

Evaluating blogging as a reflective strategy in a service-learning module for undergraduate nursing students

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Abstract

Literature suggests that blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning. It is claimed that blogging is a useful practice for development of higher-order learning skills, active, learner-centred pedagogy, authentic learning, associative thinking, and interactive learning communities. At a school of nursing students are expected to be active participants in constructing knowledge and to build upon constructive learning principles through the use of e-tools such as forums, chat rooms and blogs. Hence an online module was designed for the fourth-year undergraduate nursing programme that requires students to engage in and reflect on a service learning community project. The reflection activities were accomplished through blogging and were expected to be completed according to the allocated structure. The main pedagogic objective was to reflect upon and discuss module content and/or issues that arose out of their learning experiences. Quantitative methods were used for this study. The purpose was to evaluate whether blogging could enhance reflective learning and the depth of the reflection that arose as a result of blogging. Results showed that students engage in both reflective and non-reflective thinking through blogging, with varying levels of depth of reflection.

Keywords: Blogging, reflection, service-learning, e-pedagogy, undergraduate.

How to cite this article:

Boltman-Binkowski, H. & Julie, H. (2014). Evaluating blogging as a reflective strategy in a service-learning module for undergraduate nursing students. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, October (Supplement 1:1), 41-49.

Introduction

Blogging has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning. It is claimed that blogging is a useful practice for development of higher-order learning skills, active, learner-centred pedagogy, authentic learning, associative thinking, and interactive learning communities (Muwanga-Zake Parkes & Gregory 2010; Farmer, 2006).

The rapid evolution of information and communication technology (ICT) leads to the adoption of technologies without enough time to research their impact upon learning and teaching. To meet this challenge Sims (2006) suggests designing pedagogical strategies for each ICT, because different ICT tools might support different pedagogical strategies. Adoption of ICT without focused pedagogical goals, as realised in most institutions (Mandinach, 2005), is also one

of the major challenges facing university education. Successful pedagogical blogs require clearly guided objectives.

Ferdig and Trammell (2004), drawing on the social constructivist educational theories of Vygotsky (1978), usefully explicate the four central pedagogic benefits of blogging for students as follows: assisting students to become subject matter experts through a process of regular scouring, filtering and posting, and increasing student interest and ownership in learning. Blogging also gives students legitimate chances to participate and enculturate into a community of practice, as well as providing opportunities for diverse perspectives (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004).

Farmer (2006) argues that the personal expressive dynamics of blogging help restore a vital sense of individual empowerment and valorisation which is lost in many other online learning environments, such as discussion boards, where the focus is often on the abstract shared communication space rather than the individual. Blogs, he asserts, foster 'centred communication' in which the individual is recognised and valued as part of a more equitable community of empowered learners (Farmer, 2006). Furthermore, blogs offer a socially situated, student-centred, contemporary technical solution, and cater for individual self-expression and socially driven learning (Farmer et al., 2008). Pedagogically successful and valuable blogs involve careful planning and consideration (Bartlett-Bragg, 2003). Ways of creating successful pedagogical blogs include making blogs mandatory and cultivating educationally sound perceptions of blogs among students (Cheung et al., 2006).

Blogging can be described as the successor to the traditional journal – with certain differences. The purpose of traditional journals is to provide a space for learners to examine their own current and past practices and devise their own methods of adapting their behaviour to improve their experience of the learning activity. It also provides a chronological, qualitatively detailed log of the development of learning over a period of time (Hall & Davison, 2007). On the other hand, journaling as an academic activity is focused on the reflective process being an individualised, private activity, free of assessment constraints, in order to promote a space where students could feel free to document their progress. However, this leaves the responsibility of deeper learning with the student, and does not allow for assessment of the activity in terms of academic requirements to pass a course, as well as contributing to a feeling of isolation. Blogging is therefore a flexible teaching strategy which can be a solution to all of the traditional concerns about journaling. It may be private or public, as required by the course, and may be assessed, while at the same time students may utilise this method to document their own progress and comment on the progress of others, decreasing isolation.

This study was planned at a time when no other research into the pedagogical application of e-learning or blogging was taking place within a school of nursing at a university in the Western Cape. It was conducted as a result of the acknowledgement that no research into the value and application of blogging had been done, and was part of a larger study approach to explore the value of these methods at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Only the results of the undergraduate study will be reported on in this article.

The notion of reflective practice in service learning is not novel; in fact, it is an integral part of bridging the theory-practice gap and proving the essence and level of learning that has occurred. The innovative aspects of this study centred on blogging being introduced as strategy through which reflection was required to take place. This study explored the potential and the value of reflective practice through blogging in a service-learning module taken as part of the requirements for an undergraduate nursing programme at a university in the Western Cape. Essentially the purpose of the study was to evaluate whether students engaged with reflective activities through blogging, and to what depth they engaged in reflection when required to use ICT methods to document their reflections.

Methodology

Due to the pervasive nature of gender-based violence (GBV) in South African society, it was decided that the service-learning approach may be the best strategy for teaching the module 'Gender-based violence as a public health issue'. As reflective processes are an important part of service learning, this was the ideal module for presenting service learning as well as the blogging strategy. The main content of the module covered the manifestations of GBV, its epidemiology, basic theories of GBV, health policies, legal and constitutional frameworks guiding health worker management of GBV, as well as advocacy issues. The 20-credit module took place over a semester, and was offered at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 7. The reflections and blogging activities formed 20% of the summative assessment marks.

Blogging activities in the module had two purposes. One activity was structured around reflection, and the other was a blogging activity specifically designed to encourage the application of theory (models, legal frameworks, etc.) to real-life situations. Reflective activities and the structure of blogging as a pedagogy required careful planning and took place over a semester.

One day per week was allocated to blogging activities. Students were provided with journal articles on service learning (Julie et al., 2007), and an easy-to-follow guide on reflection. Students were also encouraged to do searches for their own resources online. They were orientated to the process of blogging and the e-

learning platform they were required to use. Reflective postings were also done per group, rather than individually, although each individual had to make structured contributions towards the posting. Students were required to use a private workgroup which other students were not privy to, in order to plan their reflective postings. Clinical supervisors were able to view the planning, mainly to ensure that all members of the group participated equally and also to prompt students towards a deeper level of reflection if necessary.

After their planning on a private workgroup, students were directed to make a public posting of their reflection (maximum 500 words), to which each of the other groups then had to respond with a maximum of 200 words. Topics for the reflective group postings covered needs assessment, planning (including implementation), and evaluation of their service-learning project, ending with their thoughts for sustainability of the projects that they started.

A quantitative research design was selected as the best method to address the purpose of the study, as it is an objective, rigorous, systematic process of collecting information (Burns & Grove, 2003). The study took place from June to December 2012. Inclusion was limited to nursing students in their fourth year of study who were registered for the GBV module.

All of the students were required to do the reflective blogging activities as part of the module, and these were also assessed. However, filling out the questionnaire for participation in the study itself was entirely voluntary. The study was approved by the faculty ethics committee prior to commencement. All students gave written, informed consent before enrolling in the study. Students were also ensured that their marks would not be affected in any way, whether they participated in the study, withdrew or did not participate at all. Questionnaires were blind (no identification data were entered in the questionnaires) to ensure this.

A questionnaire that was developed and piloted specifically for evaluating the level of reflective thinking during blogging activities by Kember et al. (2000) was used in this study. The 15-item questionnaire was self-administered to students once-off, when they had completed the module. It took students approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In Kember et al. (2000) questionnaire development was based on filtering constructs of reflection from the literature, and then tested on 350 Health Science students in Hong Kong. Nursing students in the second year of undergraduate study as well as postgraduate students in the diploma and master's programme all formed part of the original group that participated in the study. The reliability of each scale was tested in Kember et al. (2000) by using Cronbach's alpha. Validity was tested by factor analysis. Three cycles of trial, testing and revision were followed in order to ensure validity and reliability, which is why the questionnaire was used as is.

Also, the student participant population mirrors the population of the participants in this study.

The questionnaire tests four scales of thinking, namely habitual action, understanding, reflection and critical reflection. Habitual action and understanding fall within Mezirow's (1991) definition of non-reflective thinking, while reflection and critical reflection are identified as types of reflective thinking. The questionnaire outcomes tested the depth of engagement of the students' thinking, level of importance attached to understanding course content, level of reflection dependent on behaviour change, and challenging previously held ideas. Other outcomes included whether students were engaged in deep critical reflection to a level which resulted in self-correction of misconceived ideas.

Data were analysed using SPSS version 22, through the services of a statistician. Basic descriptive statistics were used to report on the data.

Results

The questionnaire had four scales, or areas of measurement, as stated before. The responses to analysis are grouped according to these scales. The response rate was good, with 90 of the 160 students (56.25%) that formed the target population participating in this study.

Habitual action

Habitual action is a learnt skill which is eventually automatically performed, for example, swimming or riding a bicycle. These actions do not require deep reflection, and much of the work of professionals, after developing some years of experience, remain in this domain when dealing with normal cases (Kember et al., 2000). Over half of the respondents realised that they could not perform (64.8%; n=57) or start (62.5%; n=55) blogging or service-learning activities without engaging in thinking, while 17% (n=15) in this category were neutral. It was evident that respondents felt that memorisation of course material alone was not enough to pass examinations (60%; n=54), although 23.3% (n=21) did not know what to answer to this question. A third of respondents (37.9%; n=33) felt that they did not have to think too much during the course if they just listened to the lecturer.

Understanding

Understanding, according to the literature, has been described as a type of thinking which makes use of existing knowledge without attempting to analyse the basis for this knowledge. It has also been narrowed down further to

comprehension of both content and constructs, but without relating it to other situations (Kember et al., 2000). More than half of the respondents found that they were required to understand both concepts (55.6%; n= 50) and content (84.7%; n=72) in order to be successful in the course, although understanding of content was weighted more. To confirm this, 62.7% (n=52) of students agreed that they continuously had to think about and engage with the course material. More than half of the respondents actively had to engage with course material to bridge the theory-practice gap, with 67.9% (n=57) of students feeling that they needed to understand theoretical class concepts in order to perform practical tasks. As the course itself was structured around blogging and service-learning activities, it is evident that the course structure encouraged areas around non-reflective thinking, as well as contributing to bridging the theory-practice gap.

Reflection

Reflection can be described as the internal cognitive activities, triggered by an experience, which result in individual self-examination and conclude with new meanings, and changed conceptual understanding and appreciation (Kember et al., 2000). Exactly half of the respondents (n=45; 50%) felt that blogging did not assist them to question the way *other* people do things and think of alternate solutions, although slightly less than half (n=40; 44.4%) agreed that blogging made them reflect on their *own* actions and consider alternative solutions. In addition, blogging was attributed to making just over one-third of respondents (n=35; 38.9%) learn from their experiences in order to improve their next performance. However, 22% of students did not engage in any reflection on this question. Respondents who did not engage in reflection with regard to all questions in this particular scale remained consistent at between 17.8% and 24.4%.

Critical reflection

Critical reflection is more profound level of reflection which requires significant consideration of all possibilities, and results in a change in perspective – a transformation of meaning framework (Kember et al., 2000). Almost half or 42 (46.7%) of respondents felt that the blogging activities assisted them to change the way they looked at themselves. A similar number of respondents indicated that blogging challenged some of their firmly held ideas (n=42; 46.7%). As a result of blogging, one-third (n=30; 33.3%) of the respondents indicated that they changed their normal methods of accomplishing activities. Furthermore, 37.8% (n=34) of students indicated that blogging helped them to see faults in what they had previously regarded as correct behaviour.

Discussion

The literature has recognised that professionals often deal with problems which do not have well-defined solutions, do not follow a rational logistical pathway and are multifaceted, and therefore require unique and flexible solutions (Kember et al., 2000). Health professional education, on the other hand, has traditionally been rooted in the technical-rational approach, which presents a model to students of solving well-defined problems with procedures. Reflection has been presented as the solution to this educational issue, and therefore a growth in reflective curricula, teaching technologies, and other solutions has arisen to fill this gap. However, there is still a dearth of literature which assesses whether students actually do engage in reflection, and if so, how deeply they do so (Kember et al., 2000). This study presented an innovative teaching technology which was presented to undergraduate students for the first time, and sought to assess the depth of reflection that the students engaged in while occupied with this activity.

Reflection in this study was broken down into the four constructs of habitual action, understanding, reflection and critical reflection, based on the motivation by Kember et al. (2000) which described the need for assessing outcomes with regard to the actual level of reflection engaged in by the student. The level of reflection assessed by Kember's questionnaire included both content and process reflection as one concept, and excludes introspection as part of the affective domain due to psychometric grounds.

The results of this study confirm that the majority of the students acknowledged that they had to engage in some sort of non-reflective thinking process in order successfully complete blogging activities. NQF level 7 students are expected to be able to process and manage information and to solve problems, and this study proved that blogging required students to function at this level (South African Qualifications Authority, 2012). It is of concern that only half of the respondents functioned in this sphere of learning, although many of the difficulties students faced may also be due to a low level of ICT literacy, which was not evaluated as part of this study.

The literature describes undergraduate students as having much more difficulty with engaging in reflective thinking – especially critical reflection – as it requires a change in set belief systems (Naber & Wyatt, 2014). Hall and Davidson's (2007) study found that the students engaged in very little true reflection. In contrast, the results of this study showed that blogging had a positive effect on encouraging reflective activities in students, and almost half of the students indicated some behaviour change, mostly with regard to their own behaviour. It is encouraging to note that between one-half to one-third of students who participated in this study engaged in the areas of reflection and critical reflection.

This gives rise to possibilities that blogging may have use in encouraging reflective activity in undergraduate students, especially within health professional courses.

Conclusion

The instrument used was a valuable tool in measuring the level of reflective thinking required by the blogging activities in this module. The level of ICT literacy among this group of students may have been a limitation, as well as the fact that it was a new module, presented in a new manner. However, the fact that it was easily accessible, even from mobile devices, was an advantage. Module construction needs to be favourable for blogging activities, and in resource-poor learning environments access always needs to be considered. Even though in this study a small effect on reflection was shown through blogging, further research needs to be done to establish the value of blogging as a reflective activity in undergraduate nursing education.

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