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Faculty of Community and Health Sciences

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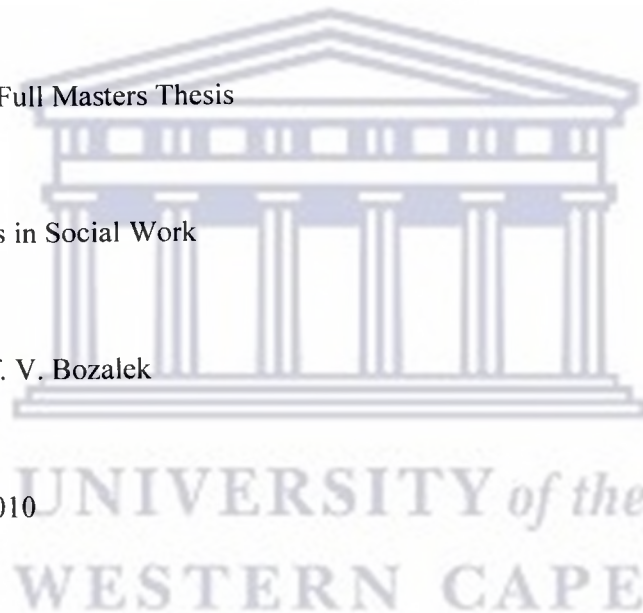
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DECLARATION

I, **FAIROZA BREY**, DECLARE THAT THIS STUDY CONDUCTED on
“An exploration of students’ perceptions and experiences of an online Social Work
module at the University of the Western Cape” IS MY OWN WORK. I HAVE
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Abstract

This study examines students' experiences and perceptions of an online Social Work Ethics module at the University of the Western Cape. Online learning as a teaching medium was introduced in 2005, in a newly devised Social Work module, and was internally evaluated by the module leader. This study concentrates on the perceptions and experiences of the student cohort from 2006 – 2008. The research methodology used was located in the qualitative research paradigm. This included drawing on data obtained from students' responses to online journals from 2006-2008, a semi-structured questionnaire administered to the 2008 cohort, and a focus group discussion conducted with the 2008 cohort. Documentary analysis was used to examine the online journal entries. Subsequently a thematic analysis was conducted on responses received from the semi- structured questionnaire and the focus group discussions.. The major findings of the study were that online pedagogy was assisted by having access to computers. Online learning provided access to information and cost savings to students, enhanced student's computer and time management skills, improved students' abilities to take responsibility for learning, and learning was perceived to be enjoyable and interesting.

The challenges, on the other hand, were ascribed to technological problems experienced such as limited bandwidth, which impacted on students not being able to submit assignments timeously. On the negative side, many students reported that they were challenged by using the technology and required more training, that they would have wanted more face-to-face learning and that they had concerns about physical health and safety related to exposure to their computers for lengthy periods of time.

The findings showed that there is an overwhelming support for online learning despite the challenges experienced. This general perception alludes to the fact that online learning has numerous benefits and these benefits can be increased if consideration is given to the inherent challenges.



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Keywords

Students' perceptions and experiences, online learning, social work ethics course, University of the Western Cape, social constructivism, advantages of online learning, challenges of online learning



Chapter 1

1. Introduction

This study focuses specifically on how students experienced the online learning environment in the Advanced Ethics Social Work module at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Online learning is a term commonly taken to mean “the use of computers and the internet for learning.”(Littlejohn and Pegler, 2005, p.16).

Bellefeuille (2006, p.94) indicates that “students in a learning environment are in a good position to evaluate instruction, because most have had experience with many other learning environments”. Cook- Sather (2002) concurs with Bellefeuille, by stating that learners themselves are the experts on knowing how they learn best and that educators should not assume that they know more about how students learn. The researcher therefore draws on related studies (reflected in chapter 2 of this study) and compares the findings in an attempt to contribute toward the relatively new body of knowledge gained on students’ experiences of online learning.

Young people today are commonly described as “digital natives” meaning, they were born having been exposed to technology at a very early age, unlike their predecessors, the use of technology is often regarded as second nature, and that most of them are heavily dependent on technology in their daily lives (Prensky, 2001). The dependency and use may vary in frequency and proficiency as the literature alludes to the fact that communities in developed and developing

countries vary in competency in using technology. These disparities in access to technology are referred to as the digital divide (Prensky, 2001).

Digital natives have an expectation of rapid information reception. They prefer to parallel process and multi-task. They function best when networked. They thrive on computer games, email, Internet, cell phones and instant messaging as integral parts of their lives (Prensky, 2001). Digital immigrants on the other hand (represented by most of the older generation who are in fact the facilitators of knowledge in the classroom) are not as technologically equipped as digital natives. (Levin & Arafeh , 2002; Prensky, 2005 cited in Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008).

With students becoming more and more au fait with digital tools, higher education is constantly challenged to employ current, relevant and appropriate methods to keep up with the technological age, and to strive towards optimally engaging these learners. One vital success factor for online learning is, 'learners' satisfaction with it. High satisfaction reflects that learners are more willing to continue in online instructional programmes, resulting in lower attrition rates, more referrals from enrolled students, greater motivation, and better learning achievement and increased commitment to the programme"(Chen, Lin & Kinshuk, 2008, p.115)

The researcher however, is of the opinion that a large percentage of UWC students are not fully equipped digital natives (i.e. technologically proficient), as most of them come from poor communities and have had limited exposure to technology, other than mobile phones, prior to enrolment with the university. This opinion is supported by the study conducted by a Human Sciences Research Council

(HSRC) case study of UWC indicating that the UWC students are the poorest in the Higher Education sector (Breier, 2010). Selwyn (2006,p.274) maintains that “the groups most likely to be ‘digitally excluded’ continue to be synonymous with those who can be characterised as being already socially excluded – especially in terms of low income and socio-economic status.” A digital divide does not mean that academics should not attempt to bridge this gap. Indeed, a lack of access to technology in the present digital age will prevent individuals from optimizing their roles in society, particularly in the workforce (Selwyn, 2006). Therefore, South African universities themselves face the dilemma of whether to rush to online programmes for fear of excluding themselves from the global educational market or to risk the slower and more considered route required to ensure justice and quality for their students (Broekman, Enslin & Pendlebury, 2002).

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and emerging pedagogical models in educational technology are challenging traditional approaches to teaching and learning in higher education, which is essentially a paradigm shift from traditional classroom based teaching to students becoming independent engaged learners (Knowles 2002). The integration of technology in higher education is said to significantly improve student learning (Turney, Robinson, Lee & Soutar, 2009).

Allowing the student an opportunity to be the central person in the learning environment through effective use of technology such as the internet, chat rooms, podcasts, email etc. are important tools that can be used in current good practice in higher education teaching and learning.

This study investigates how online learning as a pedagogical tool has been conducive to constructivist learning by looking at students' experiences of online learning.

1.2. Background and Need

Since students are well positioned to comment on their experiences and views as recipients of online learning, it is important to ascertain the impact of technology on their learning by soliciting and studying their views (Cook-Sather, 2002). Online learning is relatively new to the Social Work Department and the University of the Western Cape, and it is thus important to evaluate how students experience it and the benefits and challenges it might hold for them.

1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to ascertain students' positive and negative experiences of online learning. The findings of this study could contribute to the fairly new body of knowledge on teaching and learning with technology within the Social Work field and in so doing attempt to examine the affordances of online learning as a pedagogical tool in this discipline and more generally in particular higher education contexts.

1.4. Research question

The major question which this study will be asking is:

What are the students' experiences and perceptions of an online Social Work module at the University of the Western Cape?

Research objectives

1.4.1. To ascertain students' views of the online Social work module relating to online learning..

1.4.2. To undertake a documentary analysis of the data obtained from the 2006 to 2008 cohort and explore their experiences and perceptions of online learning as a pedagogy for learning.

1.4.3. To provide recommendations for implementation of such online modules in relation to student learning, and to contribute to the literature on student experiences of online modules, particularly in the field of Social Work.

1.5. Significance of the study

Online learning is a relatively new field of research in social work. This study therefore aims to contribute to the body of knowledge gained from similar studies conducted in higher education more generally and to the few studies that have examined online teaching and learning in Social Work. There is definitely a gap in

knowledge relating to how online courses are experienced in social work, particularly in developing contexts.

1.6. Definitions

Online learning – Computer mediated learning i.e., using technology as a pedagogical tool.

Students' experiences – students' actual hands-on exposure to the online course being examined in this study.

Students' perceptions- students' views and feelings in relation to the online course

Engaged learning –interactive learning which actively involves the learner in a variety of activities with their educators and peers as co- constructors of knowledge.

Digital native - A digital native is a person for whom digital technologies already existed when they were born, and has grown up with digital technology such as computers, the internet, mobile phones and MP3s.

Digital immigrants - Those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology.

1.7. Organization of this study

The chapters for this study are organized in the following manner and cover the following aspects:

Chapter 1 – Introduction, statement of the problem, background and need, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the field, definitions, limitations of the study and ethical considerations.

Chapter 2 - Literature review: this focuses on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study, as well as comparing and discussing the findings of similar studies conducted (nationally and internationally) on students' experiences of online learning. These experiences relate to both benefits and challenges of online learning.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology: the chapter contains the research question, the goal and rationale for the study, the methodological approach, the research design, the research setting and population, sampling for qualitative study, data collection methods implemented, coding of data, qualitative data analysis, triangulation of information, validity, reliability, transferability, limitations and assumptions of the researcher, ethical considerations, reflexivity and conclusion.

Chapter 4 - Discussion of Findings: The benefits and challenges of online learning illustrated in a table, findings and discussion in relation to the emergent

themes obtained from the analysis of the data, summary of findings and conclusion of chapter.

Chapter 5 - Recommendations and Conclusions: This concluding chapter discusses whether the objectives and goals of the study were achieved. It also elaborates on participants' recommendations for the course, and the more general recommendations emanating from the findings and the literature reviewed. Implications for future practice and finally some concluding thoughts are presented.



Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of this study focusing on students' perceptions and experiences of an online advanced Social Work Module within a Higher Education Institution (UWC) is presented in this chapter. Key conceptual and operational definitions relating to online learning are also discussed. Findings of earlier studies relating to the online learning pedagogy are also considered in this chapter. Comparisons and summaries of key findings of the online learning pedagogy are also examined. In Chapter Four, these findings are compared with the results obtained from the study conducted with students from the Advanced Social Work module representing the 2006 to 2008 cohort.

2.2. Contextual Background to the study

Historically, traditional education has been seen as a process of passing on information, from the knower or the "expert" to others who are perceived as the ones who do not know i.e. (the students).

Studies have shown, however, that there is considerable evidence that learners benefit most in the learning process from constructing knowledge themselves (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000 cited in Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Furthermore, learning needs to occur within a context of guided and focused facilitation, within a specific context co-constructed by a knowledgeable other, this other ideally being the course facilitator or a more knowledgeable peer

(Vygotsky, 1968). The social nature of online learning lends itself to these social constructivist perspectives on learning.

The most important role for the course leader in an online class is to facilitate active and interactive participation, rich communication and fast feedback, thus supporting student to student interaction (Kearsley, 2000 cited in Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Smith, 2008). Students from this perspective are not regarded as passive knowledge-absorbers who rely on the instructor to feed information to them (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Online learning pedagogy thus has the potential to facilitate a student-centered social constructivist learning paradigm. In order for the learner to reach optimal satisfaction and be actively engaged in deep learning using the online pedagogy, he or she needs to be familiar with the technology, be willing to work independently and be comfortable with the course content (Smith, 2008). The challenge therefore is to be able to master all of these aspects in order to maximize learner achievements.

The Illinois Online Network outlines the characteristics of a successful student in an online programme to be one who is self-motivated, self-disciplined, open minded about learning, willing to share personal and work related experiences, having good writing skills and being able to think critically, provide constructive critical feedback and also to have access to a computer and a modem (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Critical success factors for online learning include higher educators who have knowledge of technology, relevant support services, appropriate and effective technology, good instructional design and effective course evaluation (Chen et al, 2008). These critical factors have been measured in this study in order to determine the effectiveness of the online pedagogy for this particular module being discussed.

2.3. Key conceptual and operational definitions of online learning:

2.3.1. On-line learning is described as ‘the use of the electronic media to deliver learning and can be delivered through any of the following electronic technologies: the inter, intra and extranets, audio or video conferencing, simulators, handheld devices and palm pilots, Web Online, LAN, Internet, television or interactive television, CD-ROM, mobile phones, DVD, VCD, video and satellites systems (Zaiane, 2003 cited in Herselman & Hay, 2003). Online learning allows for flexibility of access, from anywhere and usually at any time, however, the learning materials must be designed properly to effectively engage the learner and promote learning (Ally, 2004).

2.3.2. Blended learning is described as a combination of face- to face and online learning methods. Blended learning also implies bridging the gaps of traditional classroom learning and contemporary online learning (Khaddage, Lanham & Zhou, 2009). Salmon (2003) defines blended learning as the combination of conventional teaching approaches and online learning elements within a single course. Blended learning can also take the form of media (blend of audio and video) or activity blend, print resources or readings and face-to-face activities. Large online courses can have relatively high drop out rates, thus blending face-

to-face approaches and facilitating peer support activities for example, could help students to feel more committed to their work (Salmon, 2003).

2.3.3. Student-centered learning as a key concept in online learning places a greater responsibility on the learner as it is no longer only a person standing at the front of the room to guide the student through the lesson (Smith, 2008). The implications of student-centered learning means that the course instructions, module outcomes and the “pathway for progress through the course must be abundantly clear to the students” (Smith, 2008, p.14). The students’ responsibility is one of a co-creator of knowledge, thus the knowledge and experiences shared in the classroom are a two-way rather than one-way process (i.e. from the course leader only). Student-centered learning is also a prominent component of outcomes based education (OBE), which aims to prepare the learner for the workplace. The OBE philosophy emphasizes key outcomes of learning (outputs) and not only that which was learned (inputs), as in the case of traditional learning.

2.4. An overview of students’ perceptions and experiences of online learning.

Findings obtained from previous studies demonstrate that students’ experiences are invaluable to teaching and learning, curriculum review and development, as it is the students who are the most impacted on by the learning pedagogy. Therefore it is highly important to ascertain their opinions and to take them into consideration when designing courses. Cook-Sather (2002) for example, argues that students are the most affected by education but the least frequently listened to. Particularly in the twenty first century, she notes, educators should acknowledge

that students have valuable contributions to make with regard to critiquing and reforming education and should thus be consulted and legitimated. A study by Chen et al. (2008) also demonstrates that it is crucial to ascertain students' satisfaction with e-learning to ascertain success in terms of instruction and interaction. The studies under review in this section are concerned with the perceptions and experiences of online learning for students in higher education. A summary of findings gathered from previous studies conducted are examined from a dual perspective: that of the benefits and of the challenges of on-line learning experienced by students.

In terms of the benefits reported by students in the literature, the major aspects reported were on: access to technology and access to wide sources of information, enhanced communication and a deepened learning experience, innovative, fun and interesting learning; enhancement of student confidence, feelings of satisfaction and gaining skills in using technology; cost saving; timeous feedback from course leaders; availability and accountability of feedback and course material; engaged learning and social presence of the course facilitator.

2.4.1. Benefits of online learning

2.4.1.1. Access to technology and access to wide sources of information

Students in the Rohleder et al.'s(2008) study on the blended learning collaborative course involving Psychology and Social Work students from Stellenbosch University and UWC, found online learning to be a more flexible and convenient form of learning. These students commended the ease with which readings and

other students' work could be accessed at any place and at any time, in other words, focusing on the flexibility which is afforded by this medium. Smith (2008, p.14) in his report of an effective web based course similarly found that this form of learning is advantageous for flexible and just-in-time learning. Students may work at the time of day when they are at their best, they can choose a place where they can concentrate well and at their convenience, they can move quickly through parts they understand, and go slowly through parts they don't understand and repeat sections as needed. Students can also access course content when the course leader is not available also emphasizing the importance of access to technology for the success of online learning. These views are reiterated by Paloff & Pratt (2007) and Turney et al. (2009), who argue that the affordances of technology makes learning more accessible, just-in-time and flexible for students. This would include its affordances for students to repeatedly return to resources, which has been shown to be significant, particularly for second language speakers (Ng'ambi, 2008).

2.4.1.2. Enhanced communication and deepened learning experience

As the British author of e-learning texts, Gilly Salmon (2002, 2003), reminds us, online learning does not necessarily mean a loss of active and social learning. On the contrary, many studies, such as those reviewed below, have demonstrated that online learning in fact increases opportunities for peer interaction (student to student) and interactions between learners and facilitators or educators. Rohleder et al.'s (2008) study, for example, showed that students found that e-learning

deepened their learning experience and allowed more freedom of speech than face-to-face learning.

They also found that communication between peers and students and their facilitators was easier, as online communication provides easier access than face-to-face communication. Barab & Thomas (2001, p.133) in their study conducted on students' experiences of an online course, also established that online learning facilitated an informal environment for ease of shared learning. Online learning is further advantageous as it allows for the possibility of fast and flexible communication between educators and their students (Curran, 2001; Bozalek, 2007). Bozalek (2007) also indicated that Social Work students reported enhanced critical reflective skills and that online learning had facilitated more active and egalitarian communication with their peers. This was due to the fact that they felt less intimidated and judged by their peers online than they did in the face-to-face classroom situation.

One of the key affordances of online networked learning is the way in which it makes possible interactions between groups of people across physical distances and times and spaces (Salmon, 2002). A study by Bozalek & Matthews (2009) on online communication between Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Social Work learners between New York and South Africa, also revealed that the e-learning experience created a surprisingly intimate relationship in which intellectual and emotional unpacking and sharing between students happened across distant geographical locations.

More, generally, it has been found that online learning increases both the quality and quantity of interaction between students and their peers and between students and their lecturers (Johnston & Olekalns, 2002).

2.4.1.3. Innovative, fun and interesting.

An element that emerged in some of the responses as reported by Al- Mahmood & McLoughlin (2004), which was absent in most other studies about online learning, was the importance of fun in learning. These results were obtained from interviews with five online educators/ students across two Australian universities. From a learner's perspective it is argued that online courses make learning more fun and interesting while it also keeps the attention span of the learner longer as the learner is kinesthetically, audio-visually and cognitively engaged (Herselman & Hay, 2003). In a social work study on a blended learning MA course on child protection in the United Kingdom, students also reported that they found the online experience to be enjoyable and fun (Cooner & Hickman, 2008). Gilly Salmon (2002) has also confirmed that people report on both the fun and companionship of working together.

2.4.1.4. Enhanced student confidence, satisfaction and skills in using technology

Confidence in the use of technology is another positive outcome which was indicated by the respondents in the study conducted by Johnston and Olekalns (2002). Similarly, in Bozalek's (2007) study of the Advanced Ethics course, students expressed confidence in terms of improved technological, reading and writing skills. Most of the students were reported to have struggled in the beginning with technological skills. However, with practice, training and perseverance many students' confidence increased. Al-Mahmood & McCloughlin (2004) conducted a study of five online educators who were also students, thus focusing on the duality of being an educator and a student. They found that it was important for educators to be aware of technical constraints that students may have and that students can experience levels of satisfaction about being able to use technology in situations of their own choice.

It appears, from this study and that of Bozalek's (2007) that the online pedagogy has the potential to encourage good self-management and for learners to take responsibility for own learning. The inclusion of technology can further students' satisfaction as it affords them diverse opportunities and pathways for learning (Faul, et al, 2004)

Findings in the study conducted by Bozalek (2007) as well as Paloff & Pratt (2007) reported that students who usually lack self confidence in participating in a face-to-face classroom situation were more confident, less intimidated by peers or

the course leader in the online environment and thus more engaged in their learning experience.

2.4.1.5. Cost saving

Online learning was considered favourably by students in South African universities, in that it was cheaper and easier to submit assessment tasks on the computer rather than handing in hard copies (Bozalek, 2007; Rohleder et al, 2008). Similar findings with regards to cost savings in utilizing the online pedagogy were found in the Yusuf-Khalil et al (2007) study where students from Uganda were also experiencing challenges in accessing computers and internet due to financial and technological constraints.

2. 4.1.6. Feedback on assessment tasks

Nicol and Milligan (2006, p. 65) discuss what they consider to be seven principles of good feedback. These include: “helping to clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards); facilitating the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning; delivering high quality information to students about their learning; encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning; encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem; provides opportunities to cover the gaps between current and desired performance; and provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.”

Ally (2004) also sees feedback as essential for students to be able to take corrective action if this is required. Lea, Stephenson & Troy (2003) posit that students need to be actively involved in the learning process as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients.

Comments derived from a survey completed by 1046 students which Johnston & Olekalns (2002) conducted with macro economics students at the University of Melbourne, clearly showed that the emphasis on peer feedback had positive consequences for students. Students learnt critical skills from having access to and assess each others work and having to identify strengths and weaknesses in their peer's arguments. The studies by Bozalek (2007) and Bozalek & Matthews (2009) further show that online peer feedback, with students acting as 'critical friends' to each other enhances the learning process through prompt and detailed feedback on each others' work.

The most useful features reported by the students in the study conducted by Roberts- De Gennaro, et al (2005) with the graduate Social Work students in San Diego State University, was the timely receipt of information about their fieldwork programme and the ability to send mail through the online site. The respondents in this study also appreciated the fact that the course material was easily available on the site and they could access the information at any time. Bozalek (2007), shared similar findings in her study, indicating that students commented on the easy availability of information, in the form of prescribed reading material that were uploaded on the site and students appreciated that they were able to access group members work.

2.4.1.7. Social Presence of the course facilitator

Garrison & Anderson, (2003, p.75) suggest that teacher presence is a necessary part in both formal and non-formal learning contexts. It seems that in all learning and especially online learning that we learn, not only from texts or other resources, but also from someone. The best online resources take account of this in that you have the feeling that there is somebody there, that the writers have taken care to put themselves into the production process at the level of some detail. The quality is marked by the person's presence, that they care about what they are doing and that they are doing it with a deep sense of educational purpose. (Walker 1997 cited in Johnson 2001). Rohleder et al, (2008, p.104) reported that students in a blended learning course wanted more face-to-face interaction, as they indicated that this would assist them in communicating and interacting effectively on line. According to Paloff & Pratt (2007), timeous feedback, interactive course activities and interacting with students online increases the level of effectiveness for social presence and online learning.

2.4.2. Challenges experienced on-line learning

A summary of the challenges reported by students and discussed in the literature reviewed below covers the following aspects: technical difficulties as a result of power cuts; limited access to computers; insufficient bandwidth, and lack of IT support; lack of social presence; physical and psychological problems experienced in using the technology

2.4.2.1. Technical difficulties

Technical difficulties as a result of power cuts, particularly during 2006 and 2007 were highlighted in the study conducted on the advanced Social Work Ethics course introduced at UWC in 2005. This seems to be peculiar to the third world countries or developing contexts as none of the literature reviewed based on first world studies conducted mentions power cuts or power failures (Bozalek, 2007; Yusuf-Khalil et al; Rohleder et al, 2008).

Students indicated that the negative impacts resulting from the power outages prevented them from downloading or uploading material in time for assignments and classroom tasks. The resultant delay in the timeous submission of assignments inevitably contributed to an increase in students perceived heavy workload (Bozalek, 2007; Yusuf-Khalil et al; Rohleder et al, 2008).

2.4.2.2. Physical and epistemological access to technology

Students need to have access to technology and know how to use it to be able to be optimally engaged with the course content. Paloff & Pratt (2007) emphasize that the success of online learning can be enhanced if students are familiar with the technology as this can contribute to a sense of psychological well being and therefore an increased likelihood of participation. It should be noted that a large percentage of the UWC students in the Bozalek et al. (2007) study on Stellenbosch and UWC students, indicated that they were not familiar with

technology and the online pedagogy. The lack of access to technology (physical access) and the lack of knowledge of how to use it (epistemological access) should be taken into consideration when implementing an online learning module particularly in a developing context where similar student circumstances may be the case. A vast body of literature (Selwyn, 2006; Broekman, Enslin & Pendlebury, 2002; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2006) refers to the digital divide where reference is made to those to barriers to accessing technology. Prensky's (2001) notion of digital natives (those who are familiar with technology) and digital immigrants (those who are excluded and therefore not au fait with technology) has already been alluded to in the Introduction. The vast majority of UWC students mentioned in the Bozalek, 2007 study would have been regarded as digital immigrants at the start of their online experience. Similarly, in the Rohleder, et al. (2007) study, many of the UWC students reported that they did not have computer and internet access to at home, and could only use the computers available at the university.

Findings from an online collaborative study involving ICT (Information, Communication, Technology) with students from Jamaica, US, Uganda, Israel and South Africa (UWC) revealed that student access to computers presented the biggest challenge, especially for students from the Makere University in Uganda and the UWC students (Yusuf-Khalil et al, 2007, p.6). The limited access to computers off campus seriously undermines the very purpose and intention of online learning as one of the most important benefits of online learning is accessibility to information.

2.4.2.3. Insufficient bandwidth, and lack of IT support.

Maidment (2005) in a study on Social Work students' online experiences, reported that some students felt that the training was adequate and that there was adequate support whereas others felt that they needed more training and continuous support by the IT assistants. Studies report a number of the difficulties associated with technical problems which include students experiencing frustration with poor internet connections and closed or moved sites (Maidment, 2005) as well as the absence or shortage of technical help and support for staff and students (Wilkinson, 1999). It was generally the case that some students, mostly from UWC, were not computer literate on their arrival at University and sometimes even into their senior years (Yusuf-Khalil et al, 2007; Bozalek et al, 2008, p. 815; Rohleder et al, 2008). These students would thus need extensive technical assistance to be able to optimally engage in their online learning tasks.

Another challenge which has been reported in the literature is the financial outlay required for computer upgrades to access online learning in an environment of rapidly changing technology (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000).

An online learner must quickly establish comfort with the technology, comfort with predominantly text based communication, and comfort with a higher-level of direction than in a traditional classroom. If this comfort level is not reached, the learner will walk away from the course in frustration. (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

2.4.2.4. Lack of Social Presence

Al-Mahmood & McLoughlin (2004) in their study regarding “changing conceptions of teaching through the online experience” emphasised the centrality of the role of the teacher online. The teacher, who is sometimes known as a facilitator in online learning, plays a key role throughout the online learning experience — even when the discourse and activities are controlled by the students. The teacher is an ever present and key person, managing and monitoring the process. Seventy five percent of UWC and SU students in the Bozalek et al., (2008) study suggested the mixture of face-to-face workshops and e-learning was a desirable learning experience.

Extroverted people may have more difficulty establishing their presence in an online-environment, something that is easier for them to do face-to-face. (Pratt, 1996 cited in Palloff & Pratt 2007, p.8) On the other hand, Bozalek et al (2007) study reported that students were grateful for the anonymity of online learning as other studies. Palloff & Pratt (2007) and Bozalek (2007) also indicate that the students who are introverted gain increased confidence in participating and sharing knowledge and information and feel less intimidated to share than in a face-to-face situation.

2.4.2.5. Physical and Psychological problems experienced in using the technology

As the technology is used extensively, physical problems may occur such as carpal tunnel syndrome, back problems, headaches etc. Psychologically, students and academics can become addicted to the technology. They may have difficulty setting reasonable boundaries and limits around the time they spend online (Palloff & Pratt (2007)).

2.5. Summary and Conclusion

The studies reviewed in this chapter support that online pedagogy can be an effective learning approach, as it aims to engage the learner so that his or her optimal potential can be achieved. The engaged competent learner is the one who is technologically skilled and who displays effective competence in the workplace (which means the knowledge acquired can be applied in practice). However, as also discussed earlier in this chapter it is clear that the online pedagogy can also be challenged by various factors. These factors can be attributed to limited or no access to computers, bandwidth challenges, students who have limited technical skills, who for example, are not engaged with the course content for different reasons (learner styles, not understanding the information, not being able to gain access to information). Technological challenges are more of a prominent feature mentioned in studies conducted in 3rd world countries. None of the findings from first world contexts in the literature reviewed in this chapter have shown challenges with the technology i.e. no or limited access to computers or limited

bandwidth. A further challenge with online learning is the fact that there is a danger of students being exposed to information overload and they may not always be able to discern between relevant and irrelevant information, which clearly indicates the important role of the course leader to guide and provide ongoing support to the learners.

Practitioners of online learning should be cautious in the sense of only concerning themselves with access and convenience and overlooking the quality of the work produced by learners, as the process of learning, analysing and synthesising are equally important. This is in contrast to the traditional classroom learning where results are paramount.

The researcher aims to compare the findings, both the benefits and challenges presented in this chapter, with the results obtained for the purpose of this study and present the findings in chapter four. The methodology approach implemented in this study will be discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 3).

The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building facade with columns and a pediment, with the text "UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE" below it.

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Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides information on the goal and rationale for the study, the methodological approach, the research design and strategy, the research setting and population, sampling, data collection methods and processes as well as qualitative data analysis, triangulation of information, limitations of the study, the researcher's assumptions, validity, reliability and transferability of study and its findings.

Babbie & Mouton, (2001, p.270), describe the qualitative research design as taking into consideration 'the insider's perspective on social action'. In this study, a collection of methods were utilised to gain access to the participants' or insiders' perspectives on the topic being researched. To this end, both online and face-to-face data were collected for analysis in the study. The online journal entries as well as a focus group interview and a questionnaire were analysed to ascertain the participants' subjective experiences and perceptions of the course.

Qualitative methodology was viewed as more appropriate than quantitative as the researcher was interested in exploring students' experiences about online learning. Furthermore an analysis of, their contributions and participation are seen to be very valuable for the improvement of online educational practice.

3.2. The Research Question

The major question which this study will be asking is:

What are the students' experiences and perceptions of an online Social Work module at the University of the Western Cape (UWC)?

3.2.1. Goal and rationale for the study

To explore students' experiences and perceptions of the online Social Work module so as to determine the benefits and challenges for their learning experience. Furthermore, to provide recommendations for improving educational practice based on the findings of this study and the literature reviewed.

Objectives of the study

3.2.2. To ascertain students' views of the online Social work module relating to online learning.

3.2.3. To undertake a documentary analysis of the data obtained from the 2006 to 2008 cohort and explore their experiences and perceptions of online learning as a pedagogy for learning.

3.2.4. To provide recommendations for implementation of such online modules in relation to student learning, and to contribute to the literature on student experiences of online modules, particularly in the field of Social Work.

3.3. The methodological approach

The qualitative research approach was primarily selected for this study as it deemed to be more appropriate than the quantitative approach based on the fact that it includes “an exploration of values, processes, experiences, language and meaning, among other things”. “Qualitative methods are usually relatively semi-structured, relying on open-ended questions or themes to elicit responses in questionnaires, surveys, interviews, observations and text analyses.” (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004, p.60).

Babbie & Mouton (2001, p. 272), informs that “qualitative approaches consist of thick, lengthy descriptions that captures the sense of actions as they occur. It places events in contexts that are understandable to the actors themselves”. These descriptions were captured from the administration of the semi-structured guide, the online journal entries and the focus group discussion. The processes and specifics of implementation are discussed below.

3.4. The research design

An exploratory design, as explained by Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p.79, “is conducted in order to examine a new interest or when the subject of the study itself is relatively new”. An exploratory design was implemented, as this is the most appropriate means to satisfy the researcher’s concern for better understanding of the subjective experiences of the participants, on the impact of

online learning for their (student) performance. The ultimate aim of the research was to contribute ideas for improving the learning environment for online learning, from an understanding of the students' subjective experiences over a period of three years.

Both primary and secondary data sources were used in this study. Primary sources of data were obtained from the focus group discussion as well as the semi-structured guide, whereas secondary data were obtained from the online journal entries administered by the course leader during 2006 to 2008. Primary data is referred to by Babbie & Mouton (2001,p.76) as “data which you have collected yourself as opposed to secondary data that already existed when you began your research”.

3.5. Research setting and Population

The study was conducted in the Social Work Department at the University of the Western Cape. The population can be described as students who mostly who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and who had minimal or limited exposure to technology upon entering the university. Most of the respondents are female in the Social Work department and their ages range from the early twenties to fifties. Apart from the students' technological barriers, the language barrier poses a challenge in students being able to articulate themselves as best as possible in a second language (English) which is required for university purposes.

3.6. Sampling for Qualitative Study

All the fourth year Social Work students' responses on the online journal from 2006 to 2008 were included in the study. The 2008 cohort (37 students) were required to complete a semi-structured guide. These were all the students who were present in class on that particular day; nine students participated in the a focus group discussion and one hundred and forty two students' responded to the journal entries, representing the 2006 to 2008 cohort.

Thus it can be seen that an attempt was made to include all the students who attended the course from 2006 to 2008. All the participants' responses to the first and final journal entries were selected (2006 to 2008) as well as the responses to the semi-structured guide, which required participation from the 2008 cohort. The focus group was a request for volunteers (an announcement was made by all the supervisors to their students). However, only the group of students being supervised by the researcher (the researcher supervises 4th year Social Work students) voluntarily agreed to participate in the focus group interview. The total responses for the online journal entries representing 2006, were forty four, for 2007, forty two and 2008, were fifty. Thirty seven students participated in the survey conducted in 2008 and nine students were engaged in the focus group discussion, which was also conducted in September 2008.

3.7. Data Collection methodology and process

The researcher used multiple sources of data collection (Creswell, 1998) such as a focus group interview, content documentary analysis (responses obtained from the online journal entries) and a semi-structured questionnaire. The variety of methods that were used for data collection was specifically conducted for triangulation purposes (to check for validity and reliability) and to obtain different perspectives, as the sample cohort represented respondents from 2006 to 2008 on online learning.

A focus group session was conducted with students as this is a good way of collecting a group perspective into participants' feelings, attitudes and perceptions about the problem (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

As this is a qualitative study the researcher attempted to elicit information from the students using various approaches (i.e. a semi-structured guide, consisting of open-ended questions and a focus group discussion) about their perceptions and experiences of the online Social Work module, as well as using content documentary analysis of online journals about their perceptions of the online course.

Such data collection processes were conducted to attempt to make the research as authentic and valid as possible. The researcher's intention was to verify and triangulate the findings by adopting a variety of methods of data collection, in order to provide the necessary and relevant evidence which could be useful to

those intending to implement online approaches to teaching and learning in higher education. This could also be of use in considerations of how to ensue changes to the module if necessary, and for the further improvements to the module. Also toward achieving the actual module outcomes and in so doing contribute toward future student performance.

3.8. Data collection methods implemented

3.8.1. Semi- structured guide

In terms of the administration of the semi-structured guide, it was considered that students would be able to identify and thus cooperate with the researcher as the social positioning of the researcher is somewhat similar to some of the students' social profiles in terms of race, culture, language, gender and educational background with regards to secondary school level (with no exposure to computers until university). The researcher is different from the learners in the sense that she is older than most of the students, comes from a more privileged socio-economic background and has twenty years experience in the field of social work and social development, although some students also have work experience. The researcher shared similar experiences (benefits and challenges) as a supervisor being exposed to online assessments, having to download e-books and communicate with students using the internet especially during 2007 and 2008. The researcher is therefore able to relate to some of the experiences of the respondents involved in this study.

The 2008 cohort was requested to write their experiences in a semi-structured open-ended guide, focusing on specific issues relating to online learning. The semi-structured guide was completed at the Department of Social work, during class hours after gaining participants' explicit written agreed consent to participate.

The guide contained the following questions: Students' understanding of on-line learning, the extent of prior exposure to on-line learning, student's attitude to on-line learning, benefits and challenges of on-line learning, training received from the department of Social Work on on-line learning, the use of technology for facilitating students' learning, students' experiences in working collaboratively with their peers on the advanced social work ethics course and the course leader's approach to facilitating the online course. A copy of the semi-structured guide is attached as an appendix. (**Appendix III**)

3.8.2. Journal Entries

The e-journals (both online first journals and or final journal entries) were designed and implemented by the course leader of the Advanced Social Work Ethics module, as a communication and evaluation tool to improve teaching and learning and to obtain and provide ongoing feedback about the course itself. The researcher was able to access these verbatim 2006 to 2008 participants' responses online with the permission of the course leader.

The questions posed to students in the first journal entry was, *“How am I finding using e-learning? What are the pros and cons of e-learning as opposed to other forms of learning?”*

Students’ responses to the final journal entry questions read as follows: *How did you find the e-learning in relation to this course? What did you learn personally and how have your skills improved? Do you have any suggestions for the university in relation to e-learning?*

3.8.3. The Focus Group Discussion

Focus groups can be described as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher”(de Vos et al, 2005, p.300). The researcher implemented the focus group discussion as a supplementary technique to the semi-structured guide and the online journal entries. Focus groups afford the participants the opportunity to self-disclose and to share experiences and perceptions. The researcher is also able to generate a substantial amount of data within a short time- span.

The researcher requested voluntary participation for the focus group discussion from the 2008 cohort. The request was announced to all the fourth year supervisors indicating a convenient time and venue at the Social Work department. Qualitative research normally is conducted in the natural environment of the participants. The response to the researcher’s request for participation was minimal, as only the nine students who were supervised by the researcher agreed to participate. The lack of response may be attributed to time constraints on the

part of the students as the focus group was held on a Friday afternoon approximately four months after the course was completed.

The focus group discussion, which was held for about fifty minutes, was recorded with a dictaphone, with prior consent from the participants. The researcher shared information with regards to confidentiality and anonymity as well as voluntary participation. The participants were requested to allow each other an opportunity to share without being interrupted and to agree or disagree with respect. The researcher facilitated the discussions according to the following topics.

The topics for students included their perceptions and experiences of: online learning in general, blended learning, collaborative learning, access to technology, training received on online learning, the course leader and supervisors approach and attitude toward the learners. Similar topics and issues were contained in the semi-structured questionnaire. This was purposefully designed in an attempt to compare and to triangulate the data. The findings of the discussion are contained in Chapter four.

3.9. Coding of Data

Coding data is said to be “the formal representation of analytic thinking”. (de Vos et al, 2005, p. 338.) The challenge here is to synthesise the data into relevant categories and themes. Various coding “schemes” may be implemented by highlighting the codes using, numbers, abbreviations of key words and colored dots for example. (de Vos et al, 2005)

The data was coded into themes emerging from the responses drawn from the first and final journal entries for 2006 to 2008, the semi-structured guide administered to the 2008 cohort and the focus group discussion held with the 2008 cohort.

The findings, discussion and analysis of these themes are contained in the Findings chapter which follows. The coding was done using a numerical system starting from 01, backslash followed by the year. Every response was given a code which started with either J for journal entry, FJ for Final Journal entry, FG for focus group and R for the semi-structured questionnaire (R indicating respondent). Applicable responses were inserted under relevant themes and then discussed and compared with the findings as described in the previous studies and relevant literature.

3.10. Qualitative data analysis

De Vos et al. (2005, p.333) refer to data analysis as the “process of bringing order, structure and meaning” to the data collected and to qualitative data analysis in particular as a “search for generalized statements pertaining to relationships among categories of data”. The transcripts and typed responses from the focus group discussion, the online journal responses and the semi-structured guide were organized into themes. The researcher coded the content as explained earlier in this chapter and selected themes derived from indicated patterns in the data. These themes provided the basis for the final results and recommendations for further practice.

3.11. Triangulation of information

Triangulation is when researchers use a variety of methods and means to elicit the type of information required in order to provide multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 213). The researcher conducted a focus group discussion as well as obtained information from the online journal entries and administered a semi-structured guide.

3.12. Validity and Reliability

Lincoln and Guba are quoted by de Vos et al. (2001, p. 346), as saying that the “truth value (validity) of a study can be measured by its applicability, consistency and neutrality” The researcher attempted to adhere to these principles by requesting the participants to be honest in their responses and by further reassuring them that their identities would not be revealed. Thus participants were encouraged not to withhold important information and to be truthful in sharing their experiences. The fact that the overall responses to the semi-structured guide administered in 2008, the focus group interview (2008 cohort) and the responses to the journal entries (representing the 2006 to 2008 cohort) elicited similar findings, indicates that the level of consistency in the findings may be of an acceptable standard.

Overall, the data obtained by means of the primary and secondary findings were applicable to the topic being studied and may be utilised in future by practitioners

in similar academic contexts, i.e. to measure the impact of online learning on students' performance.

3.13. Transferability

The indicator of “transferability suggests that researchers have provided a highly detailed description of the research context and methods so that determinations regarding applicability can be made by those reading the research account” (O’Leary, 2004, p.63). In keeping with O’ Leary’s definition, the researcher believes that she has attempted to adhere to these prescriptions, by explaining the research process and the methodology in detail and to the best of her ability, as demonstrated in this chapter. It is therefore hoped that the process may be replicated and be useful to other researchers wanting to conduct similar studies.

3.14. Limitations/Assumptions

- A limitation may have featured in the responses from participants, in that the students may have given pro-social answers, where respondents provide answers which are socially acceptable or which they think the researcher may be pleased to hear, particularly in the case of the online journals. Hence these pro-social answers may not in fact be a true reflection of the experiences of the sample population. This then could have influenced or contaminated the findings of the study.

- The researcher was reflexive throughout the study and tried to be mindful of her own assumptions and biases which may influence the outcome of the study. It is the researcher's opinion that qualitative research cannot be truly objective as there is clearly emotion and opinions involved. The researcher did however adhere to the code of ethics throughout the study as outlined in the South African Council for Social Services Professions policy guidelines, in an attempt to be as balanced as possible.
- Another limitation, as perceived by the researcher, is the fact that due to time constraints, the other participants or key stakeholders could not be involved. These participants are the course leaders, the IT assistants and the supervisors. Involving these stakeholders as respondents, may have increased the level of reliability and validity of the study as the triangulation exercise could have been broadened and deepened.
- An additional limitation to be considered is the fact that most of the literature reviewed for this study reports in first world contexts, whereas this particular study was conducted with students in a third world setting, which clearly has implications of direct comparisons, as the context, resources, skills, experience differ between the two settings.
- Finally, it may be useful to mention that the findings of this study may not be generalized to all online modules as the learning contexts may vary from one faculty to another, or even to one university to another and more so from one country to another. However, the overall findings may be

useful for improving teaching and learning at UWC and other institutions that face similar challenges especially with respect to the IT infrastructure and access.

3.15. Ethical Considerations

3.15.1. Permission

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, Higher Degrees Committee. Lecturers from the fourth year Social Work course (2008 cohort) were approached with the request to obtain access to their students for voluntary participation in the self-administered semi-structured questionnaire.

3.15.2. Informed Consent

Consent from participants was gained by the course leader on completion of the evaluation forms during the 2006 and 2007 academic years. All the participants registered for the Ethics module in the 2008 cohort were approached for the purpose of informed consent, that is, the aims and the procedure of the study was fully discussed. Respondents were informed of the precise nature, scope, purpose and duration of the evaluation. The students were also informed that participation is voluntary and that they are under no obligation to consent to taking part in the research and that they are free to withdraw consent anytime without adverse consequences and without having to state a reason. The respondents were further

informed that their decision not to participate in the study would have no bearing on their marks or successful completion of the module (See Appendices I and II).

3.15.3. Privacy and Confidentiality

Qualitative research often generates questions about the ability to protect confidentiality (Oberle, 2002). These questions arise particularly when publication of the results of qualitative research include lengthy quotations from participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was assured and permission requested for any sharing of information with relevant stakeholders

3.15.4. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Respondents were assured that their names would not appear anywhere in the study, only pseudonyms or codes would be used and that the findings of the research would be shared with them on request. Respondents were told that the findings would also be shared with all the relevant stakeholders on request, i.e. the course leader, the facilitators, students on the course and the funders for the research.

3.15.5. Plummer's checklist of Biases:

Plummer (1983) has developed a checklist of biases in order to make explicit the research process and ascertain the validity of findings. He identifies three sources of biases if not explicitly explicated in the research report. Below the research process is considered in the light of his three sources of possible bias.

Source one: The focus group interview was held with nine respondents (2008 cohort) who volunteered to participate after an announcement was made for voluntary participation of students. These students were all being supervised by the researcher at the time (September 2008)

Source 1: The informants

1. Is misinformation (unintended) given?

It was not obvious that any misinformation was given at all. The respondents answered directly and openly to the questions posed to them. These questions covered their understanding of what online learning is, their experience of online learning, the pedagogical approach, the benefits and challenges of online learning, their experience of collaborative learning and the course leader's approach.

2. Has there been evasion?

The researcher observed reluctance at first when questions were asked about the course leader. The respondents looked at each other and showed some hesitation in responding, the question was about the approach of the course leader, the specific question was whether the course content was designed in a user-friendly manner and whether the face-to-face approach complemented the online information. Some of the students said yes and others said no. The respondents were aware of the fact that the researcher's supervisor had designed the module being discussed in the study. The feeling therefore is that

they felt that those saying something about the course leader might expose their identities as they were still studying on the final year social work programme. The researcher assured the respondents that their identities would be anonymous and that the study is meant to add value to the online design and approach to the course module being reviewed.

3. Is there evidence of direct lying or deception?

There was no evidence of direct lying or deception; however some respondents were more vocal than others. However, this is consistent with the level of participation in the usual supervision sessions. Those who were vocal and dominated the group discussion were very open, direct and honest about the challenges and benefits of online learning experienced.

4. Is a front being presented?

No evidence of a front was displayed. The researcher had supervised these respondents for at least six months, so their behaviour was consistent throughout.

5. What may the informant take for granted and hence not reveal?

The respondents might have taken for granted that the researcher has been exposed to online learning at the university therefore they may have neglected to reveal important information or pertinent detailed information about their

experiences. The researcher attempted to probe and clarify when information shared was unclear.

6. How far is the informant pleasing you?

The respondents attempted to provide a balanced and honest view of their experiences although they differed in opinions, skill level, attitudes. However, as has been explained previously in this chapter the participants in the focus group interview only comprised of students from the researcher's supervision group, which may be an indication that they were attempting to please the researcher.

7. How much has been forgotten?

The module under review was completed earlier in that year, at least by about three to four months. Hence the accuracy of feelings based on their experiences may be different to what they experienced while they were on the course itself, the questionnaire however, was completed earlier in the year (during May 2008). The fact that these two data collection methods produced similar responses can be seen to be reassuring.

Source Two: The social scientist researcher

Could any of the following be shaping the outcome?

1. Attitudes of researcher: age, gender, class, race etc.

The researcher shared the same gender as eight of the nine respondents. Her age differed to the respondents by at least fifteen to twenty years. Two of the respondents were in their late thirties, which is about five years younger to the researcher. The researcher's race and culture is different to seven of the nine respondents who were Xhosa speaking, whereas the researcher is Afrikaans speaking and of Indian Muslim culture. Taking all of these factors in consideration, the researcher is of the opinion that the language barrier may have hampered the outcomes of the interview as some of the respondents were quiet and only shared briefly.

2. Demeanour of researcher: dress, speech, body language, etc

The researcher was dressed as she would normally dress for work, and her body language and speech was the same as she would be during the supervision sessions. The manner of relating to the students was the same as what they had been accustomed to during the last six months of supervision. All of the respondents appeared to be relaxed.

3. 18. Personal reflexivity

1. At the outset, the researcher acknowledges the fact that the actual writing up of this report was extremely challenging. This challenge can be attributed to the fact that this is the researcher's first attempt at writing an academic report of this nature. Hence the academic writing style, the logical flow of argument, discerning between what literatures are relevant and engaging with the literature presented challenges. Particularly so, because the topic and pedagogy of online learning was new to the experience of the researcher. The entire process of researching the topic, reviewing relevant the literature, becoming familiar with key concepts pertaining to the topic of online learning, as well as doing the actual research study, analyzing the data and finally writing the report was definitely an empowering experience.

During the course of writing this report (with its numerous drafts) the researcher acknowledges the guidance of a knowledgeable supervisor whose expertise on the content and experience in the production of academic publications and research methodology and practice helped immensely and cannot be underestimated.

2. Secondly, cognisance has to be taken of the fact that the researcher is predominantly Afrikaans speaking and is therefore, somewhat challenged in having to write in the English language. The guidance and input from the supervisor together with the constant reference to the "Websters" English thesaurus proved very useful in the completion of writing this report.

3. An additional challenge was the synthesis of the data, as there was so much data to be analysed (which also took many hours of work) that it was difficult to decide how best to present the data so that it would make ease of reading and understanding easier as well as make the report more coherent.

4. It should be noted that the 2009 students experiences have not been included and this is perceived to be a limitation, as the researcher feels that their experiences would have added value to the findings of this study (i.e.) more data to compare.

5. The researcher did not make use of any scientific tools or research software to collate and analyse the data, which could have further enhanced the validity and reliability of the data collection and analysis.

3.19. Conclusion

The researcher referred constantly to the texts on research methodology for guidance on the research process itself. The predominantly qualitative, exploratory design was conducted by implementing three data collection techniques. The online journal responses were obtained from the 2006 to 2008 cohort, the focus group discussion and the semi-structured guide were administered to the 2008 cohort. The reasons for using the three methods were primarily for triangulation purposes i.e. primary sources such as the semi-structured guide and focus group discussion and a secondary source of data

collection namely the online journal entries were used as sources of data which could be compared with each other.

The following chapter (Chapter four) contains the findings of all three data collection tools used. The findings as well as discussion in relation to the literature reviewed are also included in the next chapter.



Chapter 4

Findings and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the findings, which illuminate the benefits and challenges of online learning experienced and perceived by students who completed the Advanced Social Work Ethics course at UWC during 2006 to 2008.

In this chapter, I begin by using a table to outline the emergent themes derived from the data collated from the online journal entries (2006 to 2008 cohort), the semi-structured guide administered with the 2008 cohort and the focus group conducted with the 2008 cohort. The responses to the semi-structured guide are reflected primarily in a qualitative format with some quantitative data analysed according to the responses received in the semi-structured guide administered during 2008.

The tables outlining the benefits and challenges of online learning as perceived and experienced by the respondents are further discussed and organised per theme, linking the discussions with relevant literature to further substantiate and validate the direct responses.

The table indicating the emergent themes for the study can be found below.

These categories are listed under **Categories A and B** where **Category A** indicates the benefits as perceived by the respondents and **Category B** represents the challenges of online learning as experienced and perceived by the participants.

The chapter is concluded by a summary of the findings and this is followed up by practical recommendations, in Chapter Five.



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4.3.1. Category A: Benefits of online learning as experienced by the participants

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Physical access to computers and the internet	1.1. Access to information and learning material, course outlines, marks for assignments and tests
2. Online learning is an active and engaged form of learning	
3. Skills gained through online learning.	3.1. Enhanced computer skills 3.2. Enhanced presentation skills 3.3. Effective medium of communication 3.4. Effective time management skills 3.5. Preparation for the workplace 3.6. Development of critical thinking skills
4. Encourages independent, responsible and organized students	
5. Flexible learning (anywhere, anytime and just in time learning)	
6. Learning made fun and interesting	
7. Cost saving to students	
8. Encourages Collaborative learning	
9. Student –centered learning	
10. User-friendly programme design	
11. Helpful IT assistants	
12. Access to course leader	
13. Timely and adequate feedback from course leader	
14. Saving time	14.1. Sub-theme :Enhanced time management skills

4.3. Category B. Challenges of online learning as experienced by the participants

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Technological challenges	1.1..Feeling intimidated by technology (technophobia) 1.2.Adapting to a new method of learning 1.3.Freezing of computers 1.4.Power cuts 1.5.Limitations of accessing the internet on and off campus
2. Challenges of KEWL system	2.1.Server problems 2.2.Limited bandwidth and impact on submission of assignments 2.3.Challenges of wireless internet access 2.4.Log in challenges
3 .Insufficient Computers	
4. Submission of Assignments	4.1. Time limit on submission of assignments
5. Online training provided for students	5.1. Inadequate training 5.2.Insufficient training for course leaders and facilitators 5.3. Uploading e-books 5.4. Limited access to technical assistance
6. Limitations of feedback and communication from course leaders and facilitators	6.1.More face to face time needed with course leaders
7. Challenges of working collaboratively	7.1. Less face to face contact with peers, impacting on relationships
8. Heavy workload	
9. Physical safety of students threatened by carrying laptops	
10. Physical and mental health of students affected	

4.3.1. Category A: Findings and Discussion on the Benefits of online learning

The findings collated from the various participants' responses, are discussed below and are substantiated with direct quotes obtained from the online journal entries (2006 to 2008 cohort) as well as participants' responses gained from the questionnaire (2008 cohort) and the findings elicited from the focus group interview (2008 cohort). Furthermore, the discussion of the findings is compared to the literature, in order to locate the study in a conversation with other scholarly works.

Theme 1: Physical Access to Computers and the Internet

Discussion

The response with regards to physical access to computers and the internet varied from having limited access in 2006 to access on campus only, for the majority of students to having access to a laptop, provided to the students through a project of the International Association of Digital Publications (IADP) Affordable Access Programme which was piloted in the Social Work Department in 2007 and 2008. Having access to their own computers (laptops) provided students with easy access to information and learning material, and positively impacted on the ease of communication with their course leaders. It also provided students with constant opportunities to gain skills and proficiency in the use of the computer programmes, internet access and typing. It should be noted that UWC students have been identified as representing the poorest of students in South Africa (Breier, 2010), from which one can assume that most students do not own laptops.

The findings of Breier's (2010) study are discussed in the literature review chapter. In addition to the above-mentioned benefits, access to computers was mentioned as enhancing students' computer literacy skills. This aspect is discussed in more detail further along in the chapter. Aside from the benefits mentioned, internet access provides authentic learning experiences by giving students the opportunity to interact with real people, real events, real places and real problems as well as a virtual world of knowledge to tap into. Therefore, these real experiences contribute to a richer learning experience, which is geared toward deeper learning (Sweeney, et al, 2004; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Pritchard, 2007). Seventy eight percent of the respondents indicated in the survey, that online learning should be introduced in all their courses. This indicates that addressing the relevance and quality of the learning experience demands that higher education take a fresh look at how it approaches teaching and learning and utilizes technology.

Participants' responses

FJ21/08 - The laptops have made this system of learning easier to adapt to, because now I do not have to wait to share labs with fourteen thousand other students on campus. And furthermore the laptops and wireless have provided the opportunities of being more connected to the internet at various points on campus, which has benefited researching purposes.

R28/08- it helps me to access needed information much easier

1.1. Sub-themes: Access to information and learning materials

Discussion

Students appreciated the fact that they were able to access information online instead of having to wait until lecturers were available to provide information. Examples of information accessed online are: course outlines, marks obtained for assignments and tests as well as uploading relevant literature. Students also valued the fact that they were able to access and download information from the World Wide Web, as well as the course material, which was readily available at their fingertips (rather than having to look for hardcopies in the libraries). These views are supported by Bozalek (2007); Curran, (2001); Rohleder et al., (2008); Yusuf- Khalil et al., (2007). In addition access to assignment marks, and other information pertinent to the course was also available.

Participants' responses

FJ 29/08 - We are able to see our course outlines without having to wait for our lecturers and we can access our marks for tests, assignments and exercises

J36/06 - Despite the initial problems in using e-learning it has become much easier to make use of for assignments, assessments, etc that have to be completed. One has easy access to the material that has been uploaded for students to peruse and to equip themselves in social work studies.

FJ 35/07 -. In fact I found accessing course documents quite simple and straightforward and it definitely saved having to go to the library looking for books or scouring the internet for relevant related articles

Theme 2: Online learning allows for active and an engaged form of learning

Discussion

One of the many benefits of online learning discussed in the literature is the insight that online learning actively engages the learner rather than relegating them as passive recipients of knowledge as is the case in the traditional methods, where the course leader is perceived to be the expert (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). An engaged learner is a more motivated learner who is able to achieve better results as retention levels and depth of understanding course content is increased. As engaged learners, students also have the opportunity to become co-constructors and collaborators of new knowledge (Bozalek, 2004; Pritchard, 2007). Students cannot be passive knowledge absorbers who rely on the instructor to feed information to them. The online pedagogy encouraged students to work independently and taking more responsibility for their own learning rather than being dependent on the course leader to be “spoonfed” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Participants share some of these sentiments in the excerpts below:

Participants' responses

FJ02/06- My working ability is high now because I am always on my toes, I am always in front of the computer I have learnt to do other things and opening other sites

FJ13/06- Now I am able to submit my assignments, write tests and chat with my lecturers if there is any problem that I am experiencing and also chat with my group members. I could say that my skills are also improved in such away that I was able to communicate well with my group members and the lecturer verbal and non-verbal communication. I also listened attentively to other people views and asked questions to get more understanding of what was discussed.

J03/07 - This allows for me to study individually, taking responsibility and not relying as much as I used to on class mates for notes, but rather that I make sure that I have all electronic notes needed to complete assignments and tasks. What has even being more interesting is that there has been a lot of individual responsibility put in my hands, where I have been required to do readings and self study of articles to gain knowledge, which I feel resulted in me not over relying on the lecturer of the course.

J16/08 - E-learning inspires me to want to know more. It is really advanced in that one can keep up with the modules and see them online, and prepare for lectures in advance.

Theme 3: Skills gained through online learning

Discussion

Examples of what students reported gaining from the experience in terms of skills were: development of computer literacy skills and improved typing and reading skills. Examples of these acquired skills are listed in the direct quotes below. Cognisance should be taken of the fact that a substantial percentage of the participants had limited or no exposure to computers or computer training prior to them attending University.

The participants also indicated that this is their first real exposure to online learning as in their previous years of study, they were introduced to online learning in its basic form. This meant searching for information on the Internet, word processing or perhaps using email. Computer access is clearly a first world phenomenon, as it is assumed by many of the first world scholars writing on the benefits of online learning, that students have access to computers, that it is a given that students have their own computers or laptops and that they do have access to internet on campus or where they live. Rohleder et al., (2008) and Yusuf- Khalil et al., (2007), make reference to the fact that most students in the third world countries do not have internet access in their homes and could only use the computers and internet at the university. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the digital divide, the divide between those who have twenty four hour access, generally first world digital natives and those who have limited or no access as is common in the third world countries. (Broekman et al, 2002; Czerniewicz & Brown, 2006; Selwyn, 2006) Limited access also impacts on

online learning practice, thus alienating students as they are often not familiar with the technology and are commonly referred to as digital immigrants as discussed in the literature chapter.

Participants' responses

FJ34/07 - I have learnt that it is important to keep oneself up to date with technology as it is constantly being improved and is fast becoming the main source of communication and learning based system.

FG01/08 - understand internet better, I was not equipped to using internet before.

R 12/08- improved technical skills, increases communication

Sub-theme: 3.1. Enhanced computer skills

Discussion

As discussed in the literature review chapter (Chapter two), most students living in third developing countries have limited to no access to computers. Therefore, they are not as proficient in using computers and the Internet. The UWC students, who participated in the study, indicated that being engaged with the online learning pedagogy improved their computer skills. Similar findings were mentioned in Bozalek's (2007) study of UWC students and blended learning. In addition to computer skills being improved, students also indicated that their presentation skills and typing skills were enhanced (see responses below).

Participants' responses

FJ08/06 - Personally I have learned to type faster, as in the chat rooms if you are slow someone pass your point while you are busy searching the keyboard. My computer skills have also improved because I am also able to download content and upload assignment and to attach assignments.

FJ44/06 - At present I find e-learning very user friendly. When I started at UWC in 2003 I was not computer literate and it was a great effort to get my assignments typed, but I coped. For the last three years I only used the computer when it was extremely necessary. This year, however required of me to frequently use the computer, because of e-learning. This improved my skill of typing and my over all knowledge about computers and the use of it.

Sub-theme: 3.2. Enhanced presentation skills

Participants' responses

FJ 20/07 - I believe my presentation skills have definitely improved,

FJ36/06 - My computer skills have definitely developed especially with the Power Point presentations

Sub-theme: 3.3. Effective medium of communication

Discussion

Students revealed that communicating with their group members and course facilitators was easier, as they were accessible and could be contacted at any time, leaving messages, emailing them or discussing issues via the chat rooms.

Information regarding the course, communication of deadlines, uploading marks and exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience was made possible through the medium of online learning. A student further indicated that this medium of communication is more professional as information is kept more confidential and client's identities are kept anonymous. Preference was also given to communicating students' marks via e-learning rather than displaying them on the notice board, which is not confidential and may cause embarrassment to those who have underachieved. Students also mentioned that information previously had to be copied from the notice board, which is more time consuming than uploading from the course site.

Participants' responses

J01/06 -. We don't have to go to the notice board all the notices are on line.

J09/06 - I did struggle at first because of novelty and power failures but am now getting used to it and perceive it as an awesome and powerful communication tool.

J21/08 - The positive, it is easy to use and also we can be aware of expected tasks earlier than going and stand in front of the notice board.

J36/08 - I am able to communicate with my group member or critical friends regardless of where they are in the world

Sub-theme: 3.4. Effective time management skills

Discussion

Online learning is perceived to enhance students' time management skills. (Al-Mahmood & McLoughlin, 2004). Students who struggled with the technology in the beginning indicated that their time management skills improved as they became more proficient in the use of the technology. Hence for some students there was a shift from spending more time than expected, because of the above reason, to effective use of time, as their skill level improved.

Participants' responses

R2108- It is good in terms of helping me to manage my time better and to also commit and be responsible with my academics

FJ/08- The e-learning form of learning is also helping us to manage our time properly. Our time management skills are improving because the due date and time is programmed. The site will close strictly at that time. There are no late submissions allowed. So this makes us to be serious in terms of completing our tasks as early as possible to avoid disappointments.

Sub-theme: 3.5. Preparation for the workplace

Discussion

Students recognized the absolute necessity of being proficient in utilizing IT to be able to function optimally in the workplace. The following response provides

insight into student's views on being equipped technologically for the work environment.

Participant's response

J08/07 – I think it is a good thing that the University has introduced to students because we are going to the corporate world next year and one must be good and know how to use different resources. The reality is that internet is the biggest resource used in our days, so thank you for the orientation. I have benefited and I am still learning.

Sub-theme: 3.6. Development of critical thinking skills

Discussion

Online learning places the student at the centre of learning (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003), as it is usually designed according to social constructivist principles, where the student is expected to take co-responsibility for their own learning with the necessary guidance from the course leader, more knowledgeable peers and the course material (Vygotsky, 1978). The onus is nevertheless on the student to engage with the literature, providing them with opportunities to critique, to analyze and to form their own opinions. This is further enhanced by interacting collaboratively with their peers, engaging their peers in classroom discussions, chat rooms and in the collaborative assignments. Critical thinking is developed through active engagement with the material in different ways with different people who have diverse thoughts and opinions about the various course materials. Critical thinking skills are furthermore developed when students are

exposed to a learning environment which is authentic, where the student is able to relate to the situation and the context and is able to optimally engage in the learning process. Pritchard (2007,p.7) deliberates on the issue of authentic tasks by stating that, “authentic tasks are likely to hold the attention and interest of learners and lead to a deeper level of engagement with the task than with another similar or possibly less authentic task.”

Participants’ responses

J34/06- It taught me to read and write things critically

FJ 43/08 - Chat sessions provide the student with different perspectives and it allows the student to agree or debate other students’ views, requiring critical thinking of the student.

R36/08- Very informative and helpful. It allowed me to critically think about myself as well as my critical friend.

Theme 4: Encourages independent, responsible and organized students

Discussion

Online learning encourages students to work more independently (Bozalek, 2007; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Paloff & Pratt, 2007) than the traditional learning paradigm, where the course facilitator takes more responsibility for sharing knowledge than does the educator in the conventional learning paradigm. In the latter conventional paradigm, the facilitator or lecturer is seen to be the expert and the student the recipient of knowledge (Hildebrand, 1999, Salmon, 2003). Online

learning requires students to be more independent, committed, organized and accountable, as indicated in the responses below.

Participants' responses

FJ16/08- The student has also learned to be more organized and responsible, because everything at e-learning is uploaded.

FJ17/08 - It trained us more on being punctual and be responsible

FG01/08 - My technical skills improved, made me an independent learner and self disciplined

Theme 5: Flexible learning (anywhere, anytime and just in time learning)

Discussion

Technology is increasingly being utilised for learning and teaching in universities around the world (Jones and O'Shea, 2004; Laurillard, 2002; Sharpe et al, 2006), largely because it is considered to provide greater flexibility in relation to time, place, pace, entry and exit (Inglis et al(2002 cited in: Turney et al.; Pritchard, 2004; Robinson and Soutar, 2009)

Students indicated that their educational experience was a flexible one - in other words, being able to access information at any time and any place provided they had access to the Internet of course. Information was considered by students to be readily available, especially pertaining to course material, instructions and marks. Students were also able to interact and exchange information with peers without

physically having to meet in one place at a particular time, which is sometimes difficult to coordinate. The luxury of being able to work from home was also mentioned as a benefit in terms of accessibility. This is assuming that the student has Internet access at home. However, benefits could still be derived from accessing computers even if only for word processing purposes i.e. typing of assignments, which many students did not enjoy as a privilege prior to the introduction of the online module.

Participants' responses

J14/06 - The workgroup chat room is of benefit as we can just make arrangements to meet at the same time to do the chatting even if we not next to each other

J07/08 - I found using e-learning as useful for my studies. This site I can access it even if I am not on campus, provided that I am connected with internet

J18/08 - Giving us the opportunity to learn almost anytime, anywhere.

J34/08 - E-learning offers me much more freedom. As a mother I am able to complete tasks at home and submit assignments after hours. Before I would have to remain at the university to do research and organize my family around that.

FG 01/08 – you are able to access information from anywhere, if you have a computer it is easier to get information

Theme 6: Learning made fun and interesting

Discussion

The online pedagogy provided opportunities for innovative and fun learning. Some of the students' comments were that e- learning is an "active, innovative and fun" method of learning and it should be introduced to the broader university population. Students mentioned that they were expected to be active, engaged participants through searching for literature, uploading information, participating in discussion and chat rooms with their peers. A significant benefit of online learning related to innovation, variety of learning methods and the fun element is the fact that the retention will be higher than in a traditional learning environment, which clearly will impact positively on student performance.

The fact that students were required to access the internet, upload relevant material for their assignments, digest, analyse and integrate into their assignments meant that students were expected to apply meta-cognitive skills, whereas in the traditional form of learning they would have received the information from their course leaders, diminishing the opportunity for utilizing or developing their meta-cognitive skills.

As Pritchard (2007, p.10) notes, "the understanding required for formulating effective searches is transferable to other areas of work and is related to other meta-cognitive strategies. Meta-cognitive thinkers will make decisions based upon their knowledge of their own preferences and learning inclinations, which will guide how they use resources found on the internet".

It is also important to consider the extent to which students use their laptops for “pleasure” in class, whilst they are expected to focus on completing their academic tasks. Somekh (2007,p.26) similarly shares her concern for the fact that “difficult choices have to be made in relation to students’ use of the internet as an innovative form of learning, between protecting them from perceived dangers of pornography and paedophiles and giving them free access to the ‘information society’”.

Chen et al, (2008), noted that user satisfaction is one of the key factors in the successful implementation of online programmes. High student satisfaction regarding online learning was reported, increasing students’ online practice. Research also indicates that in today’s world students are becoming more visual in their learning patterns, which clearly indicates the advantages of the diverse approaches and techniques offered to students. Online learning was also shown to have benefits including low attrition rates, more referrals for the university from distance students, improved student performance as well as an increased commitment to the programme (Chen et al, 2008).

Participants’ responses

J39/07 – I’m finding e-learning an interesting method as its visual attraction makes me more interested in my interaction with the work at hand

J41/07 - E-learning also makes it easier for students to interact with other students in multidisciplinary courses virtually, that makes learning more exciting and broadens our perspectives [as students] on various issues of interest

J12/08- E-learning is one of the most interesting learning experiences I have ever had. It is innovative and fun to do. It makes learning interesting and I look forward to learning new things

J19/08 - Quite enjoyable to learn new methods of learning

FJ38/06 - . I can remember prior to the group chat room discussion, I was a bit worried about as I did not know how it was going to unfold, but as the discussion evolved it was rather interesting and educational as well as fun.

Theme 7: Less intimidating than face to face learning

Discussion

Some students feel less intimidated by communicating with the course leader on line rather than facing the lecturer in person i.e. The power differential between the two does influence the way the student perceives and interacts with the lecturer, specially if the relationship between the student and lecturer is strained for some reason or the student feels inadequate or not confident enough to face the lecturer. According to Pratt (1996 cited in: Palloff & Pratt, 2007), some students who are introverted, gain more self-confidence in interacting online and feel less intimidated than facing their peers in face to face interactions.

Participants' responses

J37/06 - E-learning is quite an interesting form of learning because I feel free to express my views, thoughts and feelings without the fear of being judged.

FJ07/06 -In terms of this module e-learning was very good for me personally, as I am not an out spoken person it helped me. When we were doing the chatting exercise I was very happy because I got the chance to discuss and there was no one listening to what I was saying.

J35/07 - E-learning has also removed the sometimes intimidating feeling of having to consult lecturers on a face-to-face basis, by affording one time to formulate responses to query the lecturer.

J41/07 - We do not have to meet with lecturers in person, which could sometimes be intimidating

Theme 8: Cost saving to students

Discussion

Aside from the skills acquired in e-learning, the **most significant benefit** revealed by students is cost saving. There was no need to print hard copies of assignments; as they were required to be submitted electronically. Considering that the majority of students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, it was clear that the financial benefits and cost saving in this module was greatly appreciated. Students shared examples of being able to have more money available to them for basic needs, such as food. In addition, students saved money by not having to purchase textbooks, but were able to access the e-books at no cost.

Participants' responses

J09/06 - Money is saved, as a person does not have to pay print fees for producing hard copies.

J01/07 - It is also an advantage for us as students who can't afford to print or to make copies.

J12/07 - I actual enjoyed it as we are not actually writing long assignment and hand it in as some of us are coming from low socio- economic background with no money to print

FJ32/07 - I think that e-learning is very cost effective especially for those that cannot always afford to print their work and have to submit late because of this issue, and as a consequence failing their reports.

J08/07 - we can easily access information through the net. Especially for the students like me who do not have bursaries we get access to books that are very expensive to buy

J04/08 - The positive things about e-learning is, that it is affordable for students to use

Theme 9: Encourages collaborative learning

Discussion

It appears from the responses that the overwhelming majority of participants felt that collaborative learning is beneficial because they learn from each other, they are able to share knowledge and ideas, it teaches them teamwork and cooperation, and they are able to develop their social skills. The response rate obtained from the semi-structured guide (2008 cohort) in support of collaborative learning, was 86%.

It is evident that the students on the Advanced Ethics course were empowered to work collaboratively as the course was designed to afford the students the opportunity to work more independently and allowed for their voices to be heard, which essentially facilitated the social constructivist paradigm. Students often had to reflect and give feedback on their performance, on the course content as well as the e-learning pedagogy. This is synonymous with best practice principles for online learning (Hildebrand, 1999; Paloff & Pratt, 2001; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). It is clear from the responses that some students found it challenging not to be “spoon fed”, as they were accustomed to this in their other courses at University. Certain students supported the idea of being independent from the course leader. Working collaboratively seems to have enhanced students’ communication skills, encouraged group cohesion, developed critical thinking skills as students were expected to participate fully and actively and be reflexive about the course content and the e-learning pedagogy.

McConnell, (2006, p.99-100) emphasizes the essentials of successful collaborative learning, which can be used by course leaders and peers for assessment purposes. These are: product achievement, communication skills, social relationships and reflective skills. These indicators can be summarised by stating that collaborative learning involves individual participation and commitment in working together towards creating a final product, which also requires individual analyses and synthesis from a diverse group. Furthermore, it develops shared responsibility which fosters mutual dependency and knowledge sharing, reflecting on self and peer participation, performance, knowledge, feelings and experiences, observing social interactions and group dynamics as well as observing values and principles and finally for all members to take the initiative in meeting deadlines for projects

or assignments undertaken. It is evident from the responses below that many of these indicators (i.e. sharing ideas with others, giving and receiving feedback, critical thinking and being reflexive, engaging with peers and enhancing communication skills) were present in the online module under review.

Participants' responses

J23/07 - A helpful thing about e-learning is the fact that one can go on e-learn and share with others ideas on a specific topic or issue and get feedback from others.

J29/07 - e-learning has helped me connect to class members in another way, such as being critical and being able to reflect. The good part of e-learning is the continuous interaction amongst class members

J33/07 - The one thing I like the most about the site is the fact that your critical friend gives you feed back to your written work. This therefore gives you a chance to evaluate what your friends said about your work and what they think of what you said.

FJ 41/08 - This also allow you to express your opinions in chat rooms and discuss with your class mates issues which you are struggling with.

R03/08- I don't mind sharing ideas with others and being open to suggestions and opinions of others

R16/08- I enjoy working with people and sharing or debating views

R28/08- Although all group members were not present at times, at least the work load was still reduced by the few present.

R3408- I don't have a problem interacting with group members, because you can learn from your peers but only if everyone puts in the same amount of effort

Theme 10: Student- Centered Learning

Discussion

Student-centered pedagogy relies on the learners to take responsibility for their own learning. It requires the student to be independent, to rely on their own knowledge and experiences, and forces them to do research and engage critically with the material and the relevant literature (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Paloff & Pratt, 2007; Rohleder et al, 2008). It is evident from the responses that the students enjoyed the student-centered approach to learning; they seemed to appreciate the fact that they were actively engaged and involved in their own learning. The positive responses are refreshing as it is the researcher's experience, being a student supervisor for the last eight years that most of the students expect to be "spoon fed". There is a common pattern of dependency on the course facilitator to provide information and the lecturer is often viewed as the expert and the student the recipient of knowledge. Learner interaction is seen to be the key to an effective online course by many experts in the field of online learning (Draves, 2000; Kearsley, 2000; Paloff & Pratt, 2007, 2009). Kearsley (2000 cited in: Conrad and Donaldson, 2004)) reports that the most important role of the course leader in an online class is to ensure a high degree of learner participation and learner engagement.

The course leader or designer does have a very crucial and significant role in that he or she is responsible for developing the course tasks and outcomes even though the student functions more independently within the online pedagogy.

Participants' responses

J01/06 - We are doing work on our own which gave us opportunity to see that we can work independently.

J42/08 - This program has also allowed us as students to take into account responsibilities to do our parts as students without having our lecturers telling us what to do.

FJ21/08 - What has even being more interesting is that there has been a lot of individual responsibility put in my hands, where I have been required to do readings and self study of articles to gain knowledge, which I feel resulted in me not over relying on the lecturer of the course.

FJ 26/08 – I have learned how to work independently and not to wait for the lecturer to spoon feed me as a student



Theme 11: User friendly programme design

Discussion

Students indicated that the course outline, instructions and design of the module is user- friendly, easy to understand, and clear instructions were given. In the survey conducted with the 2008 cohort, sixty five percent (65%) mentioned that the course was designed in a user-friendly way, twenty two percent (22 %) responded

that it was not and thirteen percent (13%) not in all circumstances.. The challenging aspects that were indicated were attributed to the fact that some students did not interpret or understand the instructions clearly. This may be regarded as a personal or an individual challenge, and may not necessarily be attributed to the instructions not being clear or simple to understand. It is important to recognize that student-centered learning as an effective pedagogy caters for student's individual needs which can be addressed by means of scaffolding.

“Scaffolding is the name given to the process of giving support to learners at the appropriate time at the appropriate level of sophistication, and in an appropriate way to meet the individuals needs” Pritchard, (2007, p. 6). One of the participants indicated that the “course was user-friendly, not the site”. One is therefore able to deduce that the student may be referring to the course content being user-friendly and the e-learning platform being difficult to negotiate. This is alluded to by Pritchard (2007), who reminds us that learning does not take place in a vacuum. Learning ideally and optimally will happen if and when the student is able to relate to the context which may be the physical or virtual space, socially or culturally defined and is the degree of familiarity to the student.

Participants' responses

J30/07 -The fact that you can just click an icon and it takes you directly where you want to be is very user friendly.

R0108 – everything was clearly explained

R0708- instructions on how to upload assignments were given clearly

R2808 – course was friendly not the site

Theme 12: Helpful IT assistants

Discussion

The majority of students indicated that the IT assistants were helpful. This is also an individual issue, as the students who disagreed with the response may have needed additional assistance as per their individual skill level or needs.

Participants' responses

FJ04/07 - I.T experts were very helpful, they were always there for us. They work with us even after class. The instructions were loud and clear.

FJ38/08 - In the mean time I do not have any suggestions for E- learning people because they were always there when we needed them and they tried their best to meet our needs. They are good people to work with.

Theme 13: Access to the Course Leader

Discussion

Students indicated a preference for accessing the course leader using email or instant messaging which is convenient and fast. It was seen as means of accessing the lecturer directly rather than having to schedule appointments at specific times only, which in fact may limit access.

Participants' responses

J02/06 - E-learning is a very good method of tutoring as it is quick and it allows you to be in contact with tutors and lecturers.

J06/06 - We can communicate with our lectures via email or instant messaging if you want to ask something at that time not by making an appointment before you get help.

J23/07 - This is also a very easy way to get in contact with the lecturer as they also have busy schedules and don't always have time for us students. With this I mean that one can get in contact with the lecturers outside consultation time through e-learn which is a good thing.

J42/07 - the availability of lecturers/facilitators, is indeed an advantage because now we do not only need to knock on office doors but we can communicate, asking advice or give comments to the lecturers/facilitators via e-mail.

Theme 14: Timeous and adequate feedback from Course leader

Discussion

Students' opinions on feedback from course leaders differed. Some indicated that they received sufficient and timeous feedback, whereas others disagreed. This could be attributed to students learning needs varying in terms of level of understanding for example. Feedback from the course leader was perceived to be integral to the student's learning and academic development. Timeous feedback from the course leader in relation to students' grades was also mentioned as an advantage of online learning.

Participants' responses

R0308 - The feedback was sufficient at times, but sometimes I would have liked more comments on my worked assignments

J15/07 - The facilitator would be able to understand what you are saying, and not having a difficulty with your handwriting. It is also very helpful when you get the comments from the facilitators, because their comments give you an idea on where you stand with your work, do you have an understanding, where you can improve etc

J36/08 - If I am doing the multiple choice question it is also very pleasant to be able to access the marks at such a short period of time and being able to view what was wrong answer (feedback)

FJ06/06 - Your lecturer assesses your work immediately and gives you feedback about your work

FJ41/08 - I feel that e learning is a useful tool to have as it allows you to have conversations and chats with your lecturers online and get instant feedback from your lecturers.

Theme 15: Saves Time

Discussion

It is a given that through the medium of technology such as the internet, students would be able to save a considerable amount of time searching for relevant literature. This is often much more practical and feasible for students rather than searching for information in often under stocked libraries for hard copies.

Furthermore, having to pay lots of money for photocopying is also problematic for students whose resources are limited. It means having to wait in long queues to be assisted, which is time consuming.

Participants' responses

J12/06 - E-learning it is the best way I ever used to do my work it saves time and energy. I just log in and read the documents

FJ33/07 - E-learning has also saved my time with regards to going to the library and searching for books to complete my assessment exercises.

FJ 28/08 - The one pro I've found using e-learning is that you don't have to search for information and literature. It is all available in one place (on the site) and this cuts your time in half because you don't have to run to the library to search for books or to the notice board to check for due dates for example.

Sub-theme: 15.1. Enhanced Time Management skills

Discussion

It is clear that students were assisted to submit their tasks in time, as the tasks closed by a due date on the e-learning platform. This helped them to plan their work more carefully and be more diligent in meeting deadlines. Although online learning is more accommodating with respect to allowing students to work at their own pace, this does not mean that students are at liberty to submit at any time. The literature mentions the fact that students should be accommodated in terms of self-scheduling, rather than self-pacing, which means the deadlines are not postponed

but rather the work patterns and planning to meet the deadlines are rearranged to suit individual students' needs.

Participants' responses

J12/06- Late submissions are rejected which makes me to do my work on time

J37/07 - I think the use of e-learning taught me personally how to manage my time, since I had to plan before hand, since I knew that there will be a possibility that the computers would not be available. Therefore I always had to be prepared for this.

J07/08 - The e-learning form of learning is also helping us to manage our time properly. Our time management skills are improving because the due date and time is programmed. The site will close strictly at that time. There are no late submissions allowed. So this makes us to be serious in terms of completing our tasks as early as possible to avoid disappointments.

4.3.2. Category B – Discussion on the Challenges of online learning shared by the participants

Theme 1. Technological challenges

Discussion

Eighty one percent of the participants in the 2008 survey conducted, indicated that they experienced technical challenges. These challenges listed below reflect a combination of external and or internal or individual factors which vary from server problems, limited bandwidth, power outages (primarily in 2006 and 2007),

computers freezing because of viruses and students forgetting to save their work. Students also reported a lack of knowledge about how and where to submit assignments, feeling intimidated by the technology, finding it challenging to adjust to the new method of learning and having to submit work online, and a need for more in- depth training on online learning and the use of the technology. Furthermore, students struggled to upload the e-books which could be a combination of not knowing how as well as technical difficulties. They requested more face-to-face learning or support for a blended approach including face-to-face and online learning and reported experiencing difficulty in accessing the internet away from campus as many students do not have access to the internet at home.

Participants' responses

J09/06 - The cons of e learning are that it is reliant on a number of technical and electrical resources, which means when these resources are down or ineffective the system cannot be accessed.

J33/06 - I don't like doing my work on the e-learning system because of the constant problems that I experience. If there isn't a power cut, my work disappears, and therefore everything has to be done twice. I don't have the time nor the energy to do things twice because I do have other responsibilities

FJ05/08 - I personally found e- learning very overwhelming and stressful; I had some difficulties in the beginning I had to run up and down to get a laptop because the course ethics had to be done on line

Sub- Theme 1.1. Feeling intimidated by technology

Discussion

Students indicated that the online pedagogy was new to them, which resulted in feelings of anxiety and inadequacy in using the technology. They felt that the online pedagogy should have been introduced earlier in the course, as this would have aided the students in being confident in using the technology. Students mentioned that they had limited exposure to using online learning earlier on in their course from first year to fourth year. The feeling was that the exposure and training needed to be intensified from very early on in their course, as early as first year in fact. The literature also indicates that it is a challenge to expect students who are digital immigrants to adapt to new course content, and especially to the online pedagogy simultaneously (see Prensky, 2001). These factors may contribute to increasing the anxiety levels for students, which is bound to affect their academic performance. Students also alluded to this issue when they were experiencing exam conditions, which had strict time constraints and needed to be proficient in the technology and focus on the course content as well.

Participants' responses

J24/07 - The only negative thing about the E-learning for me is that for me it is not easy to think in front of the computer.

FJ49/08 - I never was interested in sitting in front of the computer, but the time the told me that I have to submit on line I was scared that I was going to fail since I was not good in computers

J40/06 - I find e-learning extremely intimidating and unpleasant to work in. The reason for this is because I have lost many of my worksheets which cause a lot of anxiety and undue pressure. Having to work on e-learning also to a certain extent robs one of really engaging with the work as one is often too caught up in having to submit the work.

Sub – theme 1.2. Adapting to a new method of learning

Discussion

Seventy three percent of participants indicated that this was the first time they had been exposed to online learning, the pedagogy demanded adaptation on their behalf. Furthermore, difficulties in adaptation caused feelings of anxiety and inadequacy or incompetency in the beginning of the course.

Participants' responses

J24/06 - This year was really a challenge using e-learning as we have never used this method before and especially with the power failures that occurred

J30/08 - Honestly I am not impressed at all. I am finding it very difficult especially due to the fact that this thing was introduced to us in short notice in our final year. It would of being better if it was introduced to us earlier on.

J38/08 - At first I could not relate to the e learning site and I had negative feelings regarding using the site especially when it was mentioned that we will write test via the computer. I feared writing my first test on the e learning site however I found that it was not difficult at all

Sub-theme 1.3. Freezing of computers

Discussion

The laptops freezing had negative implications for the students as it hampered assignment submission and prevented students from finishing the examination timeously. Students also indicated that during synchronous and asynchronous communication with peers, on the discussion forum or engaging in chats with peers in the chat room online, the computers froze, which also presented adverse effects for completing their assignments. The causes of the computers freezing seem to be attributed to viruses mostly, more specifically viruses in the chat room, although other technical causes could also have contributed to this challenge. This issue can be attributed to a fault of the e-learning management system.

Participants' responses

FJ45/08 -The fact that technology is not always reliable is another worrisome factor. Example the day of my ethics test my laptop froze and I nor the technician could do anything to speed along the process. I started an hour later with my test

and if the deadline time closes there is no mercy for “excuses” about faulty computers

R2108 - I have in one chat discussion we couldn't chat all of us the computer just froze and we couldn't see each others response to discussion

R2308 . The laptop sometimes freezes or I could not connect to the online site.

Sub-theme : 1.4. Power cuts/ Outages

Discussion

The power outages had serious implications for submission of assignments and completion of tasks. This problem however, was more evident during 2006 than 2007 and 2008. The power outages caused students delays in submitting their work but also impacted on their time; thus consuming more time than expected and delaying submission of assignments.

Participants' responses

J10/06 - Also the power-cuts was another big problem, because we could not access our work and time was running out

J14/06 - The sad thing about e-learning was the fact that we had power failure, which lead us not to access the information which was downloaded to it

J22/06 - e-learning was a great problem during the power cuts because the assignments were postponed, which had an impact on other work as well.

J35/08 - When there is a power failure or many people are accessing e-learning it becomes hard for us to log in and that in turn consumes our time and we can fail to meet the deadline for that particular exercise

Sub-theme 1.5. Limitations of accessing internet on and off campus

Discussion

The general feeling and responses from participants indicated that online learning was beneficial, however problems arose when students needed to access the Internet off campus i.e. from home. Many students do not have the luxury and convenience of having Internet access at home. Once again, as discussed earlier, reference is made to the 'digital divide' issue, which impedes students' ability to deliver in time. Consequently, they had to work on campus after hours or having to travel to campus in the early hours of the morning. Aside from impacting on work performance, it is imagined that student safety or rather lack thereof in commuting between the university and their communities requires serious deliberation. The lack of internet access off campus is clearly only visible in developing contexts and has a major impact on students being able to submit work in time and enjoy the convenience and flexibility of anywhere, and anytime learning.

Participants' responses

J16/06 - With regards to the e-learning system I have been experiencing various problems, mostly of a technical nature. I think that this type of learning was a

good idea but leads some to a disadvantage because they do not have access to the Internet outside of campus.

J19/06 - I do not have internet at home and thus have to make use of the facilities on campus. Most students too do not have internet at their homes and thus venues on campus are always crowded and noisy. This atmosphere is not conducive to working. I much rather prefer working quietly in the comfort of my home where my space and time can be negotiated.

J20/08 - Many of the students, myself included, do not have access to E-learning at home and can only access E-learning on campus. The availability of computers for us as social work students contributes thereto that we are not always able to submit our exercises when required to do so. Due to far distances of traveling a lot of students are unable to stay late on campus when computers actually becomes available. There are those students who are able to complete their exercises at home, but there are those who unfortunately do not have the privilege to do this, as they do not own a computer.

FG01/08 - no internet at home, that is the main thing, otherwise it was superb, did not always have access

Theme 2 : Challenges of the learning management system

Discussion

“The Knowledge Environment for Web-based Learning (KEWL) is the learning management system that was developed as an in-house or homegrown system at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to promote an open source online learning. It was built as a comprehensive learning management tool that could be modified and used to investigate the online learning process, particularly in the context of Africa and the rest of the developing world.” KEWL is suitable for use in any online learning situation, including in school, corporate training, and higher education.

[http://technologysource.org/article/knowledge_environment_for_webbased_learning_\(kewl\)/](http://technologysource.org/article/knowledge_environment_for_webbased_learning_(kewl)/)

It appears, however, from the participants’ responses that the KEWL system presented challenges in terms of accessing course content, uploading and downloading information, and the chat room continuously failed which impacted negatively on students being able to use it for a particular assignment in the course. One student indicated that having to repeatedly register for every module on the system was a cumbersome task. The KEWL system was also affected by the power failures and no back up supplies of electricity, which impacted negatively on students’ work schedules. In addition the server problems experienced by students posed more challenges as students work suffered setbacks as well as anxiety and frustration in submitting assignments. Similar frustrations were raised by the participants as a result of the limited bandwidth.

Participants' responses

J01/08 - The challenge was to go for each and every module to register they suppose to register student once and for all modules

J19/06 - I think KEWL elearning is a very sophisticated system and would work exceptionally well if the logistics were in place. The system is somewhat temperamental - I am not sure if this is as a result of the recent power failures or whether the system is just overloaded. Having information and readings loaded onto the module site is useful but accessing this could sometimes be a challenge.

J03/06 - The only concern that I have using KEWL is that much more attention is placed on concentrating on the computer screen, accessing the network, and so on that a focus in our other models or courses are lacking. e-learning as I said holds great possibilities but as things are currently going and the work load that we have I would however prefer the old 'traditional' method of learning. Taking into consideration that KEWL Next Generation is fairly new, as it is a new iteration of the original KEWL management system, it is a given that technical problems will occur

Sub-theme 2.1. Server problems

Discussion

Some of the server problems highlighted by the respondents were no access to internet, the crashing of the server, problematic wireless access, information or data being lost as a result of server problems.

Participants' responses

J06/08 - The limitations e-learning brings to this course is when the internet system is down I am unable to submit, complete tasks and share information

J13/08 - The cons would be that I always have the fear that my work will not be submitted on time or that the internet will be off line.

J 31/08 - The sites some times crash and do not have other back-up sites to enter work onto the network.

J43/08 -Although I find the process of wireless connection a hassle. It's a continuous moving about from one venue to the next to find access to the internet. The fact that technology is not always reliable is another worry some factor. Example the day of my ethics test my laptop froze and I nor the technician could do anything to speed along the process. I started an hour later with my test and if the deadline time closes there's no mercy for "excuses" about faulty computers

J14/07 - E-learning services can sometimes be time consuming. An example: when data gets lost because of server not available (the internet being down) and the continuous pressing of the stay on line button

Sub- theme 2.2. Limited bandwidth and its impact on assignment submission

Discussion

Apart from the limited bandwidth challenges at the university, often causing interrupted internet access, it should be noted that bandwidth is a problem in

South Africa at large. This issue is being addressed in the near future, by private enterprises such as Neotel who has become the anchor tenant on the broadband marine cable Seacom planning to deliver vast quantities of cheaper bandwidth to South Africa . Mybroadband.co.za

Participants' responses

J11/08 - To a certain extent E-learning limits me in a way, because it was said that only 25 people will have access to the internet at a time. I was confronted with this for some minutes and could log on later.

J16/08- The only disadvantage would be that when the Internet is down, one is not able to access the literature or website, and the internet may be slow when a number of students attempt to access the website all at once.

Sub- theme 2.3. – Challenges of Wireless internet access

Participant's response

FJ 45/08 - I find the process of wireless connection a hassle. Its a continuous moving about from one venue to the next to find access to the internet.

Sub-theme 2.4. Log in challenges

Discussion

The log in challenges may be attributed to both individual intrinsic causes, for example, a student not being familiar in how to log in, or extrinsic causes which

may be due to server problems. These challenges may also have been problems which students encountered as novices in the system and that this may have improved as they became more experienced in navigating the system.

Participants' responses

J33/08 - I struggled to submit an on-line assignment. I could just not login in spite of following the correct procedure. It is a new experience and I am sure I will be more confident as I gain more experience in this new experience of e-learning.

J36/08 - However some of my colleagues had difficulty logging in and staying on the site, which caused anxiety together with the anxieties of writing a test. It can become very frustrating when one cannot log in or access necessary information

Theme 3: Insufficient computers

Discussion

The issue of insufficient computers was predominantly experienced during the first two years of the implementation of the online course. Students had to rely on the limited number of computers in the laboratories, and accessing computers away from campus as well as accessing out of classroom times as the labs were not always accessible (due to the large volumes of student using the labs and the availability of students to use the labs were not accommodated, especially after hours) This issue was addressed during 2007 and the situation improved during 2008. Each student was given a new laptop in 2008, compared to the previous year, 2007, where they struggled with the refurbished computers. Access to computers is one of the key variables for the success of online learning, which is evident from the responses shared below and from the findings shared by the

existing literature. However, physical access to computers alone does not guarantee success of online learning. Inequality of access must also be taken into account, for example access to materials and usage access, as studies have shown that social inequality often lends itself to digital inequality or the digital divide (Van Dijk, 2006).

Participants' responses

J07/07 Availability of computers has to be the biggest con of online learning

J18/06. Computers are also not always accessible as students have to stand in long lines to book a computer and many times miss out on lectures due to deadlines for submission. Students are also not all fortunate enough to have computers at home and Internet to access this program, which even more makes it difficult.

J15/07 - There is also the fact that because the work you have to do your work online, sometimes there is no computers available on campus for you, especially if you have to submit assignments out of class time, and it becomes a problem because then you have to run around on campus looking for an open computer.

J26/07 - e-learning is very useful and a great assistance to students but the fact that everyone has to run around finding an available computer discourages students to make use of e-learning

J32/07 - Computer labs on campus sometimes close early and we then do not have access to the internet

FJ 02/06 - The University should provide enough computers in all departments, not keeping them in the store rooms. Only ten computers for all the fourth years, they are not enough. Students have to stand in long lines in labs waiting for computers.

Theme 4: Submission of Assignments

Discussion

Students raised concerns about losing their work due to the fact that they were not familiar with the technical aspects of how to save their work online. This caused frustration as they had to redo the work or sometimes lose out on marks for not submitting the work timeously. It seems that students forgot to save their work, which also required them to redo and resubmit. Students also referred to computer viruses hampering their timeous submission of assignments.

Participants' responses

J10/06 - The only problem that I found with e-learning is that when one experiences problems with the e-learning, for example the work was not correctly submitted but you know you did the work but was only incorrect submitted, then you get no marks for your work.

J17/06 - I do not think the lecturer has stressed the way that the students have been stressing about the e-learning. Sometimes you will type your worksheet for eg. and when you want to save and continue your work is gone and then you have to start all over.

J26/06 - At the beginning I found e-learning a bit frustrating. We had a lot of technical difficulties. We lost our work if we did not save it, which was our own fault but it was frustrating. When we got used to the problems it was easier to be more careful when doing your work. I have learned that if you are more careful

and save your work beforehand, you will be able to spend less time re-doing it and spend more time doing it right.

J32/06 - However I have a concern that is time consuming and because I do not type very fast, the programme close at any time. It might be that I am taking too long in answering questions, and in the event the programme shut down 3 times before I've finished the work. I had to start all over again, changing sentences, which were very stressful, since the work was not saved.

J05/07 - The disappearing of the work is my disadvantage of it and I think we should have thought by it from the first year so that we have the better understanding of what it is and how it works.

J09/07 - Sometimes you find that even though you submitted your work the lecturer would not get it. Sometimes when you are still busy doing your work the site would just turn off and your work will disappear and that cost us too much time by redoing your work again.

J13/07 - it was not easy to work in computer and submit it via computer. You repeat the work and keep on losing it and the line closed so the lecturer doesn't know whether you are telling the truth or not.

R1008 -I had to submit an assignment and couldn't since I could not access my documents due to virus on the laptop

Sub- theme 4.1. Time limit on submission of assignments

Discussion

Students experienced challenges in being able to submit their assignments in time, especially in the beginning when they were not proficient in the application of the technology. A time limit was set as part of the management of assignment submission, which if not adhered to, did not accept late submissions. Consequently, students missed the deadlines or claimed to submit rushed work of poor quality.

Participants' responses

J20/06 - It was quite a task to learn to know how to operate the E-learning, which had a negative impact on my work. I was so concerned about meeting deadlines for submissions of exercises that I feel that I was not able to concentrate as much as I would have wanted to on the quality of the work I presented

J14/08 - The disadvantage about e-learning is that the time for submission is very strict, if you are late by 1 minute on your submission via e-learning you cannot submit. The page closes exactly at the given time.

J16/08 - When you missed the time due for a task you will not get another chance to submit. While if you were submitting a hard copy you would ask for an extension or put it under the door

J26/07 - The con of e-learning is the fact that every session only last 30 minutes. This means that information is lost and everything needs to be redone

J20/08 - But negative thing about it is that sometimes you are given a task to submit at specific time, as we know that lot of people are using that internet

during the day, sometimes it takes time to open the internet and you find that that website to submit your staff is closed maybe at ten o'clock, meaning that you lose marks for that matter.

Theme: 5 - Online training provided to students

Discussion

Eighty four percent affirmative responses in the semi-structured questionnaire were received from the 2008 cohort to the question asking whether the training on e-learning was sufficient. A large percentage of the technical problems experienced were due to power cuts and server problems (especially during the 2006 and 2007 academic year). Students also experienced problems with submission of assignments due to not being registered or not saving information and losing it, or not knowing where to post the information.

In addition to the technical problems which were beyond the control of the course organisers, students also indicated that the training needed to be intensified, and the training should have taken place ahead of commencing with the module itself. They felt it was a great deal to digest i.e., learning the content and familiarizing themselves with the technology, and having to submit assignments simultaneously. Students felt overwhelmed, which resulted in them making errors when submitting their assignments. The most common error was forgetting to save their information. This had major consequences for students as they had to redo their work, which was frustrating, and stressful. Losing information appears to have been as a result of a combination of inexperience in the usage of the

technology, and problems with the server, power cuts (primarily in 2006 and 2007), and systems crashing because of limited bandwidth or viruses which froze the laptops.

Students also had positive and negative experiences with the IT assistants where some noted that they were helpful and accessible, and others mentioned that at times they were not available, or could not assist as they did not have the relevant expertise.

The results of the semi-structured questionnaire conducted with the 2008 cohort, which asked the question relating to exposure to computers and online learning indicated that seventy six percent of the cohort of Social work students were exposed to online learning for the first time. This fact further explains the reason why students were faced with so many challenges. It is clear that many had limited or no exposure to working with computers or online learning prior to the course and entering university. A lack of experience and exposure appears to be the norm for most of the respondents.

Participants' responses

J13/06 - The negative side of using the e-learning is the fact that we did not get enough training to expect us to submit our work online and there is a due date, because one cannot guarantee that our work is submitted.

J27/06 -I am struggling with adapting to the new KEWL Next Generation system in the ethics module as a result of not receiving adequate training as to how to engage with the system.

J34/07 - It was also quite frustrating because in the beginning we lost most of our work because we were not taught at first that we are suppose to click online to stay on line.

Sub-theme 5.1: Inadequate training for students

Discussion

It is clearly an individual rather than a overall experience (84% percent of the students indicated that the training was sufficient) and it also links with one of the key principles of online learning which allows for students to work at their own pace, and which also encourages different methods of teaching and learning. Some examples may include having more individualised training sessions. Some students shared the possibility of training manuals in hard copy format and others felt more trainers should be introduced. These suggestions are included in the recommendations in the next chapter.

Participants' responses

FJ45/08- In our training we received they taught us about word and presentations etc, which was not applicable to what we needed to know, more preparation time should have been given to fully equip the learners on the technical skills so that the facilities provided could have been fully and adequately used. As I basically only used my laptop for typing purposes and in class for books accessibility etc. I didn't have the privileged of utilizing it at home or take the risks of exploring features on my own.

FJ 21/06 - I am of the opinion that adequate training should be provided to the students. Due to the fact that we did not receive adequate training before embarking on this course I experienced numerous problems.

FG 01/08 -Yes, the training was so short, they just go on, should have more trainers,, to give individual assistance. There were only two trainers, so those who were slow, struggled, more trainers needed and they should slow down, should introduce us in 3rd year already, then u don't feel incompetent, we also lose marks if we have problems and we cant submit in time.

Sub-theme 5.2. Insufficient training for course leaders

Discussion

Students' perceptions of a lack of training for course leaders were noted. Acknowledging the fact that the online pedagogy was new to both students and course leaders. One also should be mindful of the fact that with any new experience there is a high possibility of adjustment, anxiety, technical glitches and so forth.

Participants' responses

FJ27/06 - Then there were also the lecturers who did not know how to access some of the information posted to them. This is a serious problem because if the lecturers can't access the documents what about the students. In the future the IT specialists should equip the lecturers first to equip the students.

Sub-theme 5.3. Challenges of Uploading e-books

Discussion

Students highlighted the issue of not being able to upload the e-books which caused frustration and time consuming. These challenges were identified as being external to the students' abilities, meaning that the problem was caused by technical challenges and not by students not having the skills to upload information

Participants' responses

J17/07 -The thing I don't like about this is sometimes readings not easy to open so you have to take time trying by all means to open it.

J18/07 - sometimes I struggle to access the prescribed readings because some readings did not open

FG01/08 – e-books was challenging, you can't highlight as with hard copies, going over and over, that was challenging

Sub-theme 5.4. Limited access to technical assistance

Discussion

The issue of limited assistance differed among students feedback. Some students actually felt positive about the technical assistance given to them whereas others had more negative views. Students referred both to access and helpfulness, by stating that sometimes the technical support personnel were too few and therefore could not assist everyone, which influenced the quality of the assistance as they were thinly spread and had to rush to assist students. Some students indicated that

they preferred asking their classmates or peers for assistance, as they were more accessible.

Participants' responses

FG 01/ 08 - It is not easy to get help immediately when we are facing with a problem, people from IT are sometimes overloaded with work and they have lots of students to assist, so they cant give you individual attention. This should be upgraded.

Theme 6: Limitations of Feedback and communication from course leaders and facilitators

Discussion

Feedback from course leaders is seen to be a crucial element in improving students' performance. Students indicated that the feedback was not always included which hampered their opportunity for improving their work. One key benefit of online learning is constant feedback which keeps the communication between course leader and student open at all times, enhancing understanding and building a cohesive relationship between student and course leader, developing social presence and thus contributing to the improvement of student performance (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swann, 2003; Rovai & Barnum, 2003).

Participants' responses

J08/06 - Disadvantages is that we are unable to see the comments of the educators in our work. We do not know what we should do in order to improve our work since we do not see the comments. We are experiencing many problems with e-learning we end up doing the same thing several times

J18/06 - Lecturers only mark your work but do not advice or inform students about their wrong doings this is a problem to most students, as we all need room for improvement but are not made possible.

J20/08 - With other methods of learning the lecturer will mark a student's assignment or exercise and make comments. These comments are helpful as it gives an indication where we went wrong and in which areas we are able to improve. With E-learning this does not happen. The result is that we do not have an idea on the mistakes we made and how to improve on it. If the lecturer is physically in our presence we are able to question on certain procedures with regard to the assignments. If we are unclear about certain issues we are able to get immediate clarification on certain issues. With E-learning we need to get to an available computer and mail the lecturer or facilitator and then wait on a reply. This is time consuming and sometimes results into not obtaining the relevant advice at the time needed.

J21/08 - Even in the assignments handled by hands I used to see the complaints and re-correct my mistakes. But now I am unable to see and to improve my way of studying.

Sub -Theme 6.1. More face-to-face time needed with course

leaders and facilitators

Participants' responses

J41/07- I think the only disadvantage of E-learning is that it decreases personal contact between students and course facilitators which is sometimes necessary for some students to fully understand that particular course

J48/08- I feel like I have been robbed my lecture by E-learning since we do not spend much time to spend with her, we communicate with her electronically.

R0208- You sometimes have to get the lecturers input on matters you do not understand. The content online might not be sufficient.

R0308-.. Face time is also important especially when you need clarification on something

R0608- It is not sufficient. It allows access to article but lecturers still need to impart their expertise verbally

Theme 7: Challenges of working collaboratively

Discussion

Gauging from the responses below, the researcher is able to deduce that the participants who preferred working alone or who perceived collaborative learning to be a challenge did so mainly as a result of a lack of equal participation from all the group members. This was also due to different styles of learning, where some

students prefer to work on their own, and others prefer teamwork or group work. The participants who prefer working independently, places a great deal of emphasis on individual needs to perform, to succeed, to be held accountable and responsible. This also acknowledges the fact that students work and learn at various paces which is difficult to coordinate in a group context.

Students were expected to share knowledge, ideas and experience, and they could assist each other if they found tasks complex and difficult. Some students indicated that working in a group worked occasionally to their disadvantage, as it is perceived that group members did not all participate equally. Some felt they did more work than others. Students felt that at times working independently encouraged increased personal and individual accountability.

The perceived disparity in students taking responsibility for collaborative tasks could foster resentment and frustration, and in fact cause a rift among group members if it is not addressed by the members themselves or the course facilitator.

Participants' responses

R03/08- I don't have to worry about others not doing their tasks and then having to take on extra work.

R04/08 - because there is never equal distribution ie participation in group

R12/08- Alone . Less time consuming and more work gets done. More responsible learning takes place

R16/08- Alone. It creates learning at my own pace and time

R31/08 - Yes. Alone because I like to work in silence, group work is a distraction

J25/07 - I find using e-learning to be very impersonal, especially in the case where you need to work in your group. It is a bit slow in relation to where you could have met face to face and worked faster. Now you have to wait until the members submit their work before you can reply and this is a bit unnecessary.



Sub-theme 7.1: Less face- to -face contact with peers, impacting on relationships

Discussion

Numerous studies have covered the importance of social presence indicating that interaction between students does not necessarily equate to social presence. Students need to feel the synchronous presence of a peer or course leader in order not to feel isolated, and to be motivated, and in so doing be more active and engaged. The concept of presence has drawn a lot of interest and has been studied in significant depth (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swann, 2003; Rovai and Barnum, 2003) which demonstrate that social presence enhances student satisfaction and depth of learning. One can safely assume that social presence by peers would result in improved student performance especially with regards to collaborative learning tasks.

Participants' responses

FJ14/08- Personally I have learned that sitting with a computer all the time, can have negative effects on your personal relationships. For example, ever since we got the laptops I rarely see my class friends and we rarely have the opportunity to really work together, as everyone is locked away behind their laptops. So even though we speak and interact with each other, e-learning has had negative effects on personal relationships. We now keep in contact via e-mail or e-learning, which in a sense is good, but not always

Theme 8: Heavy workload

Discussion

The emergent theme and perceptions shared by students, on heavy workloads could be viewed in different ways. The heavy workload may be attributed to students adapting to the online approach, which demanded extra time, learning by doing as well as adjusting to working differently. It is also a fact that there is a big gap between the third year workload and that of the fourth year, a fact shared by many students. Students indicated that the work in fourth year is more complex and demanding on their time. Perhaps the idea of scaffolding the workload and to reduce the gap between the third and fourth year may provide an option to alleviate the stress and anxiety for the students in the fourth year.

Participants' responses

J05/06- E-learning was very difficult and very challenging for me. The program is very interesting but it need a lot of time to learn how to use it. Therefore due to our limited time and work loads being unable to login in the program I become frustrated - .

J23/06 - The cons of e- learning are when we had many things to submit and we don't have enough time to do it.

J07/07 - it is a lot of work we get to do so we are constantly busy doing things

FJ 40/08 - There was too much course material loaded on the e-learning for this course and I did not yet read all of them due to constrains. I believe that some of the readings could have helped me in this ethics course. Therefore for future purposes only those readings relevant to the course should be uploaded and also the most needed additional readings.

Theme 9: Physical safety of students threatened by carrying laptops

Discussion

Students raised concerns about their physical safety while carrying laptops on their person. There is a threat and danger of them being attacked. This feeling was shared by students who did not have Internet access at home, and consequently having to work from campus after hours. This posed a threat to them when going home. There was also a fear of laptops being stolen on campus, or even from students' homes.

Participants' responses

FJ 23/08 -One does not always feel safe walking with laptops, as our area where we live in is not safe at all.

FJ25/08 - Even those who live on campus they struggle to have access to internet so they have to go to the student centre to get access for internet which is not the good thing because they are at risk because their lap-tops can be robbed.

FJ 26/08 - I stay out of campus, because I need internet I have to stay here at campus till late, and I arrive late at home which is very risky.

Theme 10: Negative Impact of physical and mental health of students

Discussion

Online learning exposes students to numerous physical, emotional and psychological ailments or issues such as “carpal tunnel syndrome, back problems, headaches, addiction to the technology, can experience personality shifts and fantasising on line” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p.6)

Two participants concur with the above author with regards the physical concerns in particular, highlighting the fact that online learning forces students to be glued to their laptops for lengthy periods of time, which makes them physically inactive and could be detrimental to their health. In addition, one does question the impact of viewing the laptop screens for hours on students' eye sight, neck, shoulder and back problems as a result of slouching and bad posture.

Numerous participants (see previous discussions and findings) indicated frustration about technological problems associated with online learning. This caused tension and anxiety especially at the time of submitting assignments as well as during the examinations, which ultimately has adverse consequences.

Participants' responses

J39/07 - methods of learning can make one physically inactive as one sits on one place

FJ03/06 - It has the potential to cause a lot of anxieties and frustration as work gets lost and there is no ways of retrieval.

4.4. A summary of the findings on the students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the Advanced Ethics course

Online pedagogy, particularly focusing on engaged learning in an online environment is supported by a vast body of research (Conrad & Donaldson ,2004; Garrison & Vaughn, 20 08; McConnell, 2006 ; Meyer 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2007,2009; Rohleder et al, 2008; Salmon 2002). The findings drawn from this study conducted with the fourth year social work participants at UWC (2008) and documentary analysis obtained from the 2006 to 2008 cohort of participants support this body of knowledge.

4.4.1. A summary of the benefits of online learning as outlined by the participants of this study

1. Social work students were fortunate in being able to gain access to laptop computers in 2007 and 2008. This assisted them to become digital natives, rather than digital immigrants, as it gave them constant access to a computer thus changing their learning identities.
2. The online pedagogy assisted students who have few resources in that they were not financially burdened by having to print hard copies to submit to their lecturers.
3. Online learning was also time efficient – students were able to avoid long cues and having to search for information in under stocked libraries.
4. Access to the internet provided the students with more extensive resources such as being able to access international and national literature, as well as access to e-books, which students were able to upload onto their laptops.
5. Online learning was seen to be innovative and fun, as it is a new method of learning. This method assisted students in improving their computer literacy levels. Online learning was described by one student as being “a powerful, awesome communication tool”
6. Online learning was regarded as a “good tool for group discussions” and for accessing lecturers. Students mentioned that lecturers are always busy and indicated that it is more intimidating having to face the lecturer than chatting on line or communicating via email.

7. Online learning benefitted introverted students in that they were able to communicate via chat rooms or email, which afforded them sufficient time to formulate their thoughts, ideas and questions. This was easier than having to be spontaneous when engaging with classroom peers, and possibly avoiding the feeling of being judged.

8. Students also perceived and experienced online learning as assisting them with time management as their deadlines for tasks and assignments are strict

9. Online learning was seen as flexible, where learning could occur “anytime and anywhere”, in contrast to conventional learning. This was of course, subject to internet access and to students having constant access to computers. Students were also prepared for the workplace where using technology is the order of the day.

10. The overall perception about the online Advanced Ethics module was that the course content was well structured and user-friendly. The literature indicates that the success of the online pedagogy depends on a number of factors, such as a well structured course, easy access to computers, training of the participants, timeous feedback by the lecturer and a combination of approaches such as the online with a face-to-face approach. The overwhelming majority of students indicated that online learning should be introduced to them as early as first year, so that they are familiar with the technology by the time they reach their final year. Seventy eight percent of the respondents in the semi-structured questionnaire indicated that online learning should be introduced in all their courses. This statistic is interesting, considering that most of the challenges faced by the students were technological in nature which caused much frustration to students.

11. A student-centered approach, together with collaborative learning, are crucial elements to an effective online learning module. It was evident from the student responses in this study that those students who are strong academically preferred to work independently in many instances, and those who struggled academically preferred working collaboratively. Students revealed that there are benefits to working collaboratively as ideas, opinions, knowledge, experiences are discussed and shared which creates a sense of respect for diversity in all its forms, culture, gender, age, language, race, class etc. This point leads into the discussion with regards the challenges experienced by the fourth year Social Work students.

4.4.2. A summary of findings on the challenges of online learning as outlined by the participants of this study

1. The most common challenges experienced by the students was those that were technological or technical. These ranged from electricity supplies being cut to students forgetting to continue to save their work online before submitting and thus losing information and having to redo the work. Therefore, despite students sharing that online learning saves time, it appears from the data that many of the students needed to redo their work because of the aforementioned reasons.
2. The technical problems experienced by the students meant work delays, not being able to meet deadlines and then subsequently losing out on marks which added to the students' stress levels.
3. Another negative experience of the online methodology was that some students were not being registered. This meant that they were unable to access the course

online. Although the overwhelming majority of students revealed that online learning saves time, some students indicated that online learning is time consuming when you are not familiar with the technology and when you have to “write, type, copy, paste and then submit your work.” This is in addition to having to continue to press the ‘stay on line button’. It was revealed by certain students that some of the readings could not be accessed, or the work completed ‘disappears which means having to redo’.

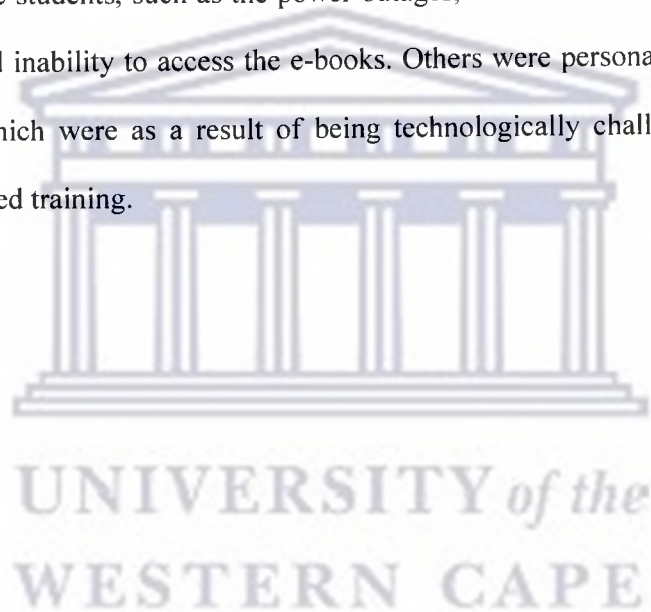
3. Too many students working online caused an overload on the system, which crashed the system. The limited bandwidth at the University is seen to be a continuous challenge for students to upload or download material and submit assignments in time, in order to meet the deadlines. Limited bandwidth slows down the access considerably, which adds to the students losing time.
4. Certain respondents also indicated that they did not receive immediate feedback, which did not help them improve their work. One of the benefits of online learning, according to the literature, is that it provides the students with timely feedback and the need for clear, detailed comments by the course facilitator is demanded.
5. A large percentage of students indicated that the online learning approach needs to be introduced much earlier in their course, so as to assist them in being comfortable and experienced with the online pedagogy (by the time they reach fourth year). Many felt that although they were trained in online learning more individualised training was needed as some students learn faster than others and the number of trainers was limited. Students shared that it was challenging having to familiarise themselves with the technology and simultaneously being expected to submit assignments with strict deadlines. The combination of the two was

daunting and overwhelming. It is interesting though that despite the majority of the students indicating that the training was adequate and sufficient, over eighty percent of them experienced technical problems, which may have been due to factors outside training such as servers crashing, lack of bandwidth, computer viruses and the power cuts.

6. Finally, an overwhelming majority of the students (78%) indicated that all their modules should implement the online learning pedagogy. However, there was reference made to the fact that the online learning should be offered with a combination of face-to-face and online approach (blended learning) as some students missed the physical face-to-face interaction with the lecturer.
7. Some of the more personal and social views shared by the students indicated the concern for students' safety in having the laptops on their person as well as concerns about eyesight being affected by constant and lengthy exposure to the laptop screen. Furthermore, students felt disadvantaged by being physically inactive by sitting for hours in front of the computer and missing out on face-to-face social interaction with peers in the classroom as everyone is (glued) to their screens. In addition to the students' eyesight being affected the researcher is of the opinion that due consideration should be given to other physical ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome, backaches, shoulder and neck aches as result of spending hours in front of the PC, which could also give rise to headaches.

4.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings showed that there is an overwhelming support for online learning despite the challenges experienced. This general perception alludes to the fact that online learning has numerous benefits and these benefits can be increased if consideration is given to the inherent challenges. These tend to be the technological aspects, which were responsible for most of the challenges experienced by students. It is important to recognize that some of these were external to the students, such as the power outages, the limited bandwidth, server problems, and inability to access the e-books. Others were personal or individual challenges which were as a result of being technologically challenged, despite having received training.



Chapter 5

Recommendations, Implications for Practice and Conclusions

5. 1. Introduction

Chapter five primarily focuses on whether the goals and objectives for the study were achieved. Recommendations from the students' reports on their experiences and perceptions of online learning in the Advanced Ethics Course are included. Specific operational recommendations for both Higher Education practitioners and in particular for practitioners in the Social Work Department are also discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, a discussion on the implications for further studies as well as conclusions to this study are noted.

5. 2. Goals achieved

The researcher is of the opinion, that she was able to achieve the goals and objectives of the study, despite the limitations outlined earlier in this study in Chapter 3.

The primary goals and objectives of this study are outlined below:

5. 2.1. To explore and describe students' experiences and perceptions of an online Social Work module at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

5.2.2. To contribute to the knowledge of the benefits and shortfalls of online learning for students within the university as well as for the discipline of Social Work within the academic arena.

These experiences and perceptions are discussed and analysed in the findings chapter and presented as benefits and challenges of online learning. The benefits as perceived by the participants were highlighted according to emergent themes, which are summarised as follows:

Access to computers and internet, enhanced computer literacy skills, enhanced typing skills, online learning is innovative, fun and interesting, encourages time management skills, develops independent and more organized students, online learning is flexible i.e. you can work from anywhere, at any time and at your own pace, online learning prepares the student for the workplace, it enhances effective communication, it saves costs and time, easier access to course leaders, develops self-confidence as it is less intimidating than face to face learning.

The perceived challenges faced by the students can be summarized as follows:

Technical and technological problems, server problems, limited bandwidth, power outages especially in 2006 and less so in 2007, insufficient training, no internet access off campus, preference for blended learning i.e. both online and face-to-face learning, limited feedback from course leaders or facilitators.

5. 3. Objectives achieved

The objectives of the study were the following:

5.3.1. To ascertain students' views of the online Social work module relating to online learning. This was achieved by having a focus group discussion with the 2008 cohort and by engaging the 2008 cohort in the self-administering of a semi-structured questionnaire. The findings in Chapter Four indicate students' responses in the focus group discussions, which relate directly to the aims of this study.

5.3.2. To undertake a documentary analysis of the data obtained from the 2006 to 2008 cohort and explore their experiences and perceptions of online learning as a pedagogy for learning. The documentary analysis was completed by analyzing the online journal entries representing the 2006 to 2008 cohort. **These findings are contained in chapter four as well.**

5.3.3. To provide recommendations for implementation of such online modules in relation to student learning, and to contribute to the literature on student experiences of online modules, particularly in the field of Social Work. **The recommendations are discussed below in two sections.** The first section reflects students' recommendations documented in the survey and focus group conducted with the 2008 cohort. The researcher felt that in keeping with the social constructivist theory that it is important and relevant to include the students' recommendations, as they are the ones affected most by the pedagogy of online

learning. The second section includes the recommendations derived from the findings obtained in the previous chapter.

5.4. The participants' recommendations for the improvement of the online learning are listed below:

- E-learning should be implemented in all the modules offered by the University.
- Back up generators should be acquired by the university in the event of power failures/outages.
- Training manuals should be provided for students in addition to more in-depth training and should take place earlier in the curriculum (as early as first year). The introduction to both the pedagogy of online learning late in the course (in fourth year only) and facing time constraints as a result of due dates for assignments, could be very overwhelming for students.
- The university should re-look their navigation system of the e-learning site in making the system more user-friendly.
- Students should be allowed to submit hard copies in case of technological glitches and due dates should be changed to later in the day, to enable students who do not have access to computers away from campus to submit in time.

- Laboratory assistants need more staff to assist individual students who need attention, and training should be more involved instead of one-way or top down.
- The time limit of the “stay online button” needs to be extended, because students forget to use it as it only lasts for a duration of thirty minutes, which means all of students work can be lost.

5.5. Factual and Conceptual Recommendations for online learning based on the findings discussed in the previous chapter

In addition to discussing the recommendations, the researcher deemed it essential to supplement the findings with best practice derived from relevant literature on postgraduate studies. According to Trafford and Lesham, (2008, p.341), factual conclusions are those facts that “relate exactly to the evidence that was collected and the conceptual conclusions refer to how the conclusions relate to the wider literature. The researcher is also required to compare the research to the literature discussed earlier in the study.”

Key elements of engaged learning described by Conrad and Donaldson (2004, p.8), which are recommended for the improvement of the overall online pedagogy are:

1. Students should establish their own learning goals i.e. the online, student - centred approach takes cognisance of the fact that students differ in their pace of working and methods of learning. This was clear from the findings of this study as

well, where students shared different needs in terms of technical skills and pacing themselves to meet deadlines, for example.

2. Students also need initial intensive and ongoing technical support and training. This was highlighted by the participants in this study. However, training needs may vary as students' needs vary. Conrad & Donaldson (2004,p.10) assert that, "an online learner must quickly establish comfort with the technology, comfort with predominantly text-based communication and comfort with a higher level of self- direction than in a traditional classroom. If this comfort level is not reached, the learner will walk away from the course in frustration"

3. Students working together in groups (collaborative learning) should be recommended with the view of encouraging equal responsibility among students and encouraging team work, rather than promoting competition among students, as students traditionally grow up under a competitive model, which encourages learners to outshine one another in order to be successful (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004).

4. Students should be well trained and versed in knowing how to discern between relevant literature and irrelevant literature. This would also save students time in submitting assignments, for instance.

5. Tasks should be authentic, with connections to the real world (this is very feasible in the social work curriculum specifically, as students are required to work in real life settings during their fourth year practicum placement. The Advanced Ethics tasks were in fact, repeated in the students' practicum using real life situations.

6. An increased combination of face-to-face and online learning, i.e. blended learning should be implanted in all the online modules, in order to maximise student engagement and motivation. The participants in this study, similarly indicated that their social connections with their peers needed to be strengthened as the online approach did not allow them sufficient time for face- to face interaction and discussions with their peers.

7. Online courses should establish presence with students by welcoming them online; communicating inspiration, enthusiasm and fun; and being more visible. The participants in this study made clear reference to the fact that the online module was “interesting and fun” Active engagement of learners is suggested by Al-Mahmood, & McLoughlin, (2004) by taking into account the following:

- Student centered, constructivist approaches should be implemented in order to engage students optimally in online learning modules. Optimal engagement enhances student performance and retention levels which serves in both the interests of the university and the student population themselves.
- Create a synchronous event or events(s) to get students to feel they belong. A feeling of belonging creates a sense of ownership and would increase the likelihood of engagement with the course content.
- Feedback is an essential factor in the success of online learning; feedback should be requested and given timeously. It should be a two way process.

This course managed to achieve the first two suggestions, but some students reported that they would have appreciated more feedback.

8. The University should seriously fast track the upgrading of the bandwidth to serve the university population more adequately and efficiently as well as continue to improve KEWL (the learning management system), in order to minimize the technical problems, such as systems crashing due to overloading and log in challenges as well as uploading and downloading e-books.

9. Most UWC students are resource strapped (Breier, 2010) and in fact most students in the developing countries do not have access to computers and the internet, as they cannot afford them but may have greater access to mobile technology i.e. mobile phones (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2006; Ng'ambi, 2008). This useful resource could be utilized for internet access, email, as well as downloading pertinent information on the course and may even be useful as a medium of communication between the course leader and students. This recommendation may provide a cost effective and practical alternative to the current challenge of accessing the internet. It is strongly recommended that this option be investigated by the University

10. It should be noted that the digital divide extends beyond just physical access to computers. Inequality of access must also take into account motivational, material, skills and usage access (Van Dijk, 2006).

11. The term "Web 2.0" is "commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design and collaboration on the World Wide Web"

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0. Incorporating the concept of Web 2.0 into the online courses, will enhance learner participation beyond the standard textual expectations and engage them more as active learners”(Kurtz & Sponder, 2010, p.3)

“Some Web 2.0 applications are open source, free and available for consumer—level users, including programs such as Audacity (for audio podcasts and tutorials).” (Kurtz and Sponder, 2010, p.3). The students at UWC have been exposed to Audacity and found it interesting and fun to apply in their podcasting tasks. Other freely available applications include Screentoaster (for taking and editing video), Wink and Screenr (online screen recording) and Voice Thread (for collaborative audio and graphical presentations). “The content generated from these programs can be uploaded to YouTube and other social networking sites or embedded in other online content” (Kurtz and Sponder, 2010, p.3). These applications will certainly be welcomed by most students in the developing countries considering the cost saving to them as well as the fun element contained in them.

12. It is important to bridge the gap not only between students of developing and developed countries, and those who are well-resourced and those who are not, but higher educators also need to become digital natives. The responsibility of bridging this divide for students and course leaders who are currently digital immigrants is a responsibility of the university to offer support in alignment with teaching and learning policy currently prescribed by the university.

13. The Learner- Centred environment described by Smith, 2008, is similar to the notion of flexible learning. In these approaches the learner selects when they want to come onto the course, which times of the day most suits them to work optimally, and which place is most convenient for them to work in. The students also are the best ones to decide their own pace, for example working faster through some section and slower through other sections and having the opportunity to revert back to those sections they are challenged by and also enjoying access to computers and internet on campus.

In order to facilitate these factors in an online course, the course leaders need to ensure that the course content has short, directed learning segments, which Smith (2008) refers to as Chunkability, the course content can be reviewed and repeated i.e., Repeatability, the course should allow for learners to stop and resume without having to start all over again, i.e. Pausability and there are clear direct instructions for the students to follow, i.e., Understandability. (Smith, 2008, pp 14-15)

5. 6. Implications for future studies

It is evident that additional studies need to be undertaken in order to provide information and to contribute further knowledge with regards to the improvement of the online pedagogy at UWC and the broader higher education sector. This study was limited in its scope as it did not include the areas of course design, assessment tools, perceptions and experiences of the course leaders and students' perceptions and experiences from other faculties. There is therefore a need to do more research on these areas.

5.7. Conclusion

The above general recommendations outlined above are suggested for both the enhancement of the Advanced Social Work Ethics online module reviewed for its effectiveness as an example of a learner centered online pedagogy course. Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings will be useful in some way in the application of any online course being delivered within the University of the Western Cape but also broadly within the Higher Education sector, more especially in the developing countries who share similar socio-economic contexts as UWC.



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Appendix I

Dear Student

I, Fairoza Brey, am currently registered for the Master's degree in Social Work, full time thesis. The title of my study is: an evaluation of an online Social Work Ethics module at the University of the Western Cape. The study aims to evaluate to what extent e-learning has benefited and or challenged students who have completed the module between 2006 and 2008. The findings of the study will be shared with the course leader, supervisors on the course, students and the funders for the study as well as my supervisor and any interested parties who wish to have the information for academic purposes.

My supervisor for the study is Prof. V. Bozalek.

This letter is to ask you whether you would be prepared to give me permission to use the e-learning material which has been generated in the process of engaging with the project.

Also to give permission to use the material if your name is selected by random sampling to participate in a focus group discussion. Your participation and contributions will definitely enrich and enhance my study and hopefully contribute to the improvement of the course for future students and

Please consider the following in your response:

1. You are requested to give permission individually, not as a group/class.
2. Whether or not you give this permission, is entirely your personal decision, and it is entirely voluntary.
3. There will be no rewards for giving this permission, as there will of course be no penalty for refusing it.
4. You have a right to withdraw your permission at a later stage – so long as it is prior to any publication – and we would then refrain from including your material in the research.
5. We would use your e-learning contributions for the purpose of research only and not for any other purpose.
6. Your name and any other names you refer to will not be used and you will therefore be anonymous.

If you have any further queries in addition to what has been explained in the letter or the attached consent form, please do not hesitate to contact me on **082 2922482**.

Appendix II

Consent form

I, _____ give Miss Fairoza Brey, who is conducting the study for the purpose of her Master's degree in Social Work on the benefits and challenges of e-learning in the Social Work 4th Year Advanced Ethics module, permission to use the material which I have generated for the module on KEWL new Gen. Miss Brey will be able to use my responses to the questionnaire (anonymously) and in the focus group (if I give permission to participate it will be part of Miss Brey's masters thesis.

I understand that Miss Brey is intending to share the work generated in the module with the course leader, her supervisor, the funders for the study as well as other interested students and academics who may have an interest in the study, and may decide to publish aspects of the study.

I also understand that:

- ↓ Whether or not to give this permission is a personal decision, and it is entirely voluntary.
- ↓ There will be no rewards for giving this permission, as there will of course be no penalty for refusing it.
- ↓ I have the right to withdraw my permission at a later stage – so long as it is prior to handing in the thesis and any publication – and the researcher then refrains from including my inputs in her research.
- ↓ The researcher would use my information for the purpose of this study only and not for any other purpose.
- ↓ The identity of myself or any other person included in information will be protected.

My signature below indicates my permission to use the material I have generated on KEWL New Gen as well as my response to the questionnaire and the focus group, if applicable.

Signed at _____ (Place) on _____

(Date) _____ (Name)

Fairoza Brey
Social Work Department
Private Bag X17
Bellville 7535
082 29 22482



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Appendix III

Questionnaire on the Advanced Social Work Ethics Module May - 2008

- N.B. 1. Please answer all the questions
2. Please write legibly (print if possible)
3. Please tick next to the appropriate answer in the case of yes or no responses.

1. On-line learning

1.1. What is your understanding of online learning?

1.2. Is this the first time that you have been exposed to an online course during your Social Work studies at UWC? Yes/No

1.3. If you answered no to the previous question, please name the modules you have engaged with in an online environment.

1.4. Kindly share your experience or feelings about the online approach to teaching and learning.

1.5. What would you say are the benefits of an online approach?

1.6. What, in your opinion are the challenges you faced with regards to the online approach?

2. The Technology

2.1. Did you get enough information during the training workshops (i.e. how to use the laptops, how to download e-books or how to work the KEWL system) in order to be able to work with the online system? Please elaborate.

2.2. Have you experienced any problems with the technology during the course? Yes--- or No-----. If yes, please describe the problems you experienced. Think about the online system communication tools such as chats, discussion for a, accessing documents or general internet problems.

2.3. Who did you mostly approach for assistance with the technology if you struggled with it? Please tick the appropriate category and explain the reasons for your response.

- Classroom peers
- friends
- Course leader/facilitator
- Lab assistants
- Other (plea specify)

3. Collaborative Learning

3.1. How was your experience of working in a group?

3.2. What was your experience like in working with a critical friend? Please elaborate.

3.3. Do you think that assigning students into working groups is a good way of teaching this course? Yes -----/No-----. Please explain.

3.4. Did you feel comfortable in working with your group members? Yes ___/No ___. Please explain.

3.5. Do you think you should be able to choose group members you wish to work with in the beginning of the course? Yes ____ No _____. Please explain.

3.6. Do you prefer working on assignments alone or in a group? Please motivate.

3.7. Can you please describe the advantages and disadvantages of working alone and working in a group?

3.8. Was it difficult for you to work collaboratively? Yes ----- or NO -----
Please explain.

3.9. Was it easy for you to share and discuss your ideas with your team members? Yes -----No -----
Please explain.

4. Course leader and Facilitator's Approaches

4.1. How did you find your facilitator's approach to sharing information on and offline?

4.2. Is the course designed in a user friendly way? In other words, did you understand what was expected of you at all times?

4.3. Would you say online teaching is sufficient in order for you to understand the content of the course? Please elaborate.

4.4. Do you feel online teaching should be combined with face-to face teaching or do you prefer face- to face teaching only. In other words would you prefer more input from the course leader or facilitator? Please elaborate.

4.5. Did you receive constant and timeous feedback on your assignments from the course leader? Please explain.

5. General Comments

5.1. Which aspects of the course do you think should be improved and why?

5.2. Do you think online learning should be used in all your courses? Please elaborate.

Thank you for your participation. Best wishes for the year ahead.
12/05/08





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