Learning by Being: Graduate Students in Educational Certificate Program Dialogue with Simulated Students in Their "Class"

Mayri Sagady Leslie, EdD, MSN, CNM, FACNM
mayri@gwu.edu

Introduction
The School of Nursing offers an online graduate certificate in Nursing Education. One required course is Learner Engagement where students “explore theory- and evidence-based strategies and techniques to promote learner engagement, interactivity and deep levels of learning”. Team taught by three professors, one section of the course focuses on Understanding Your Learners. Over four weeks topics include building community, learner diversity, ‘at risk’ learners and socialization and role development.

The challenge was to develop an environment where learners could interactively in problem solving by applying theory and approaches learned in the course. Further, the goal was to develop a community within the class to engage in applied learning. It was decided that the traditional ‘Discussion Board’ used frequently in online learning was not an optimal tool for these goals. Role playing and simulation using the learning tool VoiceThread was chosen as the means to address the course needs.

Methods
In VoiceThread, each individual listens and records at their convenience. The course is asynchronous and no live sessions are held, so the ‘dialogue’ is composed of sequential recordings.

Utilizing VoiceThread, a nursing student with a challenge (related to week’s topic) was created with an image and a voice recording (played by the course instructor).

A weekly cycle was developed. First a problem was presented. For example during the week on role development, the simulated student expressed concerns about being close to graduation but not feeling ready to be a nurse – feeling like a fake, even though they felt skilled. The students in the course then became instructors in the simulation. In response to the simulated student’s initial concerns, all instructors could ask questions for clarification and the student would answer them. Then the instructors would discuss among themselves what principles from the week might apply and what strategies and solutions might be appropriate for this student. A plan of action was created. Finally, one of the instructors presented the plan to the student.

Results
Each step of the cycle offered rich opportunity for dialogue and engagement. With the course instructor serving as the voice of the simulated student, they could provide indirect feedback to each course student in their instructor role. In one case, the ‘instructor’ in the scenario seemed to miss the challenge being expressed or in another may have asked an insensitive question. Using the student’s voice, feedback or correction was provided.

The dialogue between ‘instructors’ about the simulated student are observable in VoiceThread, so the course instructor could review and jump in to provide input during discussion and planning.

Future challenges for this application include enhancing the student’s ability to construct a cohesive plan given the limitation of sequential dialogue and no live conversation.

In course evaluations, students expressed satisfaction with this aspect of their course in their narratives.

“During the VoiceThread discussions we had this semester, I was amazed at all the creative ideas we would each come up with when working with student motivation. This has caused me to reach out more to my colleagues.”

Conclusions
The VoiceThread simulation allowed for interactive teaching and learning between course instructor and students as well as peer-to-peer dialogue and solution-making. Students learned in their student role but also in the instructor role they assumed in the simulation.

The exercise took the application of course principles into an action realm versus just “talking about” them. Application was moved from the theoretical to the practical. That is, applied in practice.

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One improvement may be to add a final step where the simulated student gives a report to their instructors on the impact of following the plan of action.