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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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Jennifer Kay Green

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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.

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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.

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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