Nursing Students' Empowerment in Distance Education: Testing Kanter's Theory

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Abstract

This qualitative, explanatory study examined Post-RN baccalaureate nursing students' experiences of empowerment with distance education and computer conferencing (CC) for fit with the constructs of Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations. Seven post-RNs from Canadian distance education nursing programs were interviewed. Interview transcripts were examined using content analysis. Kanter's theory was useful in describing empowerment structures in distance education courses. Feedback from instructors, access to library facilities, and support from employers and family are essential elements of an empowering educational experience. Students missed face-to-face contact. Two themes unrelated to Kanter's theory—self-direction and determination to succeed—emerged. This study, based on a theoretical framework, will be of interest to educators and administrators of distance education programs.

Résumé

Cette étude qualitative examine l'expérience d'autonomisation d'étudiantes au baccalauréat en sciences infirmières en éducation à distance et en conférence télématique en fonction de la théorie de Kanter (1977, 1993), la théorie du pouvoir structurel dans les organisations. Sept étudiantes du programme de sciences infirmières à distance ont été interviewées. Les transcriptions des entrevues ont été traitées par la méthode de l'analyse de contenu. La théorie de Kanter a été utile pour décrire les structures d'autonomisation dans les cours à distance. La rétroaction des formateurs, l'accès à la bibliothèque et le soutien de l'employeur et de la famille sont des éléments essentiels de l'autonomisation de l'expérience éducationnelle. Les étudiantes se sont ennuyées des rencontres en présentiel. Deux thèmes sans relation avec la théorie de Kanter – autogestion et la détermination à réussir – ont émergés. Cette étude, basée sur un cadre théorique, intéressera les éducateurs et les administrateurs de programme d'éducation à distance.

Substantial numbers of registered nurses (RNs) in Canada are seeking baccalaureate education (Canadian Nurses' Association, 2002-2003). Most post-diploma nursing students (Post-RNs), juggle the demands of work, family, and school. Thus the flexibility and accessibility of distance education with Web-based learning is often attractive.

As new educational technologies have become available, educational philosophy has also been changing. Nurse educators have been moving away from behavior-based curricula to humanistic educative professional paradigms. Empowering students is a critical aspect of these approaches to education (Bevis, 2000; Bevis & Murray, 1990), and the effective use of technology requires that the delivery method support program philosophical goals (Billings, Connors, & Skiba, 2001). Yet students' experiences of empowerment in distance education and Web-based learning have not been explored from a theoretical perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore Post-RN students' experiences of empowerment with computer conferencing (CC) specifically, and distance education more broadly. Burge (1994) defined CC as a form of delayeded-time, Internet-based messaging using software that captures and stores written dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), power in organizations arises out of structural conditions in the work environment. Kanter defines *power* as *the ability to get things done in an organization*. She identifies two types of power: formal and informal. Formal power is found in high-profile jobs that allow independence in decision-making; informal power comes from alliances with people at all levels within and beyond the organization: supervisors, peers, and others. People with high formal and informal power have greater access to *structural lines of power and opportunity*. The structure of power refers to lines of information, support, and supply (resources) in the organization. Employees require knowledge and information to carry out their jobs. Workers also must have support from superiors through feedback about their performance and discretion in decision-making. Resources (supplies) required by the employee include materials, money, and rewards needed to complete the work successfully. The *structure of opportunity* refers to expectations and future hope for mobility and growth. According to Kanter's theory, empowered workers have a high degree of access to these workplace empowerment structures and will, therefore, be more productive.

Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations explains the origins of empowerment in large corporate organizations. Intuitively, the constructs of Kanter's theory appear to be applicable to educational environments where the work of students is to learn. To achieve learning goals, students must function effectively in large bureaucratic educational organizations. Students enrolled in distance education must also function effectively in the organizational parameters imposed by technology and alternate delivery modes. In this study, Post-RN students'

experiences of empowerment in distance education with Web-based CC were examined for fit with the constructs of Kanter's theory.

Literature Review

Access to workplace empowerment structures as described by Kanter (1977, 1993) has been linked to positive organizational outcomes in several nursing workplaces, which included staff nurses (Laschinger & Havens, 1997; Laschinger & Wong, 1999); nurse educators (Sarmiento, Laschinger, & Iwasiw, 2004); and nurse administrators (Upienieks, 2002). Besides being linked to positive organizational outcomes, access to workplace empowerment structures was reported in at least one study as more important than personality characteristics in predicting nursing job satisfaction (Manojlovich & Laschinger, 2002).

Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations has also been useful in defining structures of empowerment for nursing students. A significant positive relationship between students' overall perceptions of empowerment and self-efficacy for professional nursing practice has been identified (Avolio, 1998). Similarly, students consistently identified that instructor support, opportunities to learn, and being valued as a member of the health care team were essential to an empowering clinical learning environment (Sinclair, 2000). In addition, nursing students who reported high levels of structural empowerment in a problem-based curriculum also reported high levels of psychological empowerment (Siu, Laschinger, & Vingilis, 2005).

Worrell, McGinn, Black, Holloway, and Ney (1996) instituted a model of empowerment with post-RN students built on the outcomes of collegiality, communication, autonomy, and accountability. They noted that after the model was implemented, students were much more creative and autonomous in their methods of meeting course competences. This model has some similarity to Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory. Collegiality and communication may be likened to lines of information and support, and accountability is similar to the outcome of effective work behaviors. As well, the environment in which students encountered staff and clients was an important component of an empowering educational environment for nursing students in a clinical practicum in a grounded theory study described by Pearson (1998). These findings concur with Kanter's assertion that the environment in which a person works or studies plays an important role in the empowering experience.

No studies were found describing structures of empowerment in distance education for nursing students. However, some research describes conditions for success in Web-based learning and distance education. Many are remarkably similar to empowerment structures described by

Kanter (1977, 1993). Access to resources is important if one is to be success-ful in a role. Confidence with computers and access to up-to-date technol-ogy are essential for students to feel comfortable with Web-based distance education (Cragg, 1994; Kenny, 2002). As well, post-RN students need formal and informal supports to be successful in Web-based learning (Oelhkers & Gibson, 2001). Isolation has been found to be negatively correlated with satisfaction and socialization in Web-based learning (Bill-ings et al., 2001). This corresponds to Kanter's belief that employees (in this case students) need to know what is going on in an organization.

Kozlowski (2004) noted the high dropout rate of distance education students. She suggested that the following structural conditions might be helpful to ensure success in online distance education programs: facili-tators must be available; assistance should be given with term papers; and frequent postings of encouragement should be given to students. These parallel Kanter's (1977, 1993) structures of resources, support, and infor-mation.

Shortcomings have been noted in the research on Web-based learning and distance education. Much of the work evaluating distance education and Web-based learning in nursing has been atheoretical (Thurmond, 2002). This is also true for distance education in general (Dillon, 1996; Merisotis, 1999; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Svazek, 2006). Theory-based research rather than expository and anecdotal accounts of experi-ences will serve to strengthen the knowledge base underpinning decisions related to distance education. If Web-based learning is to continue as an educational option for nursing students, it is vital to discover how these students perceive their experiences of empowerment as learners in this type of delivery mode.

Methodology

A qualitative, explanatory design was selected to gain understanding of distance learners' experiences with empowerment and to explain these experiences using an existing theory. Miller and Crabtree (1992) state that qualitative data may be used to test explanatory theory by evaluating it in various contexts. The following questions may be asked: Is the original theory correct? Does the original theory fit other circumstances? Are there additional categories or relationships? Miles and Huberman (1994) sug-gest that qualitative data can help researchers go beyond initial concepts to generate or revise conceptual frameworks. A researcher may begin with a conceptual framework and take it to the field for testing, refinement, or qualification.

In the present study, Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations was tested with post-RN students in distance education settings. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, the student had to be

enrolled in or have just completed a distance-delivered course with a CC component. These students used a variety of asynchronous course management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard. Deductive and inductive analysis, described below, was carried out on data obtained from audiotaped telephone interviews. The interviews were guided by a researcher-developed semistructured questionnaire based on the categories derived from Kanter's theory. The themes generated from the interviews were then examined for fit with Kanter's theory. Themes that did not fit with Kanter's theory were also noted.

Following ethics board approval, the researcher contacted the Deans/Directors of four Canadian university schools of nursing for permission to recruit post-RN students studying by distance education. Review from individual university's ethics boards was obtained as needed. Seven post-RNs completing a baccalaureate degree in nursing by distance education in Canadian universities that offered a component of their program by CC were interviewed by telephone. Interviews, lasting between 45-60 minutes, were audiotaped. Demographic data were also collected. Three students enrolled in their first CC course were interviewed near the end of the semester, and four students with previous CC experience were interviewed approximately midway through the semester.

The sample consisted of seven RNs completing a baccalaureate degree in nursing by distance education in Canadian universities that offered a component of their program by CC. All were English-speaking, Canadian women ranging in age from 24 to 50 years. The average age was 38.4 years. Four students had an RN diploma, and one had completed two other university degrees before this program. One student had completed several certificate courses in nursing (e.g., trauma management), and one had previously been a Registered Practical Nurse, completed her RN diploma, and had worked as a medical secretary. Four students were married and actively raising families. Two were single with no children; one was a single mother with one small child. Six of the seven students worked full time in nursing; one worked part time in a field other than nursing.

Content analysis proceeded in a manner most comparable to a schema outlined by Downe-Wamboldt (1992). The unit of analysis was the theme. Categories based on Kanter's (1977, 1993) conceptual framework, the Theory of Structural Power in Organizations, were predefined (see Figure 1). Coding rules were established so that each theme could be classified into categories. On some occasions, data fitted more than one category or did not fit into any predetermined category. The coding scheme was reviewed by an expert in distance education familiar with Kanter's theory. The

transcripts were read several times and open-coded. The themes that emerged were matched to the list of preexisting categories based on the conceptual framework, and those noted with greatest frequency were determined to be most important. Those occurring with less frequency and outlying themes were also examined.

Once no new ideas or themes emerged from the data, it was determined that data saturation had been achieved (Morse, 1999). Excerpts from interview data that best reflected the theme were selected to express participants' perceptions as they related (or not) to established categories. Transcripts were also reviewed by one of the co-researchers.

Item/Category (Preset) A priori	Definition Kanter	Adapted definition For student role, in computer conferencing and distance education
Empowering environment	Mobilize resources Ability to get things done Be effective in a role	Achieve student goals successfully Mobilize resources to progress successfully Flexible use of time Accessibility of distance learning Accessibility of courses
Knowledge	Knowledge and information necessary to carry out the job	Web pages Technical knowledge to use computer software Information re assignments—what is required Informal information, connecting with peers
Resources	Materials, money, rewards	Computer Computer software Bursaries Scholarships Course outlines, books Library
Support	Positive feedback Discretion in decision-making	Access to professor Leadership from professor Information re progress Academic consultation Flexibility in course offerings and when to take them Flexibility in assignments
Opportunity	Chances to advance in the organization Participate in change and innovation	Personal growth Professional growth Learning opportunities Challenging assignments Opportunity to think and reflect Number and types of courses available Recognition for previous learning

Figure 1. Predefined categories.

Results and Interpretation

Empowering/Disempowering Learning Environments

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), an empowering environment is one in which employees are able to mobilize resources to get the job done, to get and use whatever they need for the goals they are attempting to meet.

Participants were asked to describe what the term *empowering learning environment* meant to them. Five students reported that for a learning environment to be empowering, it must permit flexibility in their use of time. Students wished to do their schoolwork on their own schedules. It also meant that they could travel, work, and continue studying. As well, they could arrange schoolwork around their families' needs. One student said, "I'm a single working mother so I liked the freedom of time I could pursue. I could do my own reading and my work whenever, including five o'clock in the morning or late at night." The accessibility of distance education was also empowering to this group of participants. Six noted that distance education gave them an opportunity that they might not otherwise have had to complete their baccalaureate degree. Not all students agreed that distance education with CC was empowering, as evident in the following excerpt. "Nothing here has given me any power, I just have to do it, there is nothing empowering about it." This student declared that she had been unable to access grades from the previous term and was unable to contact the professor. As well, she would have preferred to attend lectures, but the nursing course in which she was enrolled was given via the Web and she had no choice but to do it that way. She was a single woman, not raising a family, and time flexibility was not a priority for her.

Application to Kanter's theory. These descriptions of positive and negative aspects of distance education with CC support the constructs of Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory. The accessibility of distance education makes the resource of education available to students. The flexibility of CC permits students to mobilize the resource of time. Participants' descriptions of having access to the resources they need to be successful are similar to Kanter's conceptualization of empowering environments. As well, the student who was unable to access vital information (her grade) felt powerless and frustrated, again supporting the constructs of the theory.

Structure of Information

Participants noted that a well-organized school of nursing Web page was essential to finding information successfully and efficiently. Appropriate links on the Web page were considered helpful. All students used e-mail to connect with each other and the course professor. As well, all used the

telephone to clarify information, ask for technical help, or seek academic consultation. Three students indicated that they would have been able to clarify their questions or issues more efficiently in a face-to-face discussion, especially in regard to assignments. One participant noted that everyone in her class seemed to have a different idea about what was required to complete the assignment properly. Another student expressed frustration with the poor grade she received for her assignment, attributing this to a lack of understanding about expectations.

Participants enjoyed connecting with each other through CC. One student mentioned that while she was away from home, "I still have the opportunity of looking in on the discussion postings to see what all my other classmates are thinking about the week's questions. It's almost like going to school with people, not quite." Two students reported that being able to connect with other RNs across the country was empowering to them. One said, "I really enjoyed the group interaction.... it was interesting meeting people [virtually] from all over the country."

Six participants missed face-to-face contact. They said that it was important to know the other person's context, and that it was easier to do this in face-to-face discussions. Nonverbal information was perceived as important for understanding and following other people's points of view. One student said, "There is a downside for me. I like to have contacts with group discussion, even though I know you can do it online."

Application to Kanter's theory. Students indicated that overall, they had access to "routine" information such as Web pages and the information in course outlines. However, instructions from faculty were sometimes difficult to understand. This led to frustration and feelings of disempowerment. They believed that communicating through CC brought a sense of belonging to a group. However, the lack of face-to-face contact led to a deficit in communication. Thus there were empowering and disempowering aspects to acquiring necessary information while enrolled in a distance education course delivered via CC.

Structure of Resources

Participants said that they had access to the hardware and software needed to complete their courses by distance education with CC. Although all reported computer glitches, they resolved them with assistance from the university's technical department, their professors, or family members. All reported receiving course outlines and other course materials including textbooks in a timely fashion.

Participants considered the Web as a vast resource for academic assignments. However, four students reported that finding library resources in a timely and dependable manner had been difficult. "They had posted readings that we were supposed to read and they were not available. So I

spent hours looking for these articles that weren't available to me … because I live so far away from anything up here."

Four indicated that access to a librarian to assist them with searches on specific topics would have been helpful. They noted that students who live in remote communities without a local university or college might feel particularly disadvantaged concerning library resources. "Well, with this course, the papers did not require that many references. We have access to the library on-line … I think if I had to write sort of a real paper, that would be very difficult." One participant spontaneously noted the lack of scholarships for distance education students.

Application to Kanter's theory. This group of students was reasonably satisfied with their computer resources and support. However, to feel empowered, they needed consistent access to library resources. This finding is congruent with Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory, which states that people must have access to the materials they need to feel empowered in their roles.

Structure of Support

Almost all participants (*n*=6) reported that instructors' participation in their CC group discussion forums was unpredictable and inconsistent. Lack of instructor presence and participation in courses led to frustration and disappointment. "In my CC course there is actually no feedback at all … and I'm not sure if I like it or not … the discussions are just with other students." Students noted that they had enrolled in a course to benefit from the instructor's expertise and knowledge. Three said that feedback on assignments and grades received were timelier in print-based distance education courses. They also expressed that they needed the instructor's leadership to guide the discussion and keep them on track. "Sometimes they really need to come in and give us a bit of direction because we can really get off topic and sort of beam off on a tangent somewhere."

Although all students reported that many times when they wanted more guidance, they could also recall instances when instructor participation had made a real difference in increasing their satisfaction with taking a course by CC. When present, instructors' participation was highly valued. One student, pleased with the instructor's support in the CC medium, said, "Teachers are always putting up postings saying that we are doing good work and that our views are good. We get personal e-mails about our marks saying how we are doing." All participants were satisfied with the accessibility of academic consultation with regard to courses that should or could be taken and how they should structure their course loads.

Six students worked as RNs; one worked in a non-nursing field. Support from employers and families was essential to permit these nurses to study by distance education. Almost all (*n*=5) felt that their employers and peers were supportive. One said, "I have access to the Internet [at work] and I can do it [course work] in my breaks and on my lunch hour at work with no problem. My employer is very, very supportive." Another shared, "I'm able to access my course through the computer at work and use fax machines." Not all participants experienced support from their employers. One stated, "With the distance education, it just seems to me that it would be easier to get that support from an institution but it didn't happen once we went to distance education. It's not there, period."

Support from peers at work was essential. "The girl I shared the [position] with took over the full-time position all summer so that I could do this." Support from family was also evident. "My husband was very accommodating to give up his summer and work time and a half to support us while I wasn't making money."

Application to Kanter's theory. These findings support the tenets of Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory. Namely, structures must be present in the distance learning environment if students are to have an empowering learning experience. Support from the instructor in CC courses is essential. As well, most employed students noted that support and encouragement from employers and families were essential to their success. Students who did not have employers' support felt bitter that their professional development efforts were not recognized.

Structure of Opportunity

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), the structure of opportunity refers to chances to advance in the organization and to develop knowledge and skills. Five students reported that information discovered in their CC course discussions was applicable to their professional work as RNs. "Most of what I have taken can relate to where I am working." Another noted, "I think there is definitely a positive aspect to being able to still work while you're learning and being able to apply what you've learned to work." Students also spoke about sharing professional ideas and information in their discussion groups. Six felt that they had benefited personally from the online discussions. They reported that CC encouraged them to think, reflect, and be more confident in expressing their points of view. "I can sit there and I have a lot of time to think and write down what I want to say, so I make sure that I'm saying exactly what it is I want to say."

When asked about the numbers and types of courses available by distance, participants had varied reactions. One said her program was regimented; however, this did not alter her enjoyment of it. Two felt that

taking clinical courses by distance education was challenging and that clinical options were limited in isolated areas. One student reported that the number of non-nursing electives was limited, and another noted that popular courses were often not available. Students were especially pleased when credit was offered formally for previous coursework that was related to their degrees and areas of concentration. Overall, students communicated that their professors had been flexible and helpful in letting them proceed through the courses at their own pace within program parameters. This included giving them extensions for submitting assignments if their personal lives became busy.

Application to Kanter's theory. Students shared that distance education with CC offered them many opportunities for personal and professional growth. This increased self-efficacy and satisfaction with their studies assisted them to be successful in their courses. They found the learning experiences empowering, supporting the constructs of Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory.

Themes Unrelated to Kanter's Theory

Two themes—self-direction and determination to succeed—that did not fit with Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory emerged from the data. Participants spoke of the personal commitment required to be successful in this learning environment. This was expressed in differing ways. One participant said, "There is no lecture to go to … I have to read … that has been better for me. It makes me a more self-directed learner." Making a schedule and sticking to it was also important. Another student shared, "The only way I got through it was by scheduling my time and sticking to it … you have to be disciplined."

The determination of these students to succeed was evident. Keeping the end goal in mind was perceived as helpful. "I am going to do what it takes to be successful in obtaining this goal [of finishing the degree]." Another participant stated that, although she did not receive much support from her employer, she was determined to reach her goal. "I have accepted the things that are not going to change … if you want to do it, you just do it."

Finally, one student expressed how much energy it sometimes required of her to study as a mature student. "You may die doing it, but you do it. Sometimes falling asleep at the kitchen table."

These statements reveal that Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory was useful in assisting students to describe what they found empowering or disempowering about their educational experiences. However, additional themes emerged, and the theory did not fully capture what led to success in this educational environment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine nursing students' experiences of empowerment in a distance education setting that used CC for congruency with Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations. According to Kanter, an empowering environment is one in which employees are able to mobilize resources to get the job done, to get and use whatever they need for the goals they are attempting to meet. This learning environment was empowering in that it gave students access to education and permitted them to use time efficiently to meet their educational goals. Although satisfied with the accessibility and flexibility of distance education with CC, participants also noted deficits in this type of educational delivery. Interview data supported Waddell and Hayes' (2000) conclusion that online courses and degree programs may sacrifice certain benefits of classroom dynamics while increasing accessibility. We briefly discuss these deficits and offer suggestions for improvement in the delivery of Web-based education.

Structure of Information

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), employees require information to carry out their jobs effectively. Such knowledge includes technical knowledge to get the job done and knowledge of what is going on in the organization. For students in a distance education setting, this includes program and course information, technical information, and connections with peers.

Students in this study reported that information such as course outlines arrived on time. However, they often felt a need to have face-to-face discussions with instructors or other students. Perhaps there is a need to supplement CC with other technologies such as tele- or videoconferencing, chat, or voice-over Internet protocols such as Elluminate. If possible, opportunities could be available for face-to-face meetings with students who can arrange these. Professors could also be available by telephone should the need for support arise.

Structure of Resources

According to Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory, employees need access to materials, money, and rewards in order to be empowered to do effective work. This may be extrapolated to students in a distance education setting who need a computer, software, access to a library, as well as course outlines and books when completing distance education courses. Availability of scholarships, a valuable resource to complete programs, could be considered in relation to this structure.

Relying solely on the Internet for library resources was frustrating to more than half of study participants. This is especially difficult for students who live in areas that do not have a local college or university to

supplement information received through the Internet. Cain, Marrara, Pitre, and Armour (2003), in a qualitative study with eight distance learners, noted that most students used library resources nearest to their residence rather than using online services offered by the main campus. Efforts must be made to increase library resources, including instruction in conducting literature searches more consistently for all distance education students. Udod and Care (2002) suggest that reading materials should be provided directly to students by mail. This option could be revisited for students who live in remote areas.

Structure of Support

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), employees need support to function in a way that maximizes effectiveness. Positive feedback from superiors and the chance to exercise discretion in decision-making are also important aspects of this empowerment structure. For a student in a distance-learning program with CC, this might include access to internal supports such as the course professor, academic consultation, and leadership from the professor and feedback about progress, as well as supports from outside the organization.

Inconsistent instructor presence was noted by participants in this study. The literature indicates that students need the presence of the instructor (Andrusyszyn, 1996; Townsend et al., 2002; Zhang, Perris, & Yeung, 2005). The instructor is the expert learner and "plays a key role in establishing a balance between structure and dialogue" (Murphy & Cifuentes, 2001). This lack of presence might suggest that instructors may not be comfortable in online facilitation or be overwhelmed with high course enrollments. Hewitt-Taylor (2003) states that the availability of tutorial staff skilled in facilitating learning for students with whom they are not in face-to-face contact has been overlooked in the development of distance education. This is an important element as it creates the distinction between a distance education experience and the isolated use of material (Hewitt-Taylor). A task force initiated by the Council of Ontario Universities (2000) suggested that supporting faculty and students who use learning technologies is a critical aspect in the appropriate and effective use of learning technologies. Access to empowerment structures of support and resources are important constructs in Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory and were noted as important in this group of participants.

Structure of Opportunity

According to Kanter (1977, 1993), the structure of opportunity refers to chances to advance in the organization and to develop knowledge and skills. For students in a distance learning environment, this refers to op-

portunities for professional and personal growth. Examples of these are the availability of learning opportunities, challenging courses, and opportunities to think and reflect.

Participants stated that they frequently used information gained in their distance education course to improve their professional practice. This phenomenon has been recently documented in the literature (Kozlowski, 2004). Atack and Rankin (2002) found that RNs who needed access to the Internet at work while studying by Web-based learning encountered barriers such as insufficient time and limited computer access. Thus more support from employers and increased access to the Internet at work are recommended as sources of support and opportunity.

Only one student commented on the lack of scholarships for distance education students. However, this area deserves attention. Both employers and universities could offer opportunities for RNs who meet professional goals by distance education to apply for bursaries or scholarships.

Additional Themes: Persistence and Determination to Succeed

The findings in this study indicate that Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory is useful in defining structural influences on student empowerment in distance education. In this context, empowerment means being able to reach educational goals. In addition, students noted that people must contribute to their own success through persistence and determination to succeed. These latter two points did not fit the theory, but were important emergent themes of learner empowerment. These themes are similar to the finding of Murphy and Cifuentes (2001) that self regulation and persistence were integral to success in the online environment, especially with first-time users.

Summary

The field of distance education is diverse and continually evolving. For example, Wallace (1996) noted the changing demographics of the distance learner: the distance education student is younger, may have local residence, and combines independent study with on campus courses. More recently, Muirhead (2005) noted that distance education has moved from the margins of the academy to a more central strategic position. He notes the "growing digital lifestyle of most students in advanced economies" and further states that the idea of students and faculty working together in a noncontiguous asynchronous manner is usual, expected, and desired.

The essential nature of the distance learning experience has been debated. Moore and Kearsley (1996) believe that distance education is different in that you cannot see how students react, so you need to pay more attention to how students are supported. Shale (as cited in Simonson

et al., 2006), on the other hand, does not believe that physical separation changes the essential process of learning and teaching.

All these factors lead to a lively discussion in the distance education literature as to what type of theory should be used to inform research in the field. Gibson (2003) sums up the debate by asking if the field of distance education should generate new theories, build on existing theories, or borrow theories from other disciplines, and asks if borrowed theories should be modified.

The value of Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations may be delineated by calling on Saba's (2003) definition of distance education, which he describes as "a complex set of relationships between learners and teachers within various types of industrially structured organizations." Kanter's theory describes the structural component of empowerment in such organizations.

Kanter states that structural factors, and not personality characteristics, are the determinants of empowerment in organizations. The theory, however, does not describe learners' contributions to their own success. Students in this study reported that their own determination to succeed and their ability to work autonomously were important factors that contributed to their success.

A balance is needed between support and guidance from the institution and the learner's contribution to an empowering learning experience. Clearly what is needed is a distance education theory that describes how autonomy and responsibility interact with support and guidance to create an empowering learning experience in which students achieve success.

Limitations

Gathering data via telephone interviews was efficient and cost-effective. However, this method may have limited the richness of the data obtained. One of the challenges of this study was the low response rate of distance education students to postings about the research on online course bulletin boards. A larger number of participants would have given a wider range of students' experiences to examine. It is possible that the title of the study attracted only participants who felt empowered or had a specific message to share. Although data saturation was achieved with this group of participants, more global, less structured questions may have enabled more elaboration on particular topics.

All participants were enrolled in Canadian distance education nursing programs for RNs completing their baccalaureate degrees. However, individual courses and programs in which these students were enrolled were not examined. It is possible that the empowerment structures students perceived as lacking were actually present in the educational en-

vironments, but that they needed more confidence and expertise to access them. As well, transcripts of online course dialogue were not examined for evidence of empowerment structures.

This research was about the applicability of Kanter's (1977, 1993) theory, and some of the constructs were evident in the findings. However, some responses from the students to the interview guide seemed to be related to personality characteristics (persistence and determination to succeed), which Kanter did not include in the origins of empowerment in her theory. Persistence and determination to succeed are particularly important attributes in distance education learning environments.

Conclusion

Empowering nursing students has been a theme in the nursing education literature for the past several years. Post-RN nursing students' experiences of empowerment and disempowerment with distance education and Web-based education were examined in this study. Kanter's (1977, 1993) Theory of Structural Power in Organizations was applicable in describing structural empowerment in this distance education population. Further empirical and qualitative research is needed to define empowerment structures in distance education and Web-based learning as these delivery media expand in nursing education.

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