Using Blogs to Increase Awareness of Public Health Issues

Teaching in an online RN-to-BSN course requires faculty members to plan activities that enhance student learning through course interaction. In the recent supplement to the Baccalaureate Essentials, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2013) advocated for a stronger curricular focus on population health, particularly because of the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2013). Promoting population health requires that nurses are prepared with knowledge of diversity, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and the ability to solve complex problems (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2013). A public health blog activity was created for an online population health course to engage students in critical dialogue about public health issues affected by a variety of social, economic, environmental, and political factors. The goal was to increase student awareness of public health disparities while engaging in respectful discussion as diverse opinions and perspectives were shared.

Public Health Blog Activity

As a teaching strategy, the blog activity draws on the theory of social constructivism that emphasizes active learning, social interactions, collaboration, and a personal critical thinking process to enhance learning (Powell & Kalina, 2009). The public health blog was implemented using the blog tool in the learning management system as part of a population-focused nursing course in an online RN-to-BSN program. Prior to blog participation, students were assigned a set of relevant materials to prepare that included a media presentation (i.e., YouTube video, TED Talks, or podcast), a Web resource with reliable public health data to highlight the prevalence of the problem, and a resource that depicted the social and health consequences in the community (local, national, or global). Some of the blogs included a video or personal narrative that highlighted individual stories of those affected. Blog topics included:

- Human trafficking.
- Rape on the reservation.
- Rural oral health disparities.
- Gun violence in the United States.
- Opioid epidemic.
- Medical marijuana.
- Cancer clusters.
- Asthma, children, and poverty.

After students studied the assigned material, a simple grading rubric guided their participation in the blog. They were advised that the topics could provoke emotion, disagreement, and even result in meaningful debate. In a primary blog post, they were asked to share their personal perspectives and experiences with the issues, then to discuss further by posting at least two replies to the blogs created by their peers. Grading was based on participation that was relevant to the topic, engaging, and timely. Instructions included the following:

- Please share your opinions and perspectives in a respectful and engaging manner.
- Blog posts should be related to the topic and should demonstrate appropriate and nonoffensive language.
- There is no need to cite course material in this blog; however, please feel free to share resources, informative links, or post pictures.
- Consider this an opportunity to be creative and share your unique and valuable perspectives.

By requiring students to share their personal views on current social and health issues in the community, a real-life context was applied to the interactive learning experience.

The diverse topics addressed in the blog activities provided an important foundation for the final population advocacy assignment. As the course progressed and students prepared for the final project, they were encouraged to choose a public health issue affecting a specific vulnerable population that they had a passion for. The focus of their advocacy was to propose a specific policy change that would influence services and support for the population affected by the issue. They were also required to choose an audience for their proposal that was in a position to make decisions on behalf of the population, such as to allocate resources, approve policy changes, or implement services. In small groups, students served as audience members for each other and were required to present opposing views and discuss their proposals. Students were allowed to choose topics previously discussed in the blogs or choose alternative topics that fit their passions and interests more specifically. The variety of public health issues discussed in the blog helped students think critically about the health and social conditions in the community that are also influenced by public policy.

Student Results and Reactions

Student and faculty evaluations of the activity were positive. Students enjoyed the less formal online activity and appreciated discussing personal opinions and experiences while addressing such challenging health and social issues. Students stated the following:

- I understand the importance of self-reflection and clarifying values…. Provocative topics allow us to express and respond in ways that help us to do just that.
- I loved the blogs. It was an opportunity to engage in health issues that are meaningful and touch individual lives, our lives. It also greatly increased my awareness of issues that impact our local, regional, national, and global society.
- The blog helped connect the individuals together as a class…more personal and life experiences…that increased awareness outside of my immediate areas of home and work. The topics were raw, but are all very important aspects of real life.
- Sharing opinions and feedback are important when looking to improve a community.
- The issues ignited passionate responses…. We got to experience
explaining our feelings in a professional and respectful manner. It felt like a safe place to express ourselves.

The blog activity is worth repeating. It is recommended that the blog be adapted to explore additional, diverse public health topics and that blogs be considered as an effective strategy for engaging online interaction in a variety of content areas.

References

Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act; HS Notice of Benefit and Payment Parameters for 2012. 78 Federal Regulation 15410 (March 11, 2013) (to be codified at 45 C.F.C pts. 153, 155, 156, 157, & 158).


Melissa Robinson, PhD, RN
mrobinson1@linfield.edu
School of Nursing
Linfield College

The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise. doi:10.3928/01484834-20170712-13