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e-Learning: Maturing Technology Brings Balance & Possibilities to Nursing Education

*An Orange Paper from Mather LifeWays
By Jon Woodall*

e-Learning: Maturing Technology Brings Balance & Possibilities to Nursing Education

“Learning is at the center of our ability to adapt to the most trivial and the most profound environmental demands. It makes the difference between purposeful action and directionless activity.”

Charles K. West, James A. Farmer, & Phillip M. Wolff

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

In recent years, the boom of **e-Learning, or Internet-based learning, has reaped many positive benefits as an efficient and effective educational tool.** The beauty of e-Learning is that it is a unique solution for delivering online, hybrid, asynchronous, or synchronous learning for nurses despite geographical location, time, or distribution devices. It provides the ability to deliver both learning and information at will, dynamically, and immediately. It allows participants to tap into the knowledge of experts and non-experts, and catapult those messages beyond classroom walls and into the workplace. And it lets administrators know—through the magic of technology—who is learning, referring, and contributing—and who is not. Still wondering about e-Learning? This paper outlines the practical ways e-Learning **engages nurses by building interest, motivation, and providing opportunities** for active participation while protecting organizational interest with documented training.

ENGAGING NURSES WITH E-LEARNING

There are many benefits when it comes to e-Learning and nurse training/education—for example, flexibility and a student-centered learning approach. However, optimal success comes from consistent engagement. The fast-evolving nature of the nursing role, and the requirements of registration bodies, means that **continuing professional development and lifelong learning are critical within the nursing profession.** For a number of reasons—most notably staff shortages and geographical isolation—the ability for nurses to undertake traditional face-to-face training has been dramatically impaired, especially in light of ever-growing responsibilities and non-traditional work schedules.

Non-traditional methods like e-Learning, therefore, are needed to ensure that nurses can continually develop their knowledge and skill set in a time when nursing supply and demand for qualified nurses continue to work against hospital administrators due to the shortage of nursing school faculty. e-Learning offers many positive possibilities and advantages that can provide the necessary flexibility in times of massive workplace change. In this time of need, as already noted, it will continue to become more and more of a priority for many organizations, and as this continuum grows, the need for service and retention will keep pace. **The lifeline of this module will depend on engagement.** Nurses will need to have the ability to undertake as much or as little of the course as they need, depending on their existing knowledge. The model structure of the online courses will have to ensure that nurses can work through

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manageable chunks of learning that will keep pace with their workload or follow a pre-determined timetable.

It is projected that, at some point in the near future, all nurses will come into contact with Internet-based learning, whether through third-party sites such as [Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging](#) or via national government initiatives. Whatever the origins of the learning environment, it is vital that strict quality-control mechanisms are in place that promote evidence-based practices and provide learners with confidence that the material they access is of the highest quality. **This type of learning will require nurses to have ready access to technology as well as the skills to use it.** Thus, individual nurses will have access to a large range of online learning opportunities that may be integrated into their lifestyles and careers.

Such a wealth of opportunities increases the requirement that nurses manage their own learning portfolio and plan for their future in terms of learning and career development. These are key skills in and of themselves. Organizations also benefit from this style of online learning, as the cost is negligible and there is evidence to suggest that it does lead to improvements in patient care. However, further research is necessary to determine the true value to learners, organizations, and patients. The challenge to meet the educational needs of future nurses is a significant one, but one that organizations like [Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging](#) has begun to prepare for.

BENEFITING FROM ADVANCEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY

Interactive computer learning has the potential to revolutionize the role of educators by empowering nurses to take more responsibility for their own learning. Given the work environment—in many cases traditional, classroom-based resources may not be a nurse's first choice. e-Learning **achieves its potential when used repeatedly over time by engaged students** who will seek online lessons and references, and—in this Web 2.0 world—will also contribute generously, making choices to both consume and create resources which promote healthy growth. In a short attempt to illustrate the growing demand for e-Learning 2.0, it may be useful to consider the advancement of the Web as shown below:

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PRESENT	FUTURE
<p>CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (CMS): Today, nurses with a technical background may use specific computer applications to create, manage, and publish content for their peers to review and/or critique.</p>	<p>WIKI'S: Nurses, with little to no technical experience, will be able to use Wikis and social media devices as a simple method to create and edit content using their Web browser.</p>

The above chart is particularly useful in considering the following fictional scenarios in Long-Term Care (LTC) or other similar environments:

- The 1st shift features three RNs on duty. A medical auditor from the state reaches out to this team to work together to complete a [WebQuest](#) through NursingCenter.com. The communication takes place via phone and e-mail due to the large geographical distance between the two parties. The medical auditor then turns to an e-coach to solve a knotty problem, and creates a Wikipedia entry documenting lessons learned.
- The Director of Nursing uses a performance support tool to qualify his/her staff and then joins a blog to provide feedback about how the tool could be more helpful at his/her specific location.
- The nurse educator of a large LTC organization builds a simulation in [Second Life](#) to reveal to novice nurses the implications of decisions about where and how to manage residents in their respective facilities.

Through these examples, it's obvious that the applications of e-Learning have grown to be more than just lessons and tutorials. It certainly is the case for Sarah, the Director of Nursing for a large, nationwide LTC organization. In order to anticipate the needs of future and potential residents and customers, she often relies on a blog. There, she reads about emerging trends in the field of aging and can track the responses and requests from potential residents while providing family decision makers with feedback and solutions to their concerns in a non-threatening environment or tone. If she becomes stalled, Sarah can quickly turn to the Web and her organization's portal. On the spot, she is able to e-mail relevant resources to the potential customer, while encouraging them to add their reaction/response to the blog where other potential customers have gathered to talk about their expectations. Sarah also fulfills compliance requirements because she has eliminated the need for travel, food, entertainment, and presentation dollars by coordinating her research and learning online.

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In another story, Pam has recently hired a large number of care providers at each of the LTC communities in her organization. Each community was in dire need of additional staff, and the large hiring class has created a positive buzz around the organization. Pam is encouraged but concerned because her initial education and training was 30 years ago, and she hasn't communicated with new hires in a number of years. With encouragement from her administrator, she completes [Powerful Tools for Caregivers \(PTC\) Online](#), an online course for caregivers teaching self care, which is applicable to the newly-hired class. **Because it is offered online, Pam finds time to complete this course while she travels among facilities around the country.** After discussing her experience with her administrator, she finds similar online classes to update her knowledge reservoir. She enrolls in several with a promise to boost or update her people management skills, geriatric nursing, and memory loss knowledge.

Pam knows that she will need help in coaching and managing these new hires as well, so she visits a regional center to take a two-day, brick-and-mortar class. **After completion, she also receives follow-up training from an e-coach who helps her practice her skills** prior to applying them in her field. Expert, vetted messages and lessons are available when and where Pam needs them via her online course rooms. She and her peers are urged to weigh in as well through blogs, Wikis, and online course room discussion boards and Second Life organizational islands. Pam's experiences are not only functional in terms of training and development, but also as support, guidance, community building, assessment, and informal "give-and-take." However, none of her training is valuable if ignored.

NURSING'S NEED FOR E-LEARNING

The unfortunate reality is that, in spite of its multitude of benefits, many simply fail to embrace e-Learning. For example, the new nursing student who is falling behind on assignments in her online Introduction to Nursing course; or the nurse that looks at two of the six e-Learning modules and completes only one; or the supervising Registered Nurse (RN) who has the best intentions, but is too busy with work to be e-coaching her staff; or the Director of Nursing, also with good intentions, who is absent from podcasts and a related blog. **Every industry study reveals marked increases in training and development delivered via e-Learning, but often with disappointing numbers characterizing participation and persistence.**

Growing sophistication in organizational analytics methods are beginning to correlate investments in human capital (nurses) and technology with organizational success measures such as revenue, profitability, knowledge measurement, retention, protection, and talent attraction. The use of e-Learning provides a foundation for performance, monitoring that makes the correlations between nurses and learning technologies possible. For example, nursing supervisors often have to go beyond their professional training and manage

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budgets, employees, retention, and help coach and set conduct codes. While these components may not have been associated with their nursing education, a lack of these skill sets may have a negative impact when administration expects financial goals to be reached. **Organizational e-Learning benefits, therefore, appear to be realized on two distinct fronts:**

- The needs and interests of nurses and other applicable staff members who are linked to competency and accomplishment
- The needs of the organization, tied to true business results, e.g., nursing supervisors who are needed to manage expenses and staff in order to achieve yearly budget expectations and goals

e-Learning is an increasingly important part of the conversation. When used in conjunction with reliable, valid, and predictive assessments, and correlated with an individual's learning profile, **e-Learning can generate data for diagnosing skill gaps** and prescribing activities and experiences that link learning events with on-the-job experience. More importantly, **nurses can monitor their own progress** and determine the next step in their professional development.

A range of learning resources—videos, articles, online communities of practitioners, professional advisors and mentors, and so on—become available when and where those resources are needed by nurses. e-Learning also provides administrators ways to begin tracking returns on learning investments, time spent on learning tasks, and content use patterns. When sparked from a reliable Learning Management System (LMS), it can be relatively easy to track course completion, task completion, resource use, and historical use data, as well as assessment results and various qualitative evaluations. One great example of this can be seen with [Blackboard](#). It has helped many forward thinking organizations establish their goals through Networked Learning Environment (NLE), where students or teachers can view instructional content, collaborate, and evaluate academic performance amongst other components in real-time via the Internet.

PUTTING PRACTICE IN ACTION

Recently, Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging attempted to find out what its current and potential student population regarded as their “purchasing product” when participating and/or considering our e-Learning program. Ultimately, we wanted to identify what concerns organizations have about using e-Learning—more specifically, organizations that employed or have nursing staff.

The responses that we received were not surprising. One of the top responses was “employee involvement/buy-in.” The result was expected and is a major concern for many e-Learning programs. **One positive note though is that it enables freedom and nurse independence, with access to learning, guidance, and the**

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information needed by employees and students. The flipside is that the use of e-Learning is not automatic, and when nurses do take advantage of this resource, they do not always do so consistently.

Most people involved with e-Learning have a story regarding dismissed resources. More than four years ago, Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging offered one of its first Powerful Tools for Caregivers Online (PTC) courses, with nearly 50 students enrolled. Many resources and time had been devoted to the development and timely deployment of this class, only to have it result in actual participation three weeks later. Our first thought was, “What happened?” Was it the flaws in the design or content, or had we violated some of the basic e-Learning strategies?

After reviewing the situation and combing over the components of the e-Learning delivery, issues became apparent in our execution and alignment with the participating organizations relating to two aspects of successful engagement: great assets and systems, and organizational readiness for a dramatic change.

- Did the administrators of the participating organizations make a concerted effort to introduce e-Learning? Since their nursing staff was not directly paying for each online course, perhaps they felt no personal investment. Did we communicate how the e-Learning program would advance their nursing careers or their reservoir of knowledge? Did administrators of the participating organizations complete the e-Learning program as recommended, and report their experience to their respective nursing staff?
- Were administrators of the participating organizations familiar with the program, and did they know how to provide support or who to contact for further support? Did they provide encouragement for their nursing staff in regards to their expectations and motivations?
- Were the nursing staff encouraged to participate, and what was their perceived expectation? Did they see links between the e-Learning course objectives and their own career goals? Was there help available when the “glitches” occurred?
- How did Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging execute the rollout and was the focus appropriate for the individual staff?

It would be inappropriate if this paper about e-Learning for nurses and other professionals positioned itself as the final word on engagement and possibilities. Rather, **the purpose and goal here is to advance the conversation about e-Learning and nursing education.** While there is no silver lining here, we do hope to help you understand all that is, and can be, involved in attracting nurses

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to e-Learning, encouraging them, and holding their attention so that they benefit as well as the organization.

For more information on e-Learning, or for details on Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging's online programs, contact Jon at jwoodall@matherlifeways.com or (847) 492.6753.



Jon Woodall is the Online Programs Manager for Mather LifeWays. Reach him at jwoodall@matherlifeways.com.

Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM For more information about our senior living residences, Community Initiatives, or award-winning research, please visit our website at www.matherlifeways.com or call (847) 492.7500.