



International Journal of Nursing and Health Care Science

Review Article

De La Fosse KK and Guillaume NM. J Int J Nurs & Health Car Scie 03: 2023-207

Perspectives of Educational Leadership: Cultivating Success with Research-Based Learning Strategies

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Submission Date: 07 February, 2023

Accepted Date: 13 February, 2023

Published Online: 17 February, 2023

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How to cite this article: De La Fosse KK and Guillaume NM (2023) Perspectives of Educational Leadership: Cultivating Success with Research-Based Learning Strategies. Int J Nurs & Health Car Scie 03(04): 2023-207.

Abstract

This qualitative study presents findings of responses from faculty, staff, and administrators employed at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities regarding research-based learning strategies. Eight respondents provided feedback from open-ended and Likert-style questions. Survey results identify value in research-based learning strategies, and demonstrate students and educators benefit significantly from the implementation of research in the curriculum. Specific recommendations include supporting educators while navigating the process of incorporating research-based learning strategies, mentorship, and continuing education to ensure comfort and mastery of implementation.

Keywords: Educational leadership; Higher education; Research-based learning

Introduction

The landscape of higher education transformed during the global pandemic and created a new paradigm highlighting the benefits that research-based learning contributed to developing competent practitioners. Advantages are evident for employing research-based learning and instructional strategies, including motivation, critical thinking, application of relevant topics, fostering new skills, and developing a passion for life-long learning. Embracing these strategies was paramount to enhancing the environment for teaching and learning in higher education, helping to ensure success for students and leaders alike. Research-based instruction enables a partnership between faculty and students. Such collaborations contribute to individual learning experiences and allow stakeholders to benefit from the process. Effective strategies that initially appear to make comprehension more difficult have positive long-term effects that foster retention and strengthen learning outcomes. Educational programs founded on research-based learning strategies are critical to best support completion rates and meaningful learning.

Purpose Statement

The qualitative research study aimed to explore Minnesota State Colleges and University faculty perspectives on using research-based learning strategies in higher education to promote success for students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this inquiry:

How do college and university faculty perceive the value of research-based learning strategies?

How do college and university faculty implement research-based learning strategies in academic environments?

What are the outcomes/results when using research-based learning strategies in college and university settings?

Background

Soaring attrition rates in higher education programs coupled with decreased enrollment post-pandemic warrant examining instructional strategies used by educators. The global pandemic's abrupt onset commanded immediate change in instructional presentation and impeded program completion without the ability for face-to-face instruction numerous programs relied on to meet accreditation body mandates. With no time to deliberate best practices, faculty were left to make autonomous decisions on ways to mitigate disruption in the classroom. The overarching question to be defined as how research-based learning strategies were incorporated before, during, and after the pandemic, if at all. Upholding program standards and rigor was necessary to ensure students gained the education necessary for meeting competencies specific to the degree sought and proficiency as they matriculated through the educational area advancing into the industry. Utilizing research-based learning strategies enhances critical thinking skills in students and enriches scholarly learning outcomes [2]. Research-based learning strategies have been supported by the literature to promote student success as they matriculate through higher education and enter the industry driven by technology [3]. Pedagogical strategies are challenged when instructors implement research-based learning strategies aiming to increase student engagement in preparation for future endeavors [4]. Jacobson, et al. [5] argue that research-based learning strategies in higher education programs develop competencies paramount for student mastery of content. Hallinger [6] posits that research-based learning utilized by educators contributes to student success and accommodates diverse learning needs. Implementing research-based learning strategies in higher education promotes students' mastery of content, especially observed through lectures, case-based studies, and the incorporation of technology [7]. Instructors in higher education are urged to employ research-based learning strategies to promote student success, however, various attributing factors in the methodology correlate with a lack of compliance.

Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to examine faculty in higher education's use of research-based learning strategies proven to promote success for post-secondary students. The researchers concentrated on faculty teaching at Minnesota State colleges and universities before, during, and after the global pandemic. This study garnered data from eight faculty in various disciplines and experience levels teaching across the state. Utilization of a Qualtrics survey asked open-ended and Likert-style questions to provide optimal opportunity for participant feedback. Open-ended data positions the researcher to enable participants to freely share their experiences and thoughts without the constraints of pre-determined scales and then analyze individual feedback [8]. The researchers sought to obtain feedback from the lens of the participants to understand the phenomenon deeper. Creswell and Creswell [8] argue purposeful selection of participants optimizes the researchers' comprehension of the research study and is paramount in qualitative studies. Providing this perspective, the researchers conducted the study through this lens. Patton [9] asserts qualitative investigation enables phenomena exposed for assessment and illumination in the field of inquiry.

Setting

This study was conducted after the global pandemic with participants employed with the Minnesota State System, which comprises 30 colleges and 7 universities. Data was obtained virtually to enable participants throughout the state to provide feedback. Diversity was evidenced by incorporating programs represented, degrees awarded at each establishment, and locations throughout the state of Minnesota. Respondents encompassed veteran and novice faculty sharing perspectives across multiple disciplines on their utilization of research-based learning strategies.

Sample

This study was conducted with faculty employed at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities across multiple disciplines. Eight respondents participated in the study, exemplifying diversity in ethnicity, experience in the profession, gender, years of service, and education level. One participant was male and seven were female. Four hold a doctorate, and four are masters-prepared practitioners. Diversity with race was represented: four participants identified as Caucasian, two as African American, and one identified as mixed. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain rich data pertinent to explore research-based learning strategies throughout the Minnstate educational system and changes in practice before, during, and after the global pandemic [10].

Literature Review

Critical thinking skills and student learning outcomes are enhanced by employing research-based learning strategies [11], which assist educators striving to guide students to become independent strategic learners. Employing instructional strategies that enhance students' learning assists with remaining actively engaged throughout the learning process to obtain a deeper understanding of the content and utilize independent strategies throughout the process. Instructional strategies enable students to connect learning in the classroom to real-life scenarios. Lubis et al. [11] argue that student-centered learning approaches are paramount to engaging students' attention and participation in the current era reliant upon technology. However, captivating attention is not an easy feat for educators, especially online. Attention to methods employed must be deliberate to promote student success [11]. Fostering research-based methods in the classroom support active meaningful learning and drawing connections to theory and applied practical skills [12]. Several approaches are available to employ student-centered learning in higher education for effective teaching. Bidabadi, et al. [13] assert paramount components of successful implementation encompass faculty and students' reception to adapt to the strategy, interest levels, trust in ability, the interest of the discipline, and the faculty's commitment to success. Effective educational strategies require quality assurance of delivery methods evaluating the learning process and outcomes to ensure compliance with accreditation standards [14].

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is one strategy employed most effectively with English Language Learners (ELL) that promotes a positive reflection on the learning experience. Selectively pairing students into groups promotes the application of prior knowledge to enhance skill sets while engaging in teamwork which are core characteristics of cooperative learning. Students benefit from strong teamwork exemplifying why the cohort model is so powerful. Respondents of the survey disclosed research-based strategies incorporated in their classroom that have proved effective. "I use active/cooperative learning to promote independent learners to become life-long learners". Emphasizing objectives of lessons and activities optimizes learning because expectations are clear on desired learning outcomes of what students should master". Participants provided specific examples such as concept maps, case studies, and peer reviews in the skills lab, and deliberately assigned students into teams to build upon strengths and weaknesses. Incorporation of multiple technology-based modes of delivering information to students and facilitating learning experiences, such as simulation and direct patient care clinical is how one participant employs research-based strategies to enhance the students' learning experience. Classroom discussion was addressed by many respondents that elicited examples of students understanding concepts from peers viewing concepts from a different lens and perspective that solidified concepts difficult to grasp. Classroom discussions provoking responses and additional queries from others can be instituted online or in person promoting reflection and the opportunity to synthesize content. Discussions enable educators to gauge student comprehension and adjust the advancement of introducing new content. Participation in classroom discussion promotes interest, provides immediate feedback from peers and faculty, bestows control over classroom engagement, and force all students to remain actively engaged while sharpening communication skills.

Cohort Model

Cohort models in higher education advance through programs together establishing a sense of community supporting one another depending on the structure to promote motivation and persistence [15]. Cohorts remain together from the beginning to the end of academic programs [16]. Engagements among members establish trust, and comradery, and fortifies relationships [17]. Engagement within the cohort model provides support systems that contribute to program completion [18]. Cohort models enable faculty and students to establish rapport and enhance relationships in comparison to programs not embracing this methodology [19]. Intentional program design orchestrating opportunities for student/faculty engagement enables a strong community academically and informally correlating with optimal mentorship [16]. Partnerships within cohort models expand expertise amongst members from teamwork and contribute to enhanced academic results [20].

Cohort models with online programs require academic socialization via virtual collaboration to achieve success [21]. Regardless of program presentation, face-to-face, online, or hybrid, the cohort model has proven successful in assisting students to reach the finish line to achieve academic aspirations. During the global pandemic devising a sense of community in an overwhelming isolating period was paramount to mitigate attrition rates in higher education, most noteworthy in graduate programs. Graduate students rely on additional support to feel worthy and included in academic programs [22]. Strategic onboarding in graduate programs and the cohort model fosters group participation [23]. The cohort model creates a robust atmosphere for academics and contributes significantly to mitigating attrition rates in graduate programs [24]. Holmes, et al. [15] argue that doctoral programs battle soaring attrition rates that significantly enhance with the online modality up to 70%, higher than face-to-face programs. Cohesive cohorts are integral for fostering the successful completion of doctoral programs [15].

Actionable Feedback

Higher education aims to provide authentic guidance and instruction setting students up for success in academics as they matriculate through programs and enter the industry by utilizing research-based tools such as actionable feedback [25]. Feedback must be established in evidence and encompass the following components: 1. Provide the context necessary to establish the desired outcomes, 2. There is additional or new insight garnered from the feedback provided, 3. It is applicable to the desired end project and 4. The feedback is able to be understood and prioritized by the receiver [26]. Providing feedback in academia must position the student with the ability to achieve the necessary outcomes. Providing feedback might be difficult and uncomfortable to extend to students; however, it is critical to support learning to enhance academic growth, and formulating carefully crafted guidance is essential [27]. Developing an environment for receptiveness to the feedback provided encompasses focusing on the outcomes, sharing feedback in a timely fashion to provide adequate time for adjustments, and also sharing specific expectations [27]. Sharing actionable feedback with students encourages confidence between students and faculty, ultimately increasing motivation and compliance to advancing academic performance [28].

Use of Technology Learning

Technology has changed the educational landscape aiding in enhancing the curriculum and providing alternative delivery options [29]. The pandemic afforded the opportunity to appreciate innovative approaches to incorporate technology in the classroom and to enhance current practices. Digital tools aid in increasing student engagement, aligning with research-based learning strategies that enhance personal and professional abilities and performance [30]. This is noteworthy as many higher education students require online/hybrid models to enable advanced degrees with full-time jobs and family obligations. Ensuring rigor has not been jeopardized with distance learning is integral and obtainable by embracing learning from employing technology options. Technology-enhanced learning demands motivation and persistence reliant upon self-efficacy optimizing engagement, academic success, and program completion [31].

Blended learning reliant upon technology directly correlates with enhanced performance attributed to multifaceted opportunities and flexibility to engage with multiple learning techniques [32]. Establishing a closely connected community centered around online learning reliant on technology through online discussions and group work strengthens motivation and persistence to meet academic benchmarks and remain on track for program completion [33]. Despite the negative attention associated with online learning during the global pandemic innovation, creativity, and flexibility were demonstrated by learners and educators alike exemplifying that in a post-pandemic era learning online will significantly benefit educational arenas [34].

Students Moving to the United States from Other Countries

Research-based learning strategies afford students the ability to remain actively engaged in their learning. International comparisons provide detail on the equity of resources, overall access to education, and student outcomes. Comparisons enable assessment from the aggregate data to identify disparities in student achievements and ways to optimize learning opportunities. Eight countries Germany, the United States, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Russia were examined specifically regarding education outcomes, and economic and policy issues. The educational system is enhanced in the United States as compared to other countries and prepares students for real-life application. Arguments center around benefits and disadvantages across countries with learning strategies employed. International students are uprooting and moving to the United States to participate in excellent learning opportunities. Research-based learning incorporated in the United States provides a landscape conducive to mastering content and mitigating disparities with language barriers. Academic leaders in the states remain cognizant of student learning needs and customize and tailor experiences to best situate international learners with success. Although no aggregate data exists on concrete numbers of learners migrating to the United States, the universities and colleges nationally in America observe a significant rise in the application and acceptance of students enrolling annually. Commendable is the student feedback that the educational system is stellar in comparison to native countries. Watching students' bravery in moving to a new country for their desired education is impressive. Most admirable is the fortitude observed and students excelling academically and professionally as matriculation through higher education.

Ethics and Confidentiality

Faculty are members of the academic community and are expected to adhere to ethical principles outlined in the Statement on Professional Ethics published by the American Association of University Professors [35]. Academic establishments remain under the jurisdiction of governing bodies for accreditation purposes. Accreditation bodies ensure programs meet standards and examine multiple components of higher education operations. However, educational leaders must employ measures to ensure confidentiality and ethics remain central to the decision and execution of the instruction. Professors are expected to lead with integrity and promote academic success for students based on research indicating best practices [36]. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects student information as another component of educational leadership that must remain at the forefront to protect the best interest of students when supporting their academic journey. It is an expectation that faculty in higher education provide meaningful learning experiences to promote students' ability to flourish academically and professionally. Programmatic implementation, changes, and policies must be congruent with evidence-based practices grounded in research.

Theoretical Framework

Connectivism Learning Theory

Connectivism Learning Theory originated in 2005 by George Siemens and Stephen Downes, emphasizing how evolving technology capability enhances opportunities to learn and disseminate research.

The benefits of the Connectivism Learning Theory enable students' opportunities to dialogue with peers predominately with the online modality central to the global pandemic. Remaining connected and engaged in the learning process although distanced from the brick-and-mortar establishment is conducive to learning. Instruction is led by the teacher; however, students are encouraged to consult the body of literature to expand their knowledge base and investigate the validity of discoveries online. Sharing results from research prompts a community of connectivity. The theoretical framework provides the lens through which to view the phenomenon under study. The framework serves also to demonstrate interactions and connections among the concepts. Connectivism Learning Theory aligned with the purpose of the study and allowed the researchers to formulate salient connections among the variables associated with research-based instruction and learning.

Data Collection/Analysis

Data was collected online via a survey to elicit feedback from educators in higher education across multiple disciplines. Six open-ended questions provided insight into research-based strategies' value, application, and insights related to implementation. Two Likert-style (Options: never, sometimes, often, and always) sought to inform the inquiry concerning the use of research-based learning strategies, pre-pandemic to the present. The aim was to explore changes in practice and the value placed on consulting the body of literature to guide instructional practices. Six initial questions elicited data pertaining to demographics, education level, current role, and years of experience of participants.

- Implement an onboarding process for new educators guiding the processes for employing research-based learning.
- Provide mentorship for educators to ensure continued support adapting to research-based learning processes.
- Devise annual in-services for novice and veteran educators to enable them to remain adept with current practices.
- A longitudinal comparative study exploring attrition and success rates for students in programs employing research-based learning strategies post-pandemic versus pre-pandemic when the value was not assigned to such practices may be beneficial to the body of knowledge on the subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, survey findings outline a successful approach for educators to enhance student satisfaction and mastery of content. Implementing research-based learning strategies in the curriculum contributes to students' understanding of appreciation of the benefits of research. Providing a rationale for learning methodologies enables students the opportunity to process why assignments and lessons are constructed and appreciate the foundation devised based upon prior research supporting efficacy. Research-based learning strengthens doctoral students' ability to master content that directly impacts satisfaction for students and educators alike. The phenomenon of research-based learning is paramount and was employed prior to the pandemic, however, the increased prevalence was noted during an uncharted era as educators were desperate to meet the needs of students promoting success and program completion.

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