Remote Learning Environments: Lessons Learned From Collaborative Small Group Activities

Nurse educators unexpectedly forced into remote learning spaces because of the current public health crisis are striving to continue offering enriching learning activities to students. Lessons uncovered from traditional online courses using small-group activity (SGA), a type of collaborative learning approach, reveal they can be integrated as a viable pedagogy. This article proposes SGA lessons learned that provide opportunities for students to absorb course content while practicing application of key skills required for success in ever-evolving health care environments.

Collaborative learning (CL) in higher nursing education has been described as an engaged instructional approach, offering social and cognitive benefits requiring students to work together to achieve commonly identified preset learning goals (Slavin, 1987, as cited in Zhang & Cui, 2018). A CL approach conventionally affords students occasions to experience (a) interdependence for attainment of common learning goals, (b) individual and interconnected accountability, (c) group interactions and communications, (d) development of social skills, and (e) enhanced comprehension with one another for collective wisdom (Johnson & Johnson, 1989, as cited in Zhang & Cui, 2018). With CL, essential skills such as teamwork, effective communication, and problem solving (Peck & Preston, 2017) are simultaneously reinforced.

SGAs involve students working in collaborative learning spaces, synchronously and/or asynchronously, to complete course assignment tasks. Examples of SGA assignments used successfully focused on a failure mode and effect analysis, electronic report writing, and debates via discussion boards, as well as the peer review process. Furthermore, using an SGA offers opportunities for non-traditional methods of evidencing learning, as well as assignments outside of the typical remote learner’s comfort zone that reinforces self-efficacy.

Developing a sense of community by timely and focused emails, encouraging networking in nongraded group hangouts, and affording space for classroom discussions are key to faculty’s role in preparing to incorporate an SGA. Designing an SGA also includes consideration of assignment complexity, size of class to determine group breakdown, timing of activity within course and/or program, and level of learners for the conceptual thinking, essential to accomplish task learning outcomes. Specific directions in using predetermined software to collaboratively communicate in both synchronous and asynchronous fashions is a foundational element for success. Support and monitoring of the SGA progress needs to be delineated for appropriate frequency and use of acceptable fashions. Rubrics need to be deliberately crafted and calibrated to accurately evaluate elements of both individual and group performances.

Consideration of attentiveness to the student role is necessary to prepare them to engage in an SGA with a level of intentional receptivity and open-mindedness, further fostered by faculty communicating the purpose of the experience and offering clear direction. During the SGA, students are encouraged to listen to one another, wait their turn to offer reflective feedback in synchronous exchanges, consistently participate in required tasks, remain aware of time constraints and respectful of deadlines, be aware of their own impact on group dynamics, and be supportive of other students’ areas for growth.

Faculty teaching online reflected positively on SGA outcomes as evidenced by groups effectively achieving learning outcomes, overall improved quality of work with challenging assignments, positive communications with faculty during SGAs, and decreased faculty grading burden with major course assignments. Consistent with the SGA design purpose, students’ feedback included favorable comments related to learning improved teamwork skills, importance of collaboration with stakeholders, and elevated communication skills. With well-planned strategies, clear directions, appropriate technology, and adequate guidance to navigate real and perceived barriers, SGAs offer remote learners refreshing and authentic learning experiences that are transferable for employment in the postpandemic world.

References


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