



Virtual Practicum Role Immersion During a Global Pandemic: Meeting the Informatics Scope & Standards Through Innovative Technology Use

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Introduction

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in 2020 has proven to take a toll on human life, frontline healthcare workers, essential services, healthcare organizations and many “norms” that we have all come to know and rely upon for life, work and school for students of all ages. Healthcare organizations quickly mobilized to care for the influx of COVID-19 patients, prepare and protect staff as well as the community. Remote work environments replaced offices; staff deemed ‘non-essential’ were often relegated to the remote environments, visitors were banned or severely limited and student clinical and practicum experiences were canceled or curtailed within the confines of hospital walls with many preceptors working remotely (Fogg et al., 2020). With Covid-19 surges continuing, innovative approaches to education continue to be of utmost importance.

Problem

Nursing Informatics students that were expected to meet the Informatics Scope and Standards while meeting practicum requirements through role immersion found themselves without precepted practicum sites for experiences and a halt in progression within their academic programs to complete and Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN) with an Informatics Specialty.

Approach to the Problem

With approval from the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) for the use of virtual practicum experiences during this global pandemic, faculty from the MSN Informatics Track practicum courses quickly mobilized to create a faculty mentor-facilitated virtual practicum experience to support a project management role immersion using innovative technology within true-to-life COVID-19 scenario-based projects. Developing “real world” experiences outside of an onsite traditional mentorship is a new and challenging opportunity.

Methods

Faculty examined the virtual project management role, technology to support a virtual role immersion, project deliverables and alignment of these with the current Informatics Scope and Standards. Students performed in the role of project manager within a virtual organization with a virtual team for the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of an overarching COVID-19 project mirroring the same project management steps as students in an on-site practicum.

Practicum course faculty assumed the role of practicum mentor further mirroring the on-site experience. Mentor and student communication methods also mirrored the on-site mechanisms including email, phone and electronic meeting software such as Webex and Microsoft Teams.

Deliverables

Using a variety of available electronic tools students were mentored through development of a project-based format to create dashboard solutions to answer an assigned real-world problem along with the development of supporting eLearning modules to train potential end-users.

References

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Implications

A faculty-mentored, virtual practicum experience provides a valuable alternate role immersion experience in the absence of an on-site clinical practicum. Alignment of the virtual practicum role and deliverables to the Informatics Scope and Standards supports competency development for the informatics student (ANA, 2015). Innovative uses of technology and software applications expand student technology knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's). The use of advance simulation in graduate education is needed (Chemikova et al., 2020). Anecdotal information obtained through instructor-student and student-Dean communication indicate positive student outcomes from the virtual experience. Notably, one student recently shared that while interviewing for an informatics position, she advanced in the selection process due to the knowledge and experience gained through this practicum.

However, faculty impact was significant related to workload and prior operational experience in the field. The ability to sustain this experience over time needs further consideration and hour allotment for faculty. Developing key skills needed for future practice has endless opportunities to enhance informatics practice. As healthcare dependence upon data to inform clinical practice increases, methods to analyze and display data in meaningful ways is of greater importance (Wu et al., 2019). As permitted by CCNE, this virtual practicum experience shows great promise as an alternative to an on-site practicum experience.