The Walden University IRB approved the study and ensured student protection prior to data

collection. The Walden IRB approval number for this study is 01-26-16-0343477. Paper information obtained is locked in a file cabinet and electronic information is stored on a personal computer with password protection.

Data Analysis Results

For fall semester of 2014 ($n_1 = 76$), four examination scores were run for overall mean and standard deviation. The same process was used for spring semester of 2015 ($n_2 = 88$). Table 1 displays the mean and standard deviation for four examinations for fall semester of 2014 ($n_1 = 76$) and spring semester of 2015 ($n_2 = 88$).

Table 1

Group Statistics of Four Examinations for Fall Semester of 2014 and Four Examinations for Spring Semester of 2015.

Semester	Mean	Standard Deviation
Fall 2014 ($n_1 = 76$)	.8228	.05783
Spring 2015 ($n_2 = 88$)	.8233	.04209

A one-tailed independent t test was calculated to determine if the mean student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments was significantly higher than the mean student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments. No significant difference was found, $t(39) = .029, p > .05$. The mean of student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments ($M = .8233, SD = .04209$) was not significantly higher than mean student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignment ($M = .8228, SD = .05783$). Table 2 displays the results of the independent one-tailed t test results.

Table 2

Fall Semester of 2014 and Spring Semester of 2015 Overall Scores (N = 164)
Independent One-Tailed t test.

t (a = .05)	df	Sig (1-tailed)(p > .05)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
.029	39	.4885	.00045	.01565	.03120	.03211

The null hypothesis (H_0) that examination scores were not significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments was not rejected.

Conclusion

In Section 2, I discussed the research design, setting and sample, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, data analysis results, assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitation, and protection of participant rights. The methodology of a quantitative causal comparative study design was used for this study. This data analysis showed no significant difference between student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments (rejecting H_a), and the null hypothesis (H_0) was not rejected. Based upon data analysis results, a policy recommendation position statement deliverable was developed and will be presented to administration and faculty at the LAC, as well as other local schools of nursing (see Appendix A). Other

nursing programs may consider statistical findings and project deliverables for use at their learning institutions. A larger nursing distance learning course size study could be conducted based on the findings of this study and expand to assignment completion and instructor feedback. In Section 3 of the project, I address the project, description and goals, rationale, review of the literature, implementation, project evaluation, implications for social change, and conclusion.

Section 3: The Project

In Section 2, I described the causal comparative methodology used in the study. Data analysis, including an independent-group one-tailed t test with a significance of $\alpha = .05$, was used to determine whether significant differences were evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. A significant difference was not found and the null hypothesis (H_0) was not rejected ($p > .05$). This section presents the project description and goals, rationale, review of the literature, implementation, project evaluation, implications for social change, and conclusion.

Description and Goals

The project, based upon the rejection of the alternative hypothesis (H_a), is a policy recommendation. This policy recommendation, found in Appendix A, includes a background of existing policy, summary of analysis, literature review, recommendations, and examples of critical thinking assignments to be used in nursing distance learning courses. Based on the results that examination scores were not significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments, a policy recommendation is appropriate because nursing distance learning course assignment expectations, along with course point criteria, should be changed to reflect that course assignments with point alignment does not contribute to higher examination scores for nursing students. The review of the literature in Section 1

indicated that adult learners build upon previous experience, are self-directed and motivated, and perform best with assessment and instructor feedback. The goal of the project is to provide policy change recommendations that include use of critical thinking assignments based upon the adult learning tenet of problem-centered learning, well-structured rubrics, and NCLEX-RN style questioning.

Rationale

The problem, described in Section 1, was that nursing programs with distance learning components have varied grading criteria, including point alignment to assignments, no point alignment to assignments, and points aligned with assignments only when the student meets the success expectation (70-76%) on all course examinations. The LAC distance learning committee often questioned whether point alignment with assignments was necessary for higher examination success. The LAC nursing distance learning committee acknowledged that assignments are necessary in distance learning courses. A policy recommendation is not only appropriate for the LAC, but for other nursing programs with distance learning components because the data indicates that assignments with course point alignment do not contribute to higher examination scores, and the grading structure of a course does not need to include point alignment with assignments.

Review of the Literature

A policy recommendation addresses the problem of course assignments and grading criteria to increase examination scores in nursing distance learning courses. Because data analysis indicated no significant differences in student examination scores

in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments, this supports that nursing students learn based upon previous experiences, are self-directed, and are self-motivated to learn without an external motivator of course points aligned with assignments, as discussed in the literature review in Section 1. Review of the literature supports use of critical thinking assignments based on the adult learning tenets of problem-centered learning, well-structured rubrics, and NCLEX-RN style questioning. A policy recommendation based on the literature review is essential to create the blueprint for nursing distance learning courses and to maximize learning and examination scores of nursing students.

Organization of the Literature Review

The strategy used to research and gather information on policy recommendation, critical thinking, problem-centered learning, case studies, discussion boards, group assignments, NCLEX-RN, NCLEX-RN style testing, and distance learning consisted of searching databases from Walden University Library and the University of Phoenix Library. I searched the following databases: CINAHL, Medline, ProQuest, ERIC, and Sage. The following key words were used in the search: *policy recommendation, position statement, case studies, discussions, group assignments, rubrics, distance learning, nursing, student success, problem-centered learning, andragogy, NCLEX style testing, evaluation, and critical thinking*. A combination of the words was also used in the databases to find peer-reviewed literature from 2010 to 2016.

Policy Recommendation

According to Wesleyan University (2016), a policy recommendation addresses a problem and presents a solution to the problem through evidence of support. The University of Victoria (2016) noted that a policy statement includes advice, based on evidence of support, given to an audience with the authority to make decisions. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) provides policy recommendations for advancement of the nursing profession, which include subrecommendations to assist in guiding policy implementation and change (Spetz et al., 2014). Recommendations by the IOM are made based on evidence and provide a basis for nursing organizations to create action plans to implement a new policy or make necessary changes. Spetz et al. (2014) developed dashboards and created research studies for additional evidence based on the policy recommendations made by the IOM to advance the nursing profession. A policy recommendation is the most appropriate project deliverable for this study because it offers a solution to the problem of nursing distance learning course assignments, point alignment, and higher examination scores to improve the outcomes of nursing students taking the NCLEX-RN after graduation. Because data analysis in Section 2 showed no significant differences in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments, a policy recommendation using the problem-centered tenet of adult learning theory (Wang, 2011), use of rubrics, and NCLEX-RN style testing promotes learning and student examination success.

Problem-Centered Learning

Knowles (1950) argued that adults should react to causes of problems, not symptoms or behavior. According to the problem-centered tenet of adult learning, critical thinking assignments in distance-learning are essential for adult learning. Su and Osisek (2011) provided an example of problem-centered learning, as opposed to content-based learning, for adults. Using Bloom's taxonomy, Su and Osisek described a heart failure patient and used sequential teaching to enhance problem-solving, otherwise known as critical thinking. According to Su and Osisek, the nurse may use interventions based on the knowledge of heart failure to solve the problems related to heart failure. Critical thinkers gather information from many sources and determine a solution to a problem (Chan, 2013). Problem-centered learning is essential to maximize learning in adults. Other assignments that promote problem-centered learning and critical thinking include discussion boards.

Sowan and Jenkins (2013) studied students in distance learning and hybrid courses by using a qualitative survey that included questions regarding active and collaborative learning. Sowan and Jenkins found that discussion boards that engage students in higher order thinking promote learning. When surveying students in distance learning courses, O'flaherty and Timms (2015) found that students rated discussion boards and case studies as the best learning features in the course that promoted deeper learning. Hodges and McGuinness (2014) developed guidelines for distance learning courses with an on-campus component to promote learning and increase student satisfaction. Discussion boards were categorized to encourage participation, and prompt

faculty feedback allowed prevented confusion in the discourse. Faculty were required to monitor and facilitate the discussion boards weekly. Student reported greater satisfaction with the course and learning after the guidelines were implemented. Discussion boards are effective critical thinking assignments within a distance learning course; however, faculty must monitor and direct discussions to meet the course objectives and promote higher level learning. Another alternative to promote problem-centered learning and critical thinking is course group assignments. Group assignments have also been found to promote professional collaboration.

Schmer, Ward-Smith, and Peterson (2011) evaluated group assignments in distance learning to meet learning outcomes. Data were collected through student interviews about group assignments. Students reported that group assignments promoted collaborative learning, which is imperative in health care, helped them meet the course objectives. D'Agustino (2012) found that students were more satisfied and learned more in distance learning environments that were interactive and encouraged participation. When students lacked the proper skills to perform or participate in distance learning environments, however, the students felt that group assignments were not helpful (Soon, 2011). Sowan and Jenkins (2013) also found that distance learning students reported a negative attitude toward group assignments. Group assignments are effective distance learning assignments; however, they should be limited within the course to minimize student dissatisfaction. In conjunction with discussion boards and group assignments, concept mapping within distance learning courses promotes higher level learning by encouraging problem-solving and critical thinking.

Passmore, Owen, and Prabakaran (2011) implemented concept mapping in a nuclear medicine distance-learning course. Students received training during orientation about how to use concept mapping. In comparison to students in distance learning courses that did not include concept mapping, Passmore et al. found significantly higher examination scores in the distance learning nuclear medicine course that used concept maps. Harrison and Gibbons (2013) surveyed students about the use of concept maps to enhance learning and critical thinking. Students reported negative feelings about using concept maps when the faculty member did not explain and demonstrate their purpose; however, students reported that concept maps were beneficial to learning and application of theoretical knowledge in a practical way. Using a control and experimental group, Atay and Karaback (2012) used care plans and concept maps to determine the effect on critical thinking in nursing students. Atay and Karaback found significant differences on students' pre- and posttest scores using concept maps compared to those using care plans. As a result, Atay and Karaback concluded that concept maps improve critical thinking of students. Concept mapping as a distance-learning assignment promotes critical thinking, reflection, and application of knowledge.

Knowles's (1970, 1978) andragogical tenet of problem-solving in adult learning is achieved through several types of assignments in distance learning courses. One assignment includes discussion boards and case studies, which promote higher order thinking with faculty facilitation. Through group assignments, students report critical thinking and team collaboration; however, multiple group assignments become

cumbersome and frustrate students. Lastly, concept mapping stimulates problem-solving and critical thinking and achieves higher success in distance learning students.

Rubrics

Rubrics are used to communicate a desired level of achievement and learning for an assignment and are a valuable part of formative feedback for students (Urios et al., 2015). Urios et al. (2015) found that faculty and student validation of the rubric is required to analyze the value of the rubric being used. Reed (2011) found through a literature review that group work within distance learning courses is needed to promote collaboration and teamwork, along with student accountability for their work within the group. Few rubrics are found to be used for student evaluation of peers in group distance learning courses. In a quasi-experimental study, Howell (2014) found that rubrics are needed for formative evaluation of learning, but should not be the only evaluation tool for measuring success. In developing a rubric for scientific writing, Timmerman, Strickland, Johnson, and Payne (2011), used curriculum and course outcomes, along with faculty input to create a rubric that was validated over a 3-year period. Using an interrater reliability tool, faculty were able to use the generalized rubric for scientific writing assignments. In a qualitative survey study of students' views on rubrics, Gezie, Khaja, Chang, Adamek, and Johnsen (2012) found that benefits to learning outweighed limitations of rubric use. Gezie et al. concluded that well-developed rubrics add to formative assessment and are useful tools for student success. Development of a rubric for group activities, use of well-developed rubrics on assignments, along with faculty and

student evaluation of the tool promotes problem-based learning and positive academic outcomes.

Well-developed rubrics can be time consuming to create; however, they are useful tools for student feedback on problem-based and critical thinking distance learning assignments. Rubrics can vary from a generalized expectations and grading guide, but can also be detailed for each assignment to provide clear assignment expectations to students. When students know the expectations of performance for assignment completion, along with valuable faculty feedback, problem-solving and critical thinking assignments maximize student success.

NCLEX-RN Style Testing

Okunji and Hill (2014) surveyed nursing students regarding nursing examinations. Students reported greater satisfaction through survey with computerized versus paper and pencil nursing examinations. Students surveyed stated that computerized testing better prepared them for NCLEX-RN examination, along with the ability to view rationales for missed items immediately after the examinations. The ability to review the rationale aided the students continued learning and problem-centered learning. Bristol (2012) has evidence-based suggestions for success for nursing students. One of the suggestions is to allow students to take NCLEX-RN style questions to promote critical reasoning. Alignment of content with the NCLEX-RN blueprint, along with NCLEX-RN preparation and NCLEX-RN style testing is one intervention to improve initial NLCEX-RN pass rates for graduates in the nursing program (Koestler, 2015). One intervention used by a university to improve NCLEX-RN pass rates was using critical thinking,

NCLEX-RN style testing in the nursing program (Carr, 2011). Faculty should give input based upon the answers given by the students to allow for higher order thinking and NCLEX-RN success.

NCLEX-RN style questioning that aligns with distance learning course content and assignments, is an essential evaluation of problem-solving and critical thinking. Along with assignments within distance learning courses, the ability for students to correctly answer NCLEX-RN style testing prepares the student for the NCLEX-RN licensure examination taken after completion of nursing school. NCLEX-RN style testing allows students to review rationale for correct answers and distractors, promoting further learning and application of knowledge.

Project Implementation

Implementation of the policy recommendation will occur after completion of the project. The intended audience for the policy recommendation included directors, deans, assistant directors, assistant deans, and faculty of nursing programs with a distance learning component. The policy recommendation will be sent to the LAC and other local nursing programs for review, then to other national nursing programs with distance learning components. Contact information will be included in the policy recommendation information for any questions the organizations may have regarding the study and policy recommendations. An overview of the policy recommendation will be provided for a quick view of the study findings and policy recommendations based upon the study results (see Appendix B).

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

As a former faculty member of the LAC, professional relationships remain with the LAC administration and distance learning faculty. The professional relationships are an existing support, along with the ability to take the policy recommendation directly to the distance learning committee at the LAC. Being previously a part of the research committee at the LAC, the study and project can be disseminated to the research committee for publication in the college journal. As an adjunct faculty at another local university, the study results and policy recommendation will be disseminated through lead faculty currently teaching distance learning nursing courses at the university. Many peer-reviewed nursing journals are available for submission of the study, in accordance to publisher guidelines, for dissemination of the study findings and project deliverable. Additionally, submission of an abstract and presentation application to a nursing educator conference can disseminate the information to a variety of faculty nationwide.

Potential Barriers

Ability to read and review the study in entirety due to time limitations by other faculty and administration is a potential barrier to dissemination of findings. This barrier will be approached by providing a quick view of the study (see Appendix B). Publishing in peer-reviewed nursing journals can be difficult and time consuming for researchers; however, strict adherence to submission guidelines will be beneficial for overcoming this barrier.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The project deliverable of a policy recommendation will be disseminated to the LAC nursing program director, and with approval from the nursing program director, to the distance learning committee at the LAC within one month of approval of the study and project. Submission to the LAC research committee for college publication will also occur within the month after approval. Other local universities will receive the information within three months of completion of the study and project. Dissemination of the policy recommendation will occur to other national nursing programs with a distance learning component within six months of completion of the project. Immediately after approval of the study and project, submission to peer-reviewed nursing journals will be made for publication to other nursing colleges and universities. Submission of abstracts and application of facilitating the results of the study at a nursing professional conference is essential for dissemination. Abstract and application of facilitation of sessions at a professional nursing conference will begin within three months of completion of the study and project.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

The students in the study do not have responsibilities since archival data was used and the students are no longer at the LAC. The role of the researcher is to disseminate the study results and project effectively and efficiently. The information must be provided quickly with the ability to review more in a short amount of time, due to time constraints that many faculty and administration encounter.

Project Evaluation

The policy recommendation will be evaluated through formative evaluation, initially at the local level. A formative evaluation is appropriate for the policy recommendation since the policy is recommending an intervention (problem-based assignments, use of rubrics, and NCLEX-RN style testing) in response to the data results that found examination scores are not significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments (DeStephano, Crawford, Jashi, and Wold, 2014). In order to evaluate if the policy recommendation was effectively implemented and if potential barriers to recommended interventions existed, a formative evaluation of nursing programs with a distance learning component is most appropriate to evaluate.

After dissemination of the study findings, a formative evaluation of policy recommendation implementation will occur. An Internet search of local and national nursing programs will determine which programs contain a distance learning component, need dissemination of the study findings and policy recommendation, and require formative evaluation of policy implementation. The survey will include questions about the importance of the study results and policy recommendation, implementation progress, barriers to progress, and an area for comments (Baker, Playle, Nelson, Lovell, 2010). The survey will be distributed through the Internet as an e-survey for convenience of responders. The goal of the formative evaluation of the policy recommendation is to identify barriers to implementation, determine gaps in information that may be needed by

the nursing programs to implement the policy, and determine if the policy recommendations are being successfully used by distance learning faculty. Appendix C contains the *e*-survey to be distributed.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

The nursing distance learning committee at the LAC questioned if course points aligned with assignments would improve student examination scores. Because the literature review in Section 1 and data analysis in Section 2 found that significantly higher differences are not evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments, a policy recommendation is the mechanism to create social change within the nursing program at the LAC. The policy recommendations including revision of current policy of course points aligned with assignments but including critical thinking assignments within the course to promote student learning promotes social change within the nursing program through improvement of student outcomes.

Additionally, other local nursing programs with a distance learning component will benefit from the policy recommendation and create social change. Social change occurs as a result of the data analysis and policy recommendations in several ways. Directors, deans, assistant directors, and assistant deans of nursing programs are able to assimilate the policy recommendation to distance learning faculty for input and review. Distance learning faculty are able to make evidence based decisions on the blueprint of

the nursing distance learning courses. As the blueprint for the distance learning course is revised and literature based interventions are being used in each nursing distance learning course, students are able to maximize learning and success within the course. When nursing students perform better on course examinations that are reflective of the post-graduation NCLEX-RN examination, students are able to pass the NCLEX-RN and enter the profession of nursing immediately after graduation from the nursing program. Since the IOM (2010) calls for an increase in nurses to meet the demands of a growing healthcare population and high amounts of currently practicing nurses are leaving the profession, effectively prepared nursing students who pass the NCLEX-RN are able to benefit the community through provision of safe, effective, and competent patient care while practicing the science and art of nursing.

Far-Reaching

Through literature review in Section 1, it was discovered that grading for course assignments in nursing distance learning courses differed in each nursing program. Since data analysis in Section 2 showed that significantly higher differences are not evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance-learning course without course point aligned to assignments, a policy recommendation is the mechanism to create social change within nursing programs with a distance learning component. Social changes far-reaching are the same as the social change at the local level and can impact nursing distance learning course blueprints at a national level.

Conclusion

Section 3 included the project deliverable of a policy recommendation. This section provided description and goals, rationale, policy recommendation, review of the literature, project implications, project evaluation, and implications for social change. The project deliverable of a policy recommendation is based on the data analysis in Section 2 that found no significant difference between student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments. In Section 3 of the project, I addressed the project, description and goals, rationale, review of the literature, implementation, project evaluation, implications for social change, and conclusion. Section 4 includes the project strengths, recommendations for remediation of limitations, scholarship, project development, leadership and change, reflection on the importance of the work, implications, applications, and directions for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

In Section 3, I described a project deliverable of a policy recommendation. Because no significant differences were found in data analysis comparing student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments and scores from a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments, a policy recommendation was chosen as the project deliverable most appropriate for this study. In Section 3, I provided the policy recommendation's description and goals, rationale, review of the literature, project implications, project evaluation, and implications for social change. This section presents project strengths, recommendations for remediation of limitations, scholarship, project development, leadership and change, reflection on the importance of the work, implications, applications, and directions for future research.

Project Strengths

I studied the problem of varied course point alignment with assignments in distance learning courses. Data analysis showed that examination scores were not significantly higher in a nursing distance-learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. Results indicated that adult learners, as described by Knowles's (1970, 1978) theory of andragogy, are self-directed, are internally motivated, and build on previous experiences with instructor feedback. Data analysis showed that examination scores were not significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a

nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. Findings indicate that adult nursing students seek information to be successful without the external motivator of points aligned to assignments. Because nursing course examinations are reflective of the NCLEX-RN examination, including evidence-based learning assignments to promote problem-solving and critical thinking skills is necessary for examination success. A strength of the project is that policy recommendation implementation at the local and national level within nursing programs may help improve curriculum and program outcomes, provide insight into assignments that encourage problem-solving and critical thinking, and prepare nursing students for success on the NCLEX-RN.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

A remediation of limitations of the project includes timely implementation of the policy due to nursing faculty time constraints. Rubric development, confirmed through literature review, is timely, requiring faculty interrater reliability and further modifications. Distance learning nursing faculty must also have the desire to improve the course assignments, and some faculty members may have limitations with time and may not desire to make changes if the course is currently successful with the assignments within it. As a former nursing distance learning course faculty member and member of a distance learning committee, I have had many discussions regarding point alignment and had knowledge of questions that some distance learning faculty ask regarding student examination success. Because I am not a part of a current distance learning committee or community of distance learning faculty, I do not know if other nursing faculty are

concerned with point alignment with distance learning course assignments. This research may not be of interest to faculty who have not had concerns regarding point alignment and NCLEX-RN examination success.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Alternative approaches to the project include a training approach or evaluation report. The ability to provide training to distance learning faculty would have immediate impact on distance learning nursing courses. Initially, planning for training would include developing objectives of the training. The curriculum for the training would be in alignment with the objectives for the training. The training would include an overview of the study findings and literature review and include development of assignments for use within nursing distance learning courses that promote problem-solving and critical thinking to increase students' examination scores. The training approach would be held over a two-day period at the college itself (brick and mortar setting). The stakeholders of the training would be nursing distance learning faculty and potentially administrators of the college. An evaluation report for distance learning courses is another approach to address the problem. Assignments used in the nursing distance learning course could have been evaluated for rigor in accordance with the literature review. Evaluation of rubric use, as well as depth of faculty feedback, could have been recommended for the project.

Scholarship

Through the study and policy recommendation development, I was able to increase understanding of academic research and data analysis. Even though small

projects involving quantitative research were part of the doctor of education program, application of quantitative methods, including proper data collection and analysis, was intensive and a new experience. In this study, sample size to produce valid and reliable results was essential, which gave insight into the importance of using the proper sample size. This study and project allowed me to align research methodology with research questions and theoretical foundation to have a purposeful study that promoted social change. Using scholarship for a policy recommendation involved an extension of the literature review process. With specific searches related to the policy recommendation, I was able to find data to support the policy recommendation and sample assignments that are used in the policy recommendation.

Project Development and Evaluation

The policy recommendation and evaluation required precision, accuracy, and clear recommendations and interventions. After I completed the literature review for the policy recommendation, the process of development, while time consuming, did not involve confusion or doubt of what the policy recommendations should include. Evaluation of the policy recommendation and implementation will be timely and will require professional persistence for further input from directors, deans, assistant directors, assistant deans, and nursing faculty.

Leadership and Change

Even though I am a small part of nursing academia, change at the local and national level can occur as a result of my study. I have the ability to lead the research in nursing distance learning programs to provide best practices to improve nursing program

outcomes. As a potential academic leader, my ability to collect proper data, analyze the data, and consider the implications is imperative to the leadership role. My leadership will promote change without bias and will allow other stakeholders to give input regarding future research that can affect nursing distance learning.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

Scholarship is the most essential piece of the research process. Developing scholarly searches is the foundation of the research process, including identifying the research question and the type of research study to be conducted. Scholarly searches must be thorough and precise. Over time, I was able to read through abstracts to include or eliminate articles as a part of the study and policy recommendation development. Also, understanding qualitative and quantitative research methods helped me determine whether studies had valid and reliable results to be used as a part of the study and policy recommendation.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

Application of study findings through policy development is essential for a practitioner. Given my previous experience with accreditation analysis, writing, and application of accreditation standards, application of study findings was not a new process for me. The difficulty with being a practitioner is continual follow-up with local and national nursing distance-learning programs to evaluate barriers to policy implementation. However, practicing further scholarship and leadership in a practitioner role can continue in nursing academia.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Developing rubrics as a project developer was lengthy and required review of Bloom's taxonomy, constructivism, and literature sources. Additionally, I determined that case studies, group projects, and discussion boards should promote problem-solving skills and should extend beyond knowledge to the application and analysis level. In the policy recommendation, I noted that NCLEX-RN style testing must remain at the individual academic level because specialized training and review are necessary to meet the NCLEX-RN blueprint. I discovered through development of the samples presented in the policy recommendation that accuracy and scholarship are necessary for policy implementation to occur.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

I sought to determine whether significant differences existed between student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared with scores from a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments. Because data analysis indicated no significant difference, the nursing distance learning course blueprint could be changed to reflect the study findings. The policy recommendation provides support for designing nursing distance learning course assignments without the external motivation of course points to encourage problem-solving approaches that promote student examination success. Because nursing course examinations are reflective of the NCLEX-RN that nursing students take after graduation to practice the profession of nursing, social change may occur at the local and national level.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The implications for the study and policy recommendation indicate that adult learners are self-directed, are motivated, build upon previous experiences, and are problem-solvers. This implies that adult learners are not motivated by external factors such as course points aligned with assignments. Further research may include an examination of the relationship between assignment completion within a distance learning course and examination scores. This study may also be extended for further research in other degree programs with admission requirements similar to nursing programs. The study results apply to nursing programs with distance learning components, but could be extended to other adult learning programs. The policy recommendation creates social change through provision of evidence-based assignment activities that promote problem-solving, a tenet of adult learning theory.

Conclusion

In Section 4, I discussed project strengths, recommendations for remediation of limitations, scholarship, project development, leadership and change, reflection on the importance of the work, implications, applications, and directions for future research. Findings of this study indicate that points aligned with course assignments do not lead to higher performance on course examinations. The study validates the tenets of Knowles's theory of andragogy in that adults are self-directed, are internally motivated, build upon experiences, and are problem-solvers. The policy recommendation includes nursing distance learning assignments that encourage problem-solving and critical thinking, which may lead to higher examination scores.

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Appendix A: The Project

Policy Recommendation

Assignments Within Nursing Distance Learning Courses

Distance learning is a component of many nursing programs and is an increasing popular learning option of adult learners of many nursing programs locally and nationwide. Distance learning is an alternative teaching and learning method to substitute traditional teaching methods (Davis, Amewonye, & Gross, 2015). An outcome of each nursing program is that graduates will pass the NCLEX-RN promptly after completion of the program to enter the profession of nursing. With distance learning increasing in nursing programs, understanding and use of evidence based components of a nursing distance learning course is essential for course development, assessment, and NCLEX-RN reflective higher examination scores.

Background

Nursing distance learning courses are used at LAC, an ADN RN nursing program in the Texas region. The nursing distance learning committee at LAC often discussed which interventions created higher examination scores for students. Some faculty expressed that students should receive points aligned with assignments completed in the distance learning course, while others expressed concerns that points aligned with assignments did not increase learning, and overall examination scores. Even though all faculty agreed that assignments within the course were necessary, no evidence was found in the literature that supported alignment of course points with the assignments and if points created higher examination scores in nursing students. Using Knowles's theory of

andragogy as the theoretical foundation of the study, literature review showed that students are self-directed, motivated, and will build upon previous experience. Literature review of nursing distance learning courses course information documents (CID's) indicated point alignment with course assignments varied in each program, locally and nationwide. The study conducted sought to answer the question if significantly higher differences were evident in student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments.

The adult complex distance learning nursing course that was used in the study is 16 weeks in length. The adult complex distance learning nursing course has five examinations and 12 varied assignments (discussion board, case study, and group work). The first four examinations are adult complex content related and the last examination is a program cumulative examination developed by HESI. The adult complex distance learning nursing course does not require students to complete assignments in order to receive course credit in any semester. The fall semester of 2014 of the adult complex distance learning course did not have course point alignment, but the spring semester of 2015 did have course point alignment with assignments. Both semesters of the adult complex distance learning course were delivered through a learning management system, use rubrics for student feedback, and had objectives built upon Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). The adult complex distance learning nursing course four examinations contained 50 questions, 100% being at application or above level of Bloom's taxonomy.

Summary of Research Findings

Students in fall semester of 2014 and spring semester of 2015 of the adult complex distance learning nursing courses were adult learners and met all requirements of entrance into the nursing program. It is unknown which students had previous distance learning courses in adult education or the nursing program; however, students had the option to transfer out of distance learning nursing courses into face-to-face delivery within the first 10 days of the beginning of the course. Because the adult complex distance learning course is the last semester of the nursing program, all students in the courses had experience with nursing examinations that are reflective of the post-graduate NCLEX-RN examination.

The sample of students was a convenience sample because the data are archival in nature and the enrollment into the studied courses had already occurred. The fall semester of 2014 course had 19 students and the spring semester of 2015 course had 22 students. Each student took four examinations, therefore, the fall semester of 2014 course examination scores from the nursing distance learning course with no course points aligned to assignments had 76 examination scores ($n1 = 19 \times 4 = 76$) and the spring semester of 2015 course examination scores from the nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments had 88 examination scores ($n2 = 22 \times 4 = 88$). The actual sample size was ($n1 = 19 \times 4 = 76 + n2 = 22 \times 4 = 88$) is 164 ($N = 164$) examination scores.

For fall semester of 2014 ($n1 = 76$), four examination scores were run for overall mean and standard deviation. The same process was used for spring semester of 2015

($n_1 = 88$). Table A1 shows the mean and standard deviation for four examinations for fall semester of 2014 ($n_1 = 76$) and spring semester of 2015 ($n_1 = 88$).

Table A1

Group Statistics of Four Examinations for Fall Semester of 2014 and Four Examinations for Spring Semester of 2015.

Semester	Mean	Standard Deviation
Fall 2014 ($n_1 = 76$)	.8228	.05783
Spring 2015 ($n_2 = 88$)	.8233	.04209

A one-tailed independent t test was calculated to determine if the mean student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments was significantly higher than the mean student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course without course point aligned to assignments. No significant difference was found, $t(39) = .029, p > .05$. The mean of student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments ($M = .8233, SD = .04209$) was not significantly higher than mean student examination scores in a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignment ($M = .8228, SD = .05783$). Table A2 shows the results of the independent one-tailed t test results.

Table A2

Fall Semester of 2014 and Spring Semester of 2015 Overall Scores (N=164) Independent One-Tailed t test.

t ($\alpha = .05$)	df	Sig (1-tailed)($p > .05$)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
.029	39	.4885	.00045	.01565	.03120	.03211

In conclusion, the data analysis found examination scores were not significantly higher in a nursing distance learning course with course points aligned to assignments compared to a nursing distance learning course without course points aligned to assignments.

Recommendations Based on Literature

Due to varied point alignment of assignments in distance learning courses in nursing programs through literature review, a policy recommendation is being made to address assignments that improve examination scores that are reflective of the NCLEX-RN examination. Since the study found no significant difference in examination scores with points aligned to course assignments, assignments within the courses that promote problem-solving, critical thinking is essential and points aligned with assignments do not improve student outcomes. Literature review showed that case studies, discussion boards, group work, concept maps, use of rubrics, NCLEX-RN style testing are assignments that promote problem-solving in adult learners.

Case studies and discussion boards must promote problem-solving and critical thinking. Sowan and Jenkins (2013) studied students in distance learning and hybrid

courses by using a qualitative survey that included questions regarding active and collaborative learning. Sowan and Jenkins found that discussion boards that engage students in higher order thinking promote learning. When surveying students in distance learning courses, O'flaherty and Timms (2015) found that students rated discussion boards and case studies as the best learning features in the course that promoted deeper learning. A sample case study, case study rubric, discussion board, and discussion board rubric are provided in Appendix A1 – A4.

Rubrics that accompany assignments require specific and clear expectations. Rubrics must also be a leveled evaluation based upon Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). Rubrics are used to communicate a desired level of achievement and learning for an assignment and are a valuable part of formative feedback for students (Urios et al., 2015). Urios et al. (2015) found that faculty and student validation of the rubric is required to analyze the value of the rubric being used. Reed (2011) found through a literature review that group work within distance learning courses is needed to promote collaboration and teamwork, along with student accountability for their work within the group. Few rubrics are found to be used for student evaluation of peers in group distance learning courses. In a quasi-experimental study, Howell (2014) found that rubrics are needed for formative evaluation of learning, but should not be the only evaluation tool for measuring success. Rubric samples are provided in Appendix A2 and Appendix A4.

Group work is necessary to promote collaboration, but students find too much group work as frustrating and unsatisfactory for learning if done too often. Rubrics should also be included for expectations and evaluation of group work, and could include

peer evaluation. Schmer, Ward-Smith, and Peterson (2011) evaluated group assignments in distance learning to meet learning outcomes. Data were collected through student interviews about group assignments. Students reported that group assignments promoted collaborative learning, which is imperative in health care, helped them meet the course objectives. D'Agustino (2012) found that students were more satisfied and learned more in distance learning environments that were interactive and encouraged participation. When students lacked the proper skills to perform or participate in distance learning environments, however, the students felt that group assignments were not helpful (Soon, 2011). Group work should be limited to one or two distance learning course assignments. Appendix A5 includes a sample of group work in a nursing distance learning course.

Concept maps move knowledge into application, but concept mapping assignments are not universal and may vary due to faculty preference. Harrison and Gibbons (2013) surveyed students about the use of concept maps to enhance learning and critical thinking. Students reported negative feelings about using concept maps when the faculty member did not explain and demonstrate their purpose; however, students reported that concept maps were beneficial to learning and application of theoretical knowledge in a practical way. Using a control and experimental group, Atay and Karaback (2012) used care plans and concept maps to determine the effect on critical thinking in nursing students. Atay and Karaback found significant differences on students' pre- and posttest scores using concept maps compared to those using care plans. As a result, Atay and Karaback concluded that concept maps improve critical thinking of students. Concept mapping as a distance-learning assignment promotes critical thinking,

reflection, and application of knowledge. A sample concept map is located in Appendix A6.

Lastly, NCLEX-RN style testing should be integrated throughout each nursing distance-learning course. Bristol (2012) has evidence-based suggestions for success for nursing students. One of the suggestions is to allow students to take NCLEX-RN style questions to promote critical reasoning. Alignment of content with the NCLEX-RN blueprint, along with NCLEX-RN preparation and NCLEX-RN style testing is one intervention to improve initial NCLEX-RN pass rates for graduates in the nursing program (Koestler, 2015). One intervention used by a university to improve NCLEX-RN pass rates was using critical thinking, NCLEX-RN style testing in the nursing program (Carr, 2011). Faculty should give input based upon the answers given by the students to allow for higher order thinking and NCLEX-RN success.

Case studies, discussion boards, group work, concept maps, and NCLEX-RN style testing are recommended to be addressed for use in nursing distance learning course policies. The variety of assignments and the ability to promote problem-solving and critical thinking are important to incorporate throughout each nursing distance learning course to improve student examination scores. Assignments also need to have rubrics to provide clear expectations and promote faculty feedback to maximize application of knowledge.

Summary

To meet the demands for professional nurses and meet the needs of non-conventional students, many nursing programs are using distance learning as course

options within their nursing programs. Assignments within a nursing distance learning course are essential for student formative evaluation, faculty feedback to students, and facilitated learning. Assignments must also promote problem-solving and critical thinking to meet the course objectives and program outcomes. Assignments, however, do not need course points aligned with them to produce higher examination scores on NCLEX-RN reflective course examinations. A nursing distance learning policy should include the type of assignments, assignment criteria to meet the problem-solving and critical thinking elements, and faculty requirements for use of assignments. Course points aligned with assignments does not need to be included in the course blueprint or distance learning policy because adult learners are self-motivated and points do not promote a higher-level of learning and application of knowledge.

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Appendix A1: Case Study: Peri-Operative Nursing

Ms. Client is a 45 year female, peri-menopausal and is scheduled for a total abdominal hysterectomy. She has a history of anemia associated with bleeding uterine fibroids and ovarian cysts. Her mother has a history of ovarian cancer. The client has had multiple surgeries before, which include an appendectomy 3 years ago, cholecystectomy 5 years ago, and pulmonic valvotomy for pulmonic valve stenosis 35 years ago. The recovery from her appendectomy was complicated by a MRSA infection of the wound that took 6 months to heal. She is a type 2 diabetic on metformin every day. Her A1C is 6.0. She is a past smoker of 1ppd for 20 years and quit 6 months ago. She did have bronchitis 3 times per year until she quit smoking. She has recently seen her physician for heart palpitations and was found to have occasional PVC's under stress or with too much caffeine consumption, but has no issues with the pulmonic valve. Her allergies include penicillin, cephalosporins, and meperidine. She has brought her husband with her to the procedure and is stating she is anxious about the procedure.

Now Consider the Following:

1. What surgical setting would you expect Ms. Client to have her surgery in? How long do you expect her recovery to be? What type of surgery is this (elective, urgent, emergency)?
2. What concerns do you have Mrs. Client? What puts her at risks for post-operative complications?

Based Upon Your Concern/ Information of the Client:

1. What detailed assessment data do you want to gather? Why do you want to have this assessment data? How will it determine your care, planning, and teaching for Mrs. Client?
 - a. laboratory
 - b. diagnostic
 - c. focused system assessments
 - d. culture considerations
 - e. psychosocial issues
 - f. anesthesia
 - g. medications
 - h. nutritional intake
 - i. informed consent
 - j. medical or surgical history
2. What about “time out” and SCIP (what considerations for antimicrobials would you make)? What are these and how will you meet these standards with Mrs. Client?
3. Prioritize your goals for Mrs. Client.
4. What are the interventions and rationales to meet the goals set for Mrs. Client?
5. When and how will you evaluate the goals set?

6. Is there any teaching you need to include that you may not have listed in your goals and interventions? What is the teaching and how will you evaluate the effectiveness?
7. Mrs. Client is ready for surgery. What do you need to report to the surgical staff, surgeon, and/or anesthesiologist?

Appendix A2: Case Study Rubric

Criteria	Needs Improvement	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	Faculty Feedback
Surgical Setting	Provides information about setting, recovery length, type of surgery, including concerns and post-operative risk identification (1 identified)	Provides information about setting, recovery, type of surgery, including concerns and post-operative risk identification (2-3 identified)	Provides information about setting, recovery (explanation provided), type of surgery, including concerns and post-operative risk identification (3 or more identified)	
Assessment				
Laboratory and Diagnostic	Lists the laboratory and diagnostics	Lists and explains (1 explanation) laboratory and diagnostics	Explains reason for all laboratory and diagnostics related to the patient	
Focused System Assessments	Lists 4 or less systems for focused assessment	Lists 5 systems for focused assessment	List 5 systems for focused assessment and constructs a reason for assessment related to the patient	
Cultural considerations			Describes reason/reasons for cultural considerations assessment	
Psychosocial Issues			Describes reason/reasons for psychosocial assessment	
Anesthesia	Indicates one reason for anesthesia history/assessments	Indicates 2 reasons for anesthesia history/assessments	Indicates more than 2 reasons for anesthesia history/assessments	
Medications	Lists medications	Identifies medications and plan for administration	Identifies medications, risks, side-effects Plans administration considerations and teaching	
Nutritional Intake		Explains nutritional intake pre-operatively	Plans pre- and post-operative nutritional considerations	
Informed Consent	Lists one component of informed consent	Lists 2 or more components of informed consent	Identifies the legal implications by describing informed consent considerations	
Medical/Surgical History		Describes/indicates why medical/surgical history assessment needed	Identifies and relates systems to medical/surgical history assessment related to the patient	
Time Out/SCIP				
How to Meet Standards	Defines SCIP	Defines SCIP and explains why	Defines SCIP and explains how SCIP	

		standard is used	will be used with patient considerations	
Antimicrobial Considerations	Lists one antimicrobial that is used	Lists several antimicrobials considered for use	List antimicrobials and explains antimicrobial considerations for the patient	
Goals	Unable to prioritize goals and/or makes goal too vague (does not meet specific, measureable, achievable, results focused, timely-SMART)	Prioritizes goals OR makes goals SMART	Prioritizes goals AND makes goals SMART	
Interventions and Rationales	Lists one intervention per goal but does not include rationale	Lists two interventions per goal but does not include rationales	Interventions are detailed (at least 3 per goal) and rationale for each intervention is explained	
Evaluation of Goals			Explains how each goal will be evaluated	
Teaching	Lists 1-2 topics for patient teaching	Lists 3 topics for teaching	Lists more than 3 topics for teaching and develops plan	
SBAR			Builds an SBAR report on the patient	

Appendix A3: Discussion Board

Obesity in the United States has tripled in the last 40 years. Obesity has a direct link to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, and other medical issues that impair a person's quality and healthy life. Obesity also has effects on the family, psychosocial status, and creates stereotypes. As nurses, we are on the forefront of the obesity epidemic. As you reflect, do you consider obesity a personal responsibility issue or do you relate it to multiple factors? In your discussion, please reflect on your beliefs of obesity, what you think societal beliefs of obesity are, and why we are seeing an epidemic. As a nurse, how will you assess (subjectively and objectively), diagnose, set goals (prioritize), and implement a plan for a person, family, or community who is struggling with obesity and healthy living? Please be mindful, this is a professional discussion and all communication and beliefs must be approached with professional dialog. You must also respond to at least 2 peers to continue ongoing discussions to promote problem-solving solutions about the obesity epidemic.

Appendix A4: Rubric for Discussion Board

Criteria	Needs Improvement	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	Faculty Feedback
Reflection of Beliefs	Lists beliefs, but no explanation/rationale for belief		Discusses beliefs, with personal reflection as reason/rationale for beliefs	
Assessment	Lists focused assessment of clients with obesity	Lists and explains (2-3) focused assessments of clients with obesity	Lists and explains reason/rationale (>3) for assessment of clients with obesity	
Diagnose	Lists <2 problems/nursing diagnosis based upon focused assessment	Lists 2-3 problems/nursing diagnosis based upon focused assessment	Lists >3 problems/nursing diagnosis based upon focused assessment	
Goals	Unable to prioritize goals and/or makes goals too vague (does not meet specific, measureable, achievable, results focused, timely- SMART)	Prioritizes goals OR makes goals SMART	Prioritizes goals AND makes goals SMART	
Interventions Implementation	Lists one intervention per goal	Discusses two interventions per goal	Interventions are detailed discussions for each goal	
Professionalism	No discussion board response to peers, does not use proper grammar and punctuation, and not responsive to peers discussions	Responds to peers, a few grammar and punctuation issues, professional tone is questionable	Discussion prompts problem-solving/critical thinking, responds politely and with professional tone to peers, supports views without judgment of others views	

Appendix A5: Sample Group Work

Instructions: Based upon the client scenario, your group will formulate and implement a teaching plan for the client that addresses the new medication ordered, physical activity, diet modification, coping with stress, and prevention of diabetes associated complications. Please be mindful that the teaching plan should be precise, clear, and understandable to the client. Develop a teaching handout for the client that is no longer than 2 pages in length. All group work and communication within the group must be done within the group area of the learning management system for validation of participation.

Client Scenario:

Ms. Jane is a newly diagnosed type 2 diabetic. The client currently smokes 1ppd, does not participate in physical activity, eating out most of the week due to time constraints, and has a limited income. Her A1C is currently 7.5, BP 148/86, weighs 90.9 kg, and is 5'4" in height. She works long hours, sometimes 10 hours per day and then must take her active son's to activities most evenings after work. The physician has asked you to formulate a plan for glucose control and lifestyle changes and has ordered metformin 500mg po qam for the client.

Appendix A6: Sample Concept Map

Instructions: Fill in each area of the concept map with the information from the client scenario. Assign colors, symbols, or other defining characters to each system problem identified. Use the same color, symbol, or other defining characters to all information within the concept map that applies to the system problem you have identified. For example, if the client has diabetes, you may underline diabetes in red. All laboratory, diagnostics, medications, assessment findings, etc. that are related to, can be or could be affected diabetes, underline in red. You will find that much of the information may have 2 or more colors, symbols, or other defining characters. (An example is given on the concept map. You will note that albuterol will be helpful for the COPD, but will also affect HTN. The goal is to identify relationships between system problems to prioritize nursing diagnosis, goals, interventions, rationale, and evaluation.

Client scenario: Mr. Client, a 67 year old male, is admitted to your facility with a diagnosis of COPD exacerbation and pneumonia. Mr. Client also has type 2 diabetes, diabetic neuropathy, HTN, stage 2 chronic renal disease and hyperlipidemia. He has previously had a stent placement after an acute MI 4 years ago.

Current medications:

Allergy to Penicillin

Metformin 750mg po qam
Theophylline 200mg po qam
Albuterol 90mcg/inh q6h
Guaifenesin 800mg po bid
Methylprednisolone 80 mg IV q8h
Regular insulin subq ac&hs PRN per sliding scale
Vancomycin 750mg IV q12h
Metoprolol 50mg po bid
Rosuvastatin 10mg qam

Current abnormal lab values:

Theophylline 8 ug/mL
 Vancomycin trough 22 ug/mL
 WBC 17,000 mcl
 Glucose 210 mg/dL
 Hgb 11g/dL
 Hct 33%

Diagnostics:

Chest X-ray: findings include infiltrates bilateral lower lobes

Vital Signs BP 148/84, P 90, R 26, T 100.4, Pox 93%

Abnormal assessment findings:

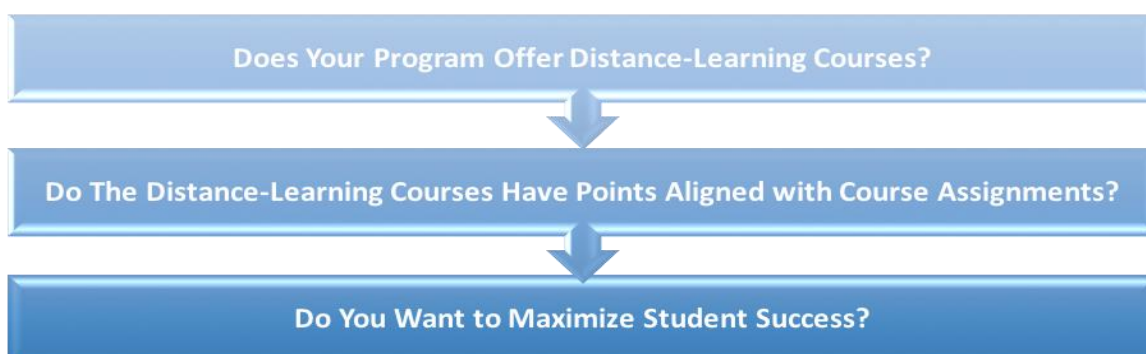
Diminished lung sounds left base, rhonchi and occasional crackles right base
 O2 at 2lpm NC
 Pain, level 6 in thoracic area, continuous, aching
 Pain, level 4 in bilateral legs, intermittent, shooting
 Increased shortness of breath when talking, walking, eating

Past Medical History HTN*	Admitting Diagnosis COPD Exacerbation	Laboratory Data
Medications Albuterol* Metoprolol*	Pathophysiology of Admitting Diagnosis	Diagnostic Data
Allergies Assessment Findings/Actual Signs and Symptoms		Expected Signs and Symptoms Based on Admitting Diagnosis
1 st Priority Nursing Diagnosis: Goal/Goals (SMART):		2 nd Priority Nursing Diagnosis: Goal/Goals (SMART):

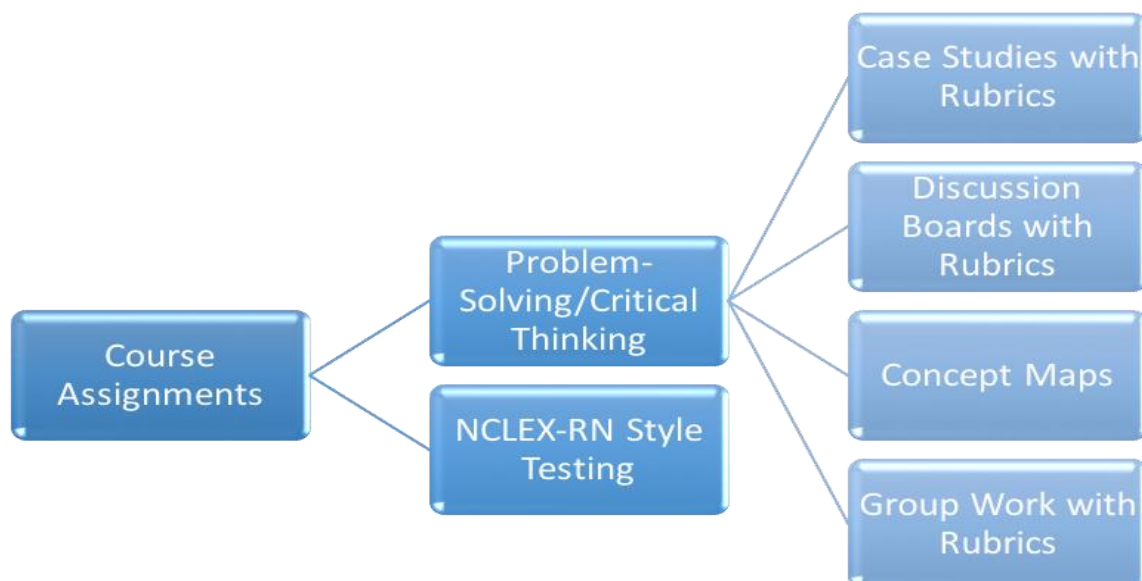
Appendix B: Policy Recommendation Quick View

To: Nursing Programs

Attention: Directors, Dean, Assistant Directors, Assistant Deans, Nursing Faculty



A recent study found that nursing distance learning courses do not have significant differences in examination scores in courses with points aligned to assignment compared courses without points aligned to assignments. How do distance learning courses maximize student success to increase student examination scores?



Appendix C: e-Survey Evaluation

Attention: Nursing Distance Learning Nursing Faculty and Administrators

Recently, you were sent a policy recommendation for nursing distance learning courses. Please take a moment to fill out the following e-Survey to evaluate the importance and implementation status of the policy recommendation. Your time is greatly appreciated.

Jennifer Mundine, MSN, RN, CNE

- 1. Do you feel the study findings are relevant to your nursing distance learning courses? (rate on a scale of 1-5, 1 being of least relevance to 5 being of most relevance) _____

Comments:

- 2. Have you implemented any changes in your nursing distance learning courses based upon the policy recommendations?_____

If yes, what changes have you made?_____

- 3. Are you experiencing any barriers during the implementation process of the policy?_____

If yes, what barriers are you experiencing?_____

- 4. Additional comments?_____
