ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION PROJECT: The Impact of Differentiated Instructional Techniques on Non-Traditional, Adult Student Engagement in a Baccalaureate Nursing Completion Program for Registered Nurses (RN-BSN) Course

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of differentiated instructional techniques on non-traditional, adult student engagement in an RN-BSN completion program course. Differentiated instructional techniques have been a staple method of teaching in K-12 education for a number of years. Differentiated instruction (DI) is a means of teaching students by considering learning preferences and by offering options for meeting course requirements. Non-traditional, adult learners have varied life experiences as well as learning needs. This study addressed how and why engagement of the adult learner in a nursing course was affected by using common differentiated instructional techniques such as model-building, tiered assignment, and literature circles.

The study was conducted using case study method. A purposeful sample of non-traditional, adult learners enrolled in an RN-BSN health promotion nursing course was taken. Data were collected via participant observation and field notes, faculty
interview, participant journals, open-ended questionnaires, researcher notes, and focus group transcript. Tiered assignments (blog and family assessment) and literature circle postings were also reviewed. Thematic content analysis (TCA) was employed for data analysis.

Five major themes emerged from the data: valuing the student, framing, learning environment, non-traditional teaching techniques, and behaviors of engagement. Each major theme was composed of several subthemes. Subthemes associated with valuing the student included personhood, voice of the student, self awareness, choice, and skills related to Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences. The second theme of framing was connected with the subthemes of making meaning and context. The third theme of learning environment entailed subthemes of safety, freedom, structure, and forced engagement. The fourth theme of non-traditional teaching techniques included “Out-of-the-box” thinking, control over learning, and self-directed learning. The final theme of behaviors of engagement was comprised of subthemes of enjoyment, ownership, accountability, motivation, and creativity.

Findings of the study indicated that each of the differentiated instructional techniques had a positive impact on student engagement. The subthemes served to identify specific aspects of the DI techniques that were found to be most beneficial for the non-traditional, adult learner.