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The registered nurse’s experience of online professional development: An action research study

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This action research project enabled nine registered nurses (RNs), with varying computer skills, ages and clinical specialties, to explore the reality of designing online learning activities for professional development. The aim of this research was to establish which educational strategies would assist a multi-generational, digitally-differentiated nursing workforce to flourish in an online environment for their professional development.

Through a process of six action research spirals, the research participants examined the potential benefits of, and barriers to, transitioning to an online environment for continuing professional development. E-learning is becoming increasingly prevalent as an option for maintaining competence in a clinical environment. With the latest developments in web-based technology there is the potential to capitalise on both andragogical and heutagogical learning.

Benefits and barriers to online professional development are explored, with online learning activities developed for each of the three clinical areas of surgical ward, operating rooms (OR) and post-anaesthesia recovery unit (PACU). Suggestions for enhancing success of transitioning to web-based learning for clinical settings are discussed. At any point in time, the current body of clinical knowledge is rapidly changing so that content learnt will, within five to ten years, be revised. In addition, maintaining professional competence is now a requirement of professional bodies. Therefore, a focus on life-long learning and the development of skills to enable access to relevant contemporary information is essential. If an organisation is going to offer online professional development, they must be deliberate in their planning, implementation and ongoing support in order to provide learner driven (heutagogical) content that capitalises on the full extent of Web 2.0 capabilities.

Rather than imposing online learning for PD, this action research project increased the participants’ familiarity with the online environment, enabling them to engage with the development of learning activities.
The use of web 2.0 capability in this action research project enabled participants and the researcher, involved as a learning designer, to collaboratively construct learning activities specific to each of the clinical contexts. As a result recommendations are made for learner driven PD activities that benefit the RN, the organisation and most significantly, have the potential to positively influence patient care.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a testament to the people that have surrounded me and encouraged me along the journey of lifelong learning. After leaving nursing school in 1982 with my Diploma of Nursing, I vowed that I would never, ever go near a training institute again. I loved learning on the job about techniques and skills that had relevance to my professional development. However, I did not believe that educational establishments had anything of value to offer me. As nursing education moved towards university qualifications, I decided to take just one paper to prove that I was not suited to tertiary study. Imagine my surprise on finding that I not only enjoyed it but I succeeded in it. This was the beginning of my changed perception of lifelong learning.

I have the deepest gratitude to my fellow research participants who willingly jumped into the unfamiliar waters of online professional development and swam through the plethora of experiences that have contributed to what you are about to read.

Thank you, Mal, for encouraging me to aim for my potential and to just ‘give it a go’. Your willingness to explore and challenge my ideas, coupled with your endless supply of lattes and love to my master’s office, have kept Altezano and me going. Thank you to my understanding children, Laura, Michael, Alannah, and Newz, who have rallied around to make sure our household continued to function and took turns in providing delicious meals and cleaning the occasional bathroom. It is my turn, now, as you undertake your studies and careers. Thanks to my parents, Jim and Joy, for their ongoing encouragement.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adult learner – Learners aged between 20 to 50 years old

Asynchronous – Accessing online activities at different times from other users

Blended courses – Those which combine online learning and face-to-face components

Digitally Differentiated – Varying levels of participant capabilities in digital technology

Distance learning – Supported by tutor outside of classroom environment, connects educational resources with remote learners

Elearning/web-based learning/online learning – Learning provided electronically often referring to internet and web-based learning but can also include offline learning using CD-ROM or DVD (see “Online learning” below.)

Generations: (Years of birth)   Baby Boomers (1943 – 1960)

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

Internet – Using the internet involves accessing the World Wide Web (www) for locating websites, search engines (such as Google), web-based content and learning management systems (LMS)

Intranet – Provides the same functionality as the internet but differs in that it is a private network accessible only within an organisation

IT – Information Technology

LLL – Life-Long Learning

LMS – Learning Management System

Online learning – Electronic learning provided by web and internet based media. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) suggest all courses of this type should be called “online”
to distinguish it from electronic learning which could also include a CD-ROM that is computer based and not online.

PD – Professional Development

Synchronous – Users accessing online activities at the same time as each other

URL – Uniform Resource Locator: Used on the internet to find the location of a specific resource/website/webpage/document