

## Clinical education

# Online professional development for digitally differentiated nurses: An action research perspective



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## ABSTRACT

Professional development opportunities for nurses are increasingly being offered in the online environment and therefore it is imperative that learning designers, nurse educators and healthcare organisations consider how best to support staff to enable Registered Nurses to capitalise on the resources available. Research participants explored educational strategies to support digitally differentiated nurses' engagement with professional development activities in an online environment through a participatory action research project that collected data over a 16 month period through six focus groups before being analysed thematically. The reality of work-based, e-learning while managing clinical workloads can be problematic however specific measures, such as having a quiet space and computer away from the clinical floor, access to professional development resources from anywhere and at any time, can be effective. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to resources offered will not meet the needs of diverse staffing groups whereas heutagogical learning offers tangible benefits to Registered Nurses seeking professional development opportunities in this context. Apparent proficiency with technological skills may not reflect a Registered Nurse's actual ability in this environment and face-to-face support offered regularly, rather than remedially, can be beneficial for some staff. Implementing specific strategies can result in successful transition to the online environment.

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## 1. Introduction

The public have an expectation that healthcare professionals will be able to provide safe and effective treatment informed by current, best practice. Therefore, it is essential to offer regular, clinically focused, professional development through learning opportunities for nurses to support their skill and knowledge development and to enable them to demonstrate competence. In order to maintain nursing accreditation, RNs internationally are required to maintain their professional knowledge and skills (American Nurses Association, 2015; Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2010; Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010; Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2015). Learning opportunities that use the online environment for delivery of professional development are increasingly common for healthcare professionals. This paper reports on a research project based on andragogical principles

(Knowles et al., 2011), and enhanced by heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012), in which the learner determines and manages their learning experience. During this project, Registered Nurses (RNs) from a private surgical hospital network took control of their learning within an online environment. The RNs involved were multi-generational (31–60 + years) and digitally differentiated in terms of their level of technological fluency in computer skills; affinity to technology; and view of online learning's value in their clinical context. Prior to this research project, their experience of professional development was comprised primarily of self-directed learning packages or attendance at training workshops provided either within their hospital or region or, less often, outside of their region. If these learning activities require travel outside of the region, the associated costs can be high and, therefore, prohibitive. In addition, it is often necessary to re-arrange the staffing schedule to allow for the registered nurse's absence from the clinical setting.

### 1.1. Background

The World Internet Project (Crothers et al., 2016) has

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highlighted the exponential uptake in worldwide interconnectedness via the internet, mediated by information technology. A move towards offering online professional development on a variety of technology platforms is supported by the 2013 iteration of this worldwide project which found that there is increasing access to the internet via mobile phones or tablets (68% and 48% of respondents respectively) (A. Gibson et al., 2013). Moreover, in the literature, there is growing evidence that information technology (IT) will soon be present in all facets of patient care (Byrne, 2012; Hinton Walker, 2010). In addition, the current volume of biomedical breakthroughs and reformatting of knowledge doubles every 20 years (Stewart et al., 2008). In order for healthcare professionals to maintain knowledge currency, they must be conversant with IT resources and be able to access current, evidence-based information to guide their clinical practice. If they are unwilling to embrace emerging technologies, clinicians risk disenfranchisement and marginalisation from ongoing opportunities for professional development and integration of new knowledge into their clinical practice. Facilitating a move towards a learning paradigm in which the learner is active and constructs their knowledge in a supported environment, is important for transformative learning to occur (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Jönsson, 2005).

Rather than being a homogenous group with similar learning needs, the RN population incorporates diverse generational characteristics and levels of technological fluency (Myrick et al., 2011; Roberts, 2005) which is termed here as 'digital differentiation'. The millennial generation (born 1982–2002) has very different educational expectations from its predecessors and Meister and Willyerd (2010) asserted that millennials desire activities that will develop their technical skills and self-management whilst capitalising on their creativity and innovation. They have a propensity for computer-mediated social interactions and, as such, have been termed 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001, p.1) whereas the majority of the New Zealand, and international, nursing workforce is what Prensky (2001) has termed 'digital immigrants' (p.2) and were born prior to a technology-mediated environment. They have differing levels of skills dependent on their level of exposure and typically see technology as a 'tool' to be used and therefore the types of activities offered for professional development will need to address these diverse, generational, learning needs.

## 2. Aim

Through exploration of RNs' experiences of online learning, the aim of this paper is to identify a strategy for effective implementation of online professional development activities. The research question is "What learning strategies would best support digitally differentiated nurses using the online environment for professional development activities?"

## 3. Research design

Action research was selected as an appropriate methodology to guide this study because it brings participants into the research arena as co-researchers and focuses on discovering practical solutions to concerns raised by the participants and their community of practice (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). Over the course of the project, the participants collaborated in small groups to firstly identify potential professional development topics that would be relevant to an RN new to their clinical environment, and secondly, to develop online learning activities suitable for their colleagues that were focused on these identified areas of learning need. Key features of action research are the cyclical process of action, reflection, idea generation and co-creation of knowledge (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). Furthermore, there is an ethical

commitment to a democratic, public and collaborative generation of knowledge that facilitates transformations in practice (Holly et al., 2009).

Testing for relevance within a practice environment is a distinct feature of action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) in which the ultimate goal is to enable practitioners, in collaboration with researchers, to set the agenda, create solutions to issues they have identified, and improve their situation in an ethically sound manner (Holly et al., 2009). This action research intentionally included an andragogical approach in which the learning designer provides a topic of interest to the learner and manages the process, in terms of scope and outcomes, but allows the learner to drive the process according to personal learning needs. However, as the research proceeded, an even richer learning outcome was achieved through a heutagogical approach in which the learner engages with a topic from their context and their awareness of how they best learn and what they wish to learn both drives and mediates the learning experience (Hase and Kenyon, 2001). Blaschke (2012) asserts that such an approach is well-suited to the online environment in which mature learners are not only developing competency for specific knowledge or skills but also developing transference capability to unfamiliar situations and an awareness of how each individual prefers to learn. Inherent in this process is the situational knowledge that each participant brings to the research process and outcomes (Greenwood and Levin, 2008). Thus, throughout this research, the participant RNs, who were all involved in clinical practice, developed, trialled and interrogated emerging ideas, evaluating them for implementation, validity and veracity.

Integral to the action research process is the importance of the participants' prior knowledge and experiences which mediate, validate, provide re-interpretation, and enable transformation of understanding as the data emerges within the research (Mezirow, 2000). At one point, a participant using her prior knowledge realised that a video being considered as a demonstration of a surgical procedure had been misnamed on the internet site and was in fact demonstrating an entirely different procedure. Through such acts of critical reflection and the interrogation of hunches and possibilities, discoveries about the topics become evident (Guba and Lincoln, 2008) and the process of developing ideas, planning and implementing them, making observations, and interrogating the outcomes occurs in a cyclical fashion depicted below (Fig. 1). This

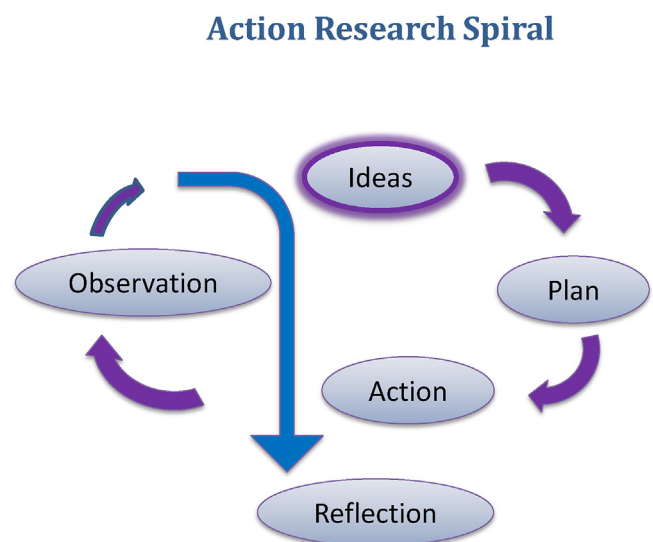


Fig. 1. Action research spirals.  
(Source: Adapted from McNiff (1988, p. 22)

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