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Advanced Practice Nursing Students' Experiences of the Virtual Learning Cafe Method

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Abstract: Background: The Learning Café method based on educational constructivism may increasingly be used as Online Learner Collaboration facilitated by the teacher. Purpose: This qualitative study draws together Advanced Practice Nursing students' experiences of the Virtual Learning Café method. The findings can be useful when evaluating the suitability of the method for students undertaking Master-level health or social studies, especially from the perspective of developing evidence-based clinical practice and interprofessional collaboration. Materials and Methods: 28 nursing students earning a Master's Degree in Advanced Practice Nursing were requested to write an essay reflecting on a Virtual Learning Café experience. The data was analyzed using inductive content analysis. Results: The study participants agreed that the Virtual Learning Café could be effectively used for both learning and development, or as a *collaborative learning structure* and *as a model* transferable to the development of health service practice. According to the participants, the method may be effective in development efforts for individual professionals, in interprofessional teams, in and between organizations, and between citizens and health service professionals. The participants appreciated the dialogic and participatory nature of the method and emphasized collective construction of knowledge. Conclusion: The Virtual Learning Café method is a suitable learning method for advanced students who already know each other and wish to participate in virtual sessions from any location. The method may be used to develop evidence-based clinical practice. It may also be useful in promoting interprofessional collaboration.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Café, Online interaction, Collaborative learning, Dialogic Learning/Interaction, Online Learner Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Robust evidence is required on the effect of technology-enabled solutions on the learning experience (Kinney and Kinney 2024) and on the role of participatory learning methods to meet the needs of the working life (Salminen 2025).

Online Learner Collaboration, OLC, is an example of contemporary approaches. In contrast to co-operative learning, collaborative learning emphasises constructivism, critical pedagogy and loosely structured group processes (Yang 2023). In the online environment, where feelings of isolation and technical problems may occur, the learner collaboration approach can increase relationship building and communication. The teacher's role is mainly to plan, facilitate and evaluate the learning process (Oyarzun and Martin 2023; Oyarzum et al. 2025).

As an example of OLC, this study deals with a Virtual Learning Café course in one of the Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland, where the use of online learning has increased following the COVID-19 pandemic. As in this article, the Virtual Learning Café

method can be seen as a pedagogical whole, where the technical tool, small group work, predefined roles, scheduling and shared documentation create a framework for participation, interaction and knowledge construction (Sidiropoulou, Sidiropoulou, and Foti 2021). The success of such online collaboration much depends on careful planning, facilitation and support of the learning process (Oyarzun and Martin 2023).

BACKGROUND

The Learning Café is a variant of the World Cafe method founded by Brown and Isaacs (2005) as a tool for learning and change management. Whereas the World Café process was used for large-scale, open-ended dialogues, the Learning Café imported the idea into education and training (CaBatt Project 2023). Based on the constructivist learning theory, the method combines experiential learning and reflection. An important attribute in World and Learning Cafés is what can be called idea cross-pollination through the systematic rotation of participants among tables (Brown and Isaacs 2005). A Learning Café can rapidly generate a large amount of data illustrating various viewpoints (Schiele et al. 2022). A study of Sidiropoulou, Sidiropoulou, and Foti (2021) found the World Cafe method appropriate for postgraduate (Master) students in promoting dialogue and active participation.

Educational constructivism, which can be claimed to underlie the Learning Café method, deals with forming knowledge and understanding the world in relation to target knowledge as defined in a curriculum. In educational constructivism, learning can be seen as an outcome of dialogue and discussion of ideas (Taber 2024). Today, the Learning Café process can take place online. For example, Ross-Sokolovsky et al. (2024) confirmed that the Virtual Café method could improve students' confidence and willingness to communicate in L2 English in an international setting. Sidiropoulou Sidiropoulou, and Foti (2021) provided a Virtual World Café for postgraduate future educators to allow them to experience the power of conversation. As pointed out by McKimm et al. (2020), a positive tone and ‘psychological safety’ are important for collective learning and collegiality in Virtual Café processes.

Besides formal education settings, the method is well suited for development and learning processes in expert organizations (Brown and Isaacs 2005). As reported by Korrigan-Cavanagh, Plumbley, and Frohlich (2025) a Virtual World Café was used as a product design method in collaboration with potential end-users. In addition, the Virtual Learning Café has been used for qualitative data collection (e.g. Kinney and Kinney, 2024; Löhr, Weinhardt, and Sieber 2020). As shown by Blankenburg et al. (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic, it can also be useful for rapid dissemination of information and educational best practices. The CaBatt Learning Café Guide for Good Practices (2023) sums up some essential attributes of the Learning Café: (1) Active participation based in small groups; (2) Idea-sharing and co-creation; (3) Collaborative problem-solving; (4) Constructing understanding through active talking, learning and reflection; and (5) A supportive learning culture in an informal and welcoming setting.

PURPOSE

This qualitative study draws together Advanced Practice Nursing students’ experiences of the Virtual Learning Café method as a learning method. The findings can be useful when

evaluating the suitability of the method for students undertaking Master-level health or social studies, especially from the perspective of developing evidence-based clinical practice and interprofessional collaboration.

The research question was: What kind of experiences had nursing students earning a Master's Degree in Advanced Practice Nursing gain of the Virtual Learning Café method?

INTERVENTION

The intervention discussed in this paper was a Virtual Learning Café piloted by 28 nursing students earning a Master's Degree in Advanced Practice Nursing. The Learning Café was part their course in the development of evidence-based clinical nursing.

The Virtual Learning Café was planned and implemented in collaboration between a Principal Lecturer in Advanced Practice Nursing and a Specialist in Digital Pedagogy. The Principal Lecturer was responsible for planning the contents and topics for the Learning Café, whereas the Digital Pedagogy Specialist focused on the pedagogical planning and technical implementation of the course.

The Learning Café topics involved transformational leadership; introducing new practices; embedding and sustaining practices; challenges in embedding evidence-based practices; competence development; improving patient safety; and the role of digital solutions in the dissemination of practices.

The Microsoft Teams collaboration platform was used for the Virtual Learning Café to ensure seamless interaction (Pal and Vanijja 2020). The pedagogical structure consisted of 7 rounds of 20-minute discussions in small groups using pre-defined scheduling, topics and participant roles; shared documentation on the digital Microsoft Whiteboard canvas; and a harvest session.

The 28 students were divided into seven breakout rooms, four students for each café topic. As is typical of the Learning Café method, (Löhr, Weinhardt, and Sieber 2020), each café had a permanent Table Host, while the other participants circulated from one topic to another according to the pre-defined schedule and Lecturer's reminders in the break out room. To ensure visual documentation and to facilitate shared construction of knowledge, the outcomes of the discussions were gathered real-time on the Microsoft Whiteboard. The process culminated in the last "harvest" session (Brown and Isaacs 2005), where the table hosts presented the most significant insights and conclusions to the entire group.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection

The participants were 28 nursing students earning a Master's Degree in Advanced Practice Nursing at a Master School. They came from various parts of Finland. Their age varied between 25 and 60, and they reported 2-30 years of work experience in nursing specialities. They were requested to write an essay on their experiences after a Virtual Learning Café using Microsoft Teams. They uploaded their essays on a Learning Platform called Moodle. Both Teams and Moodle were familiar environments to the students, but this was the first time they used the digital canvas Whiteboard.

Data Analysis

The findings are based on an inductive content analysis (Polit and Beck 2018; Elo et al. 2022). After reading through the data (142 pages, font 12, spacing 1.5) several times for an overview, all quotes representing a response to the research question were moved to a Word file and rewritten in a reduced form. These units of meaning contained the core ideas of the original material. Categories were formed based on comparable contents and combined into higher order categories. The source data was reviewed from time to time to verify the accuracy of the analysis (Polit and Beck 2018).

Research Ethics

The study followed the ethical principles outlined by TENK, the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2023), in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association 2024). Participation was voluntary; written permission was requested from the students to use the essays anonymously for qualitative research purposes. None of the students declined consent.

The data was analyzed systematically, openly and meticulously in phases (TENK 2023) and the findings were illustrated using tables and original participant quotes. One researcher conducted the analysis, but both researchers read through all data and discussed the findings, which improves the reliability of the study. Citation and referencing guidelines were carefully observed.

In planning the intervention, the collaboration between the planners, a Principal Lecturer in Advanced Practice Nursing and a Specialist in Digital Pedagogy, was effective in combining pedagogical and digital understanding, but since the same persons conducted the research, special attention was paid to identifying and limiting confirmation bias.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis were twofold: On one hand, the study participants saw the Virtual Learning Café as a versatile *development method* that could be used at many levels and contexts (Table 1). On the other hand, they considered it a dialogic and participatory *learning method*, a tool for the construction of collective competence (Table 2). The feedback for the method was predominantly positive, although a few students reported that using the Whiteboard was time consuming and difficult. The findings below are illustrated by participant quotes, labeled P1, P2, etc.

Table 1: Development of Health Service Competence and Collaborative Structures through the The Virtual Learning Café

Sub-category	Generic Category	Main Category
Interaction and collaboration	Individual competence	The Virtual Learning Café in developing health service competence and collaborative structures
Critical thinking		
Understanding others		
Facilitator competency		
Incorporating diverse staff perspectives	Multiprofessional team collaboration	
Staff engagement		
Open multiprofessional interaction		

Multiprofessional collaboration		
Team communication		
Sharing experiences and seeking solutions together		
Care strategies	Clinical competence of the organization/department	
Patient safety and care quality		
Ideation of methods, threats and solutions		
Combining experiential knowledge and research		
Position profiles		
Updating contents		
Equal engagement of nurses, advanced practice nurses and superiors		
Supporting the change process		
Commitment to change through shared ideation		
Motivation for the development of care practices		
Interprofessional collaboration	Collaboration between organizations	
Shared projects		
Multidisciplinary collaboration		
Experts from diverse organizations		
New practices for the entire Wellbeing Services County		
Collaboration between home care or nursing, police and rescue services		
Common learning café for patients and health service professionals	Collaboration between citizens and health service professionals and experts	
Dialogue between patients and professionals		
Health literacy to engage citizens		

Development of Competence and Collaborative Structures

According to the study participants, the Virtual Learning Café can be used as a development method both at the level of individual professionals and at collective level, for example in interprofessional teams, in and between organizations, and between citizens and health service professionals.

First, the study participants suggested that an individual professional could use the Learning Café method to increase their critical thinking, as well as interaction, collaboration and facilitation skills. The method might also increase the understanding of other people. In the words of one participant,

'The method offers students an opportunity to practise interaction and dialogic skills in a safe environment, where listening and respecting diverse viewpoints take centre stage' (P21).

Second, the participants found that the Virtual Learning Café could be useful for building interprofessional team collaboration. They mentioned the need for collaboration between nursing, social services, physiotherapy and medicine. The method could help engage staff members in the development of their work by fostering dialogic interaction and collaboration between the various professionals. If open communication was reached, it would allow bringing together diverse perspectives and experiences, which would form the basis for shared ideation, solution-seeking and definition of common goals and practices. To quote,

'The café environment makes it possible to get to know the roles and perspectives of other professional groups. It is a flexible and cost-effective method that combines learning, participation and collaboration'(P 27).

Third, in the opinion of the study participants, the Virtual Learning Café could be used to develop clinical nursing and position profiles in a health service organization or department. The Learning Café might provide a venue for the integration of experiential

knowledge and research evidence. Other examples given by the participants included care quality, care strategies and patient safety. These areas of development could be approached from the perspectives of threats, methods and solutions. To quote two of the study participants,

The Virtual Learning Café works especially well in the development of nursing in situations, in which shared understanding, combining experiential knowledge and research evidence, as well as staff commitment to change are needed.' (P3); and 'the Virtual Learning Café method supports collaborative learning and offers a structure for combining research evidence with clinical experience and development of nursing.´(P15).

The study participants pointed out that the Virtual Learning Café was well suited for training staff on new contents; it was equally accessable to nurses, advanced nurse practitioners and their superiors. The method could be used to support change processes and commitment to change through shared ideation. In addition, the method might increase motivation for the development of care practices. Some of the participant contributions are presented below:

'It is suitable when new care guidelines, instructions or action models are introduced' (P 18); 'The method has potential to be used in diverse teaching situations and development needs in an organization, and its pedagogical potential will continue to grow as technology is developed further' (P 14); ' In my work, the Learning Café could be used on professional development days or at the monthly team meeting' (P 21); The method could be used to introduce new things, so that team leaders choose topics to be discussed in the group' (P 23); and 'If the technical environment, scheduling and structure of work are planned carefully, the method will become an effective and pleasant way to address complex themes and to build common understanding to develop the organization' (P 26).

Fourth, the study participants noted that the Virtual Learning Café could be effective in collaboration between organizations, for example in the development of interprofessional collaboration, shared projects and other interdisciplinary collaboration. They said,

'The Learning Café would be a splendid way to develop practices and take into consideration each expert's strenghts and position profiles' (P 16); "The lack of tacit knowledge transfer is a problem with the increasing retirement rate in nursing. The Virtual Learning Café would be a good way to transfer knowledge and skills. Experienced nurses could run the Learning Café and use it to orient new nurses' (P 26).

The study participants further pointed out that the Virtual Learning Café allowed for participation from anywhere in the county responsible for organizing health and social services of the region. This could improve collaboration with home care, police and rescue services, help incorporate diverse perspectives to the client's or patient's situation and create new practices. To quote,

'The virtual environment makes it possible to participate from any location without travelling costs. That's why I see the Virtual Learning Café method as a cost-effective solution in the current tight economic situation, where organizations must seek ways to provide high quality training and development methods economically and effectively' (P 18); and 'The Virtual Learning Café lowers the threshold of participation and the participants can join the discussion irrespective of location' (P 21).

Finally, the study participants found that the Virtual Learning Café could constitute a bridge between citizens and health service professionals. The collaboration could involve, for example, a patient-professional Learning Café to improve dialogue, health literacy and meeting patient needs and wishes. In the study participants' own words,

'I believe I could well use the Learning Café in my work, both in the working community and with my clients' (P 23); and 'The Learning Café could also be used in training nurses, and experts by experience could be involved' (P 27).

Table 2: Construction of collective competence through participatory and dialogic learning

Sub-category	Generic Category	Main Category
Dialogue	Interactive learning	The Virtual Learning Café as an inclusive, dialogic learning method
Encouraging discussion		
Hearing all participants		
Being included	Inclusion	
Sharing views and experiences		
Encouraging reflection		
Groupwork skills and methods	Collaboration	
Teamwork skills		
Peer learning		
Collaborative learning		
Compiling concrete knowledge	Collective construction of knowledge	
Co-development		
Seeking shared solutions		
Seeking common understanding		
Ideation		
Sense of community		

Construction of Collective Competence

While in the first main category (Table 1), the focus was on the *development* of competence and collaborative structures, in the second main category (Table 2), it was on participatory, dialogic *learning*.

To start with, the participants appreciated the Virtual Learning Café method as a form of interactive learning. They found that they had been encouraged to speak their minds but also to listen to others. In other words, the method allowed for genuine dialogue.

Second, the participants felt included; they had an opportunity to share their viewpoints and experiences. The Learning Café also provided a platform for deeper reflection, as illustrated by some of the participant quotes:

'The method supports inclusive teaching, sharing of knowledge and experiential learning in a digital learning environment, which makes it a useful tool for future learning practices' (P 4); 'Mutual learning takes place exactly in this kind of environments, where it is not just about passive reception of information, but active participation, discussion and learning together' (P 5); and ' The discussion encouraged, even forced you to reflect on things from your own perspective and to give reasons for your opinions' (P 5).

Third, according to the participants, the Virtual Learning Cafe method could be an effective tool in learning collaboration; that is group and team work, peer learning and collaborative learning. In the words of one participant, 'It is important to create an environment, where the participants can share knowledge and learn together. This way they can be satisfied with the sessions, because discussions and shared reflection can help them deepen their understanding and provide reciprocal support' (P2).

Last, the participants found that the Virtual Learning Café could be used in collective construction of knowledge. This could involve, for example, compilation of concrete knowledge; co-development/co-creation/ideation; and seeking shared solutions and common understanding founded on a sense of community. To quote two participants,

'In my experience, the Virtual Learning Café can still be an excellent teaching method, because it fosters discussion and collaborative learning' (P 2) and 'It gives you an opportunity to share your experiences, which can strengthen the feeling of being heard. You can share knowledge and construct it together' (P 7).

DISCUSSION

In this qualitative study, the focus was on evaluating the suitability of the Virtual Learning Café method for Master-level health students, especially from the perspective of developing evidence-based clinical practice and interprofessional collaboration. It should be noted that the 28 study participants, a group of nursing students, already knew each other, and the study purpose was to examine if a virtual version of the Learning Café could be effective in constructing common understanding. The students did not require extra time for learning to know each other or for "seeking common language".

The study participants agreed that the Virtual Learning Café could be effectively used in both learning and development, or as a *collaborative learning structure* and as a *model* that the participants deemed transferable to the development of health service practice.

The participants appreciated the dialogic and participatory nature of the method and emphasized the collective construction of knowledge. In this respect, the findings were similar to those presented by Sidiropoulou, Sidiropoulou, and Foti (2021), who combined the idea of collaborative learning and the World Café method. It can be claimed that the participants' experience of meaningful dialogue in the present study was based on a successful combination of technology and a pedagogically structured process. The structure involved a rotating Learning Café with small group work, predefined topics and participant roles, with the outcomes summarized in a harvest session based on Whiteboard documentation. The Lecturer's role was to facilitate the online learner collaboration, as outlined by Oyarzun and Martin (2023).

Moreover, the study participants suggested that the method could be used to develop health services both at individual and collective level, in interprofessional teams, between organizations, and at the interface between citizens and health service professionals. The actual development targets identified by the participants must be examined in light of the thematic structure of the Learning Café. The topics provided by the course Lecturer (leadership; embedding and sustaining practices etc.) were the point of departure for the ideation.

The interface between the Master studies and development of practice became evident; The study participants' work experience likely facilitated the integration of the learning situation with the development needs of the health service. Instead of merely discussing their learning from their personal perspective, they applied the principles of the method to interprofessional collaboration, introduction of new practices, sharing of tacit knowledge and patient-professional dialogue. The results are in harmony with an earlier finding that Master students may evaluate learning methods primarily based on their relevance to practice (Salminen 2025).

Finally, it should be noted that the accessibility provided by such location-independent technology does not automatically mean inclusive learning opportunities (Lomellini et al. 2022). Factors that affect the learning situation include the learners' digital competency, the technical circumstances, access to technical support and the possibility to participate both orally and in writing. In future, it is important to provide clear written instructions, a predictable structure and alternative options to contribute to the construction of knowledge.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Producing information about the suitability of the Virtual Learning Cafë for practice-oriented Master studies in health care is a strength of this study. There is little research on the topic. The findings must, however, be evaluated in the context of one course and one group of students. The essays written by the participants are based on inherently subjective self-evaluation and cannot be used to confirm potential changes in learning outcomes, in the volume of interaction, in patient safety or in healthcare practices. The research data gathered from the participants may partly contain reflection based on course literature rather than personal experience. In addition, the fact that the researchers were involved in the pedagogical planning may have affected the context of data production and interpretation. For one researcher, the participation in pedagogical and technical planning increased his understanding of the context, but his digipedagogical expertise may have affected the interpretation of the findings. The transferability of the results to other fields of education, to other groups of students, or to other technical applications must always be evaluated in its context. The sample was limited, as it is typical for qualitative studies, so the results cannot be assumed to hold true to a broad population. The study does, however, contribute to contextual understanding of using the Virtual Learning Café method.

CONCLUSION

Based on the experiences of the study participants, the Virtual Learning Café method can support dialogue, reflection, peer learning and collective construction of knowledge in Master-level studies. The pedagogical value of the method seems to be associated with clearly structured work, small group interaction, predefined roles and a common harvest session. The results justify the further development of the method in practice-oriented higher education institutions. Future research topics could involve participants' critical and conflicting experiences, the degree of their contribution, the role of technical solutions and the practical implementation of the development ideas. The experiences of table hosts in

the Virtual Café would also be worthy of investigation. Besides cognitive and affective factors, the behavioral aspects could also be included in various research undertakings.

To sum up, the Virtual Learning Café method is a suitable learning method for advanced students who already know each other and wish to participate in virtual sessions from any location. The method may be used to develop evidence-based clinical practice. It may also be useful in promoting interprofessional collaboration, as suggested by the study participants.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors report generative AI was not used in their research or preparation of this manuscript.

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