Caring professions education and practice: meeting today’s workforce demands

About the project

Caring professionals are a vital part of the world's response to COVID-19, yet the global pandemic and its aftermath have significantly changed the ways in which care is provided. Caring practices are typically provided face-to-face, where body language, emotional cues and compassion are more easily and naturally communicated and experienced. However, the rapid pivot to remote care, where the essential caring cues and opportunities are not as readily available, has put unprecedented pressure on caring professionals. As remote caring practices have become vital to care provision, it is imperative that these competencies are taught and practiced by students prior to entering their respective fields. Supporting the ongoing education and training of caring professionals is essential to ensure that this invaluable workforce has the required skills and competencies to adapt and persevere through the current crisis and in future challenges. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity to re-evaluate how online education is provided in the caring professions, and the range of technological competencies needed to thrive in today’s digital economy. To respond to the needs of caring professional students and the populations they serve, our overarching goal was to identify the ways in which educators can design and integrate online learning opportunities that help students develop and translate caring competencies to digital working environments. Our key objective was to critically assess the state of knowledge on how to teach caring competencies effectively using online technologies.

Key findings

- In the past two years there has been an influx in research conducted related to helping students develop and integrate effective online caring practices and learning opportunities for translation into today’s digital economy.
- While the quality of studies overall tends to be weak, this may be due to the original assumptions used to develop the appraisal tools and their application to disciplines that are less likely to employ ‘higher level evidence’ study design types.
- Students need and are willing to learn how to use new technologies and appreciate the benefits of learning how to use digital technologies for their future professional caring practice.
- When online learning activities and technology align and closely replicate real-world situations, they are more helpful and effective in supporting student learning.
- Students who engage in online learning about remote care and teaching are more likely to develop online learning opportunities and/or incorporate virtual care and digital technologies into their future professional practice.
Utilizing digital technologies in classrooms and in professional practice can increase cost, time, energy and effort – all of which can impede online teaching and learning experiences. Learning new technology can be tedious and frustrating and technical problems and limitations can interfere with the interactions that normally occur face-to-face. Despite the practical and educational challenges that many new technologies bring, when faculty take an intentional approach towards addressing these challenges and leverage the expertise of educators that are highly skilled in technology integration, these barriers can be overcome.

Policy implications:

- More emphasis, assessment and training is needed to immerse students in using digital technologies that support them in developing interpersonal and technological skills required to work in remote and virtual settings.
- Assessment and feedback efforts need to be promoted at the institutional level to further extend understanding of online instruction and technology integration to improve teaching and learning experiences for educators and students.
- A framework and/or benchmarks are needed to understand the conditions that enhance productive e-learning opportunities that support caring professional students in developing digital competencies.
- More research is needed to:
  o explore the interrelationship between technology-integrated task design and participation in online settings;
  o examine the perceptions and experiences of students in different online environments that support digital skills development;
  o evaluate the persistence of students’ practices of incorporating technology in their professional practice; and
  o explore the distinctive aspects of the virtual experience, particularly during pandemics.

Further information:

Dr. Lorelli Nowell, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary: lnowell@ucalgary.ca