



## Peer learning a pedagogical approach to enhance online learning: A qualitative exploration



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Flexible online programs are becoming increasingly popular method of education for students, allowing them to complete programs in their own time and cater for lifestyle differences. A mixture of delivery modes is one way which allows for enhanced learning. Peer learning is another method of learning which is shown to foster collaboration and prepare healthcare students for their future careers. This paper reports on a project to combine peer and online learning to teach pharmacology to nursing students.

**Objectives:** To explore undergraduate nursing student opinions of working in peer groups for online learning sessions in a pharmacology course.

**Design:** A qualitative study utilising a self-reported questionnaire.

**Setting:** A rural campus of an Australian university.

**Participants:** Second year nursing students enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing Program.

**Methods:** A hard copy questionnaire was distributed to all students who attended the final semester lecture for the course. Content analysis of open-ended survey questions was used to identify themes in the written data.

**Results:** Of the 61 students enrolled in the nursing subject, 35 students chose to complete the survey (57%). Students reported a mixed view of the benefits and disadvantages of peer online learning. Sixty 6% (66%) of students liked peer online learning, whilst 29% disliked it and 6% were undecided. Convenience and ease of completion were reported as the most common reason to like peer online learning, whilst Information Technology issues, communication and non-preferred learning method were reasons for not liking peer online learning.

**Conclusion:** Peer online learning groups' acted as one further method to facilitate student learning experiences. Blending peer online learning with traditional face-to-face learning increases the variety of learning methods available to students to enhance their overall learning experience.

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### 1. Introduction

Programs that are flexible and fit around pressing lifestyle factors are becoming increasingly popular for both students and academics (Currie et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2012). Academics are continually seeking methods to engage students in the learning process and online technology tends to be the current focus (Revere and Kovach, 2011). Educators are increasingly searching for alternative teaching approaches to improve student experiences, facilitate learning in an increasing digital age and provide cost effective programs (Colvin and Ashman, 2010; Brannagan et al., 2013).

The ability for students to learn online is not a new paradigm and the impact of online technologies has increased in many universities

(Deakin University, 2011; Keppell et al., 2011; Currie et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2012). Several universities now promote flexible teaching programs using physical or virtual learning environments in their core commitments (Deakin University, 2011; Griffith University, 2013). Refining and improving online teaching approaches enable expanded opportunities for students to access education. Research into the use of online learning continues. Many Australian Learning and Teaching (ALT) government funded projects are based on technology and online teaching (Keppell et al., 2011). Varied perceptions of online teaching and learning exist for both the student and the academic (Keppell et al., 2011). Online learning is beneficial in providing accessibility for students and preparing them for a technologically rich environment, facilitating active participation, allowing shy students to participate, allowing for reflection, encouraging dialogue and communication between student, teachers and groups and providing records for the educator to assess the impact of learning (Hayward, 2004; Keppell et al.,

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2011). Some limitations include an absence of immediate feedback, technical infrastructure problems, lack of familiarity with computers, absence of non-verbal communication cues, lack of social presence, the amount of time required to prepare online materials and academic concerns surrounding the maintenance and sustainability of online programs or digital technologies (Hayward, 2004; Keppell et al., 2011).

Peer learning and mentoring in higher education have also been established as an effective learning strategy, assisting students to gain confidence in their own ability and taking control of their own learning (Keppell et al., 2011). Peer teaching uses the approach where students are involved in the teaching of other students and this concept is evident in nursing education literature over many years (McKenna and French, 2011). Peer assisted learning is growing internationally as a beneficial pedagogical strategy in health care and tertiary education (Williams et al., 2012; Brannagan et al., 2013). Peer teaching has been shown to enhance student learning and.

levels of self-efficacy (Brannagan et al., 2013). Within the nursing profession, peer teaching and learning extends beyond higher education and is one of the skills needed to productively work within a multi-disciplinary health care team. Although 'peer learning' is not a new pedagogy to nursing, its impact on online teaching continues to be developed, with ongoing research evaluating its effectiveness as an online learning strategy (Thomas et al., 2014).

As online learning and peer teaching are both valued pedagogical approaches to teaching, it was decided to combine the two approaches for one blended learning course. The implementation of peer learning groups was utilised to facilitate online learning for a nursing pharmacology course. This approach was adopted to replace a number of compulsory face-to-face tutorial sessions and a written group assessment task. All students enrolled in this course were allocated to small online peer learning groups manually based on the alphabetical listing of student names. Students were allocated in groups of 6–8 students so they could complete activities in group online forum sessions and assessment tasks. The Moodle course management system was utilised as the technology platform in which the students accessed the peer learning activities and other necessary course content. The acronym Moodle stands for 'Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment' it is a template – based online system for the delivery of course content allowing collaborative interaction between students and teachers (Cole and Foster, 2008).

Each of the students remained in the same online working peer group to complete the assessment and tutorial tasks. Students could interact online to reflect and interpret the responses of other students whilst completing these activities.

### 1.1. Objectives

The objective for this study was to examine students' opinions of the experience of peer group online learning.

### 1.2. Method

The research utilised a qualitative descriptive approach in order to understand students' experiences of peer online learning. Qualitative research involves a subjective systematic approach to exploring and describing life experiences enabling meaning to be attached to emerging themes (Burns and Grove, 2010). This approach was used as the researchers were aiming to explore and understand the experiences of the learner in using peer online learning, and not just the outcomes. Prior to the conduction of the research full ethics approval was obtained through the University ethics committee approval project number B15–109. Undergraduate nursing students enrolled in a second year pharmacology course from a rural campus school of nursing and midwifery were invited to participate in the survey. An open-ended survey of nursing students was conducted using a self-reporting questionnaire. The survey instrument included a four item anonymous questionnaire

developed for the purpose of this study as shown below (Fig. 1). The evaluation questions were.

developed to specifically understand the student opinion of working online in peer groups. Students were asked specifically if they liked, disliked or both for each question and were provided space for writing individual comments for each question. The survey was reviewed by three experienced academics to determine appropriateness of content and the questionnaire format.

A hard copy of the questionnaire was distributed to all students who attended the final semester lecture. Students were invited to complete the questionnaire and leave the completed worksheet on their seats. No gender information or student identification was present on the questionnaire. The students remained anonymous. The lecturer left the lecture theatre to enable the students to complete the questionnaire in privacy or alternatively leave the classroom and choose not to participate in the research. This ensured there was no coercion by the lecturer toward students to complete the survey or influence the feedback provided on the questionnaire. The lecturer returned in 30 min to collect the questionnaires from an empty lecture theatre. Of the 61 students enrolled in the nursing subject 35 students chose to complete the questionnaire. Qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey questions was then adopted to evaluate this teaching approach.

## 2. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken on the results for each question. Content analysis of the open-ended survey questions was then undertaken to evaluate student comments and identify common patterns amongst the written responses (Moretti et al., 2011; Chambers and Chiang, 2012). Content analysis involves coding written words into categories and patterns to study responses from open-ended questions (Moretti et al., 2011; Chambers and Chiang, 2012). It has been used by numerous researchers as a method of deducing meaning from written comments (Eriksson et al., 2006; Morasso et al., 2008; Moretti et al., 2011; Chambers and Chiang, 2012). Content analysis involves frequency count of words to identify common themes in the data. As student's comments often contained more than one code, the number of codes generated through the analysis was higher than the number of respondents. Individual pieces of written data were assigned codes to ascertain key points conveyed by the students and then clustered together into descriptive categories. Categories emerged inductively during data analysis and were not predetermined. The categories were then regrouped into themes which became the three final themes. Coding of the raw data was undertaken by two researchers individually. Discrepancies in coding were then discussed and consensus determined on which code to apply. Categories were ranked by determining the greatest level of agreement amongst participants. Percentage of agreement was calculated by dividing the number of codes for a category by the total number of participants for the question and multiplying by 100 (Jacob et al., 2014).

### 2.1. Findings

Of the 61 students enrolled in the pharmacology course, 57% ( $n = 35$ ) completed the questionnaire. The participants were mixed gender with age's ranging from 18 to 60 years; the majority (80%) were aged 25 years or less. All participants responded to the first question, which generated 79 codes (Table 1). Results identified that 66% of respondents ( $n = 23$ ) liked the online tutorials and found it helped with communication, group dynamics and time management.

All participants responded to the second question, generating 61 codes (Table 2). Similar to question one, 60% of respondents ( $n = 21$ ) enjoyed the online tutorials, although 31% ( $n = 11$ ) disliked them. Students identified peer online tutorials as an efficient learning strategy, although face-to-face learning was preferred for those who disliked online tutorials.

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