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Teaching and learning innovations for postgraduate education in nursing

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Summary This paper begins with a literature review of blended learning approaches, including the creation of learning spaces in the online environment and the model of community of inquiry and collaborative learning promoted by Garrison and others. This model, comprising of three elements including 'social presence', 'cognitive presence' and 'teaching presence', guides academics in the development and delivery of quality programs designed to enhance each student's experience of their course. The second part of this paper is the application of blended learning for the Deakin University Master of Nursing Practice (Nurse Practitioner), including a range of online independent learning activities, Elluminate Live use (a real time online program) and on-campus contact with students. The application of these flexible and innovative online modalities offered in this course, have been designed to promote quality learning experiences for students around their employment commitments and lifestyle factors. As an off-campus course, the Master of Nursing Practice (Nurse Practitioner) presents as a more flexible option for nurses residing in various parts of Australia. The three core elements of the model of community of inquiry and collaborative learning by Garrison and others have been integrated through online teaching and learning access and face-to-face contact for one day in two trimesters of the academic year. The success of blended learning approaches are underpinned by effective communication and interactions between both academics and students.

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Introduction

The impact of online technologies and its increased use by universities has led to a shift from traditional teaching and learning approaches thereby expanding options for individuals seeking flexible programs that fit around pressing lifestyle factors. Deakin University (2011) in its core commitments promotes contemporary and flexible teaching programs using physical or virtual teaching environments. The key aim for this move from the more traditional on-campus teaching and learning approaches is to increase

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student engagement in learning through greater flexibility and innovative use of online resources to provide a course experience that is both challenging and satisfying. In order to meet the many competing needs of students, academics are adopting the increasingly popular approaches of blended learning using a combination of online resources and face-to-face contact with students.

The discussion in this paper has two main purposes. First to review the literature on what is meant by blended learning in university based courses. The discussion includes the use of web-based technologies and pedagogies for online access and face-to-face interactions and incorporates the innovative community of inquiry framework of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) to explore how blended learning encourages interconnectedness between students and academics. The three key elements of this framework including 'social presence,' 'cognitive presence' and 'teaching presence', are presented within the context of blended learning. A second purpose of this paper is a presentation of the authors' experiences of blended learning, incorporating the model of community of inquiry and collaborative learning in the Deakin University Master of Nursing Practice (Nurse Practitioner), an off-campus course managed from Melbourne Campus at Burwood, Victoria.

Literature review

This literature review considers first, the interpretations and application of blended learning, and second, the model of community of inquiry and collaborative learning developed by Garrison et al. (2000). As a relatively recent application in education, blended learning is largely an acknowledgement of the various modalities used in the delivery of course and unit content (Bluic, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007) including face-to-face and online contexts (Ginns & Ellis, 2007; Ocak, 2011). Throughout this paper, the term 'blended learning' is applied as an acknowledgement of the range of teaching and learning modes used to deliver course materials. As a consequence of the diversity of terms used in the literature related to blend learning indicates how easily various interpretations may be generally applied including those for curricula documents. As an example, the terms 'blend of teaching and learning' and 'blended learning' are applied interchangeably in the literature, although a configuration of what constitutes each of these concepts as a generic requirement has not been well defined (Bluic et al., 2007; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Bluic et al. (2007) describe blended learning as comprising a mix of modes of web-based technology; a mix of various pedagogical approaches (i.e. constructivism, behaviourism, cognitivism); forms of instructional technology with face-to-face activities; and a combination of instructional technology with actual job tasks. Sener (2010) asserts that blended learning incorporates the best of both worlds (online and face-to-face) and creates an environment where student-centred pedagogies can be applied using diverse applications to promote student engagement in teaching and learning activities. It should be noted that blended learning is more than just an integration of traditional face-to-face and online approaches (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Academics need

to invest considerable time in carefully planning activities to ensure efficient implementation to fully engage students in an active learning process. Vaughan and Garrison (2005) claimed that the move to blended learning is transforming higher education through the integration of the best face-to-face and online learning activities while reducing the traditional teaching didactic styles in the classroom.

In a study by Parker and Martin (2010) it was found that undergraduate students prefer the 'virtual classroom', although the authors acknowledge that this preference, "... may be better suited to particular types of audiences or courses" (p. 144). For students, the benefits include a better understanding of how and why technology supports their learning, allowing them to be "metacognitive and self-directed in their learning" (Ward & Kushner Benson, 2010, p. 488). Undoubtedly this self-directed focus is a fundamental goal for successful off-campus learning. Hoic-Bozic, Mornar, and Boticki (2009) conducted a survey of their undergraduate university art and science students using e-learning programs. They identified that students favoured this activity over the traditional teaching styles of the classroom and importantly they noted, a reduction in student attrition rates from their courses. This claim is supported by the findings by López-Pérez, López-Pérez, and Rodríguez-Ariza (2011) who also found that blended learning approaches had an impact of reducing student attrition rates for their first year undergraduate students enrolled in an accounting course. In addition, they assert these approaches led to improved student performance in academic assessment tasks. The findings of these studies indicate that online learning strategies not only effectively meet the needs of students but also improve student satisfaction and retention rates. While these are admirable outcomes it is important that all teaching and learning activities, not least of all a blend of approaches, promote higher order thinking in students to achieve quality learning outcomes. Alexander, Commander, Greenberg, and Ward (2010), conducted a study to determine whether or not students would demonstrate higher critical thinking due to online discussions. They found that prior experiences of online use did not influence critical thinking scores and interestingly, this was neither related to students' previous experiences of learning nor their age.

On the basis of their experiences of managing postgraduate education online programs for registered nurses, Moore and Hart (2004) found that nurses selected their programs because they were far more convenient than 'traditional classes' of teacher-led didactic presentations. Barriers for nurses include for example, rotating rosters that encompass day or night shifts, thereby interfering with their attendance requirements for on-campus courses and consequently with their motivation for study. In today's highly technological society, health professionals, including nurses and midwives, are increasingly 'au fait' with online applications for data management and communication in their workplace. This familiarity means that many are already computer literate and well able to negotiate online technologies, to access and provide information. Kenny (2002) argued that these skills could also be applied to online strategies for their professional education. In having this technological aptitude one could well ask why nurses would seek postgraduate courses

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