Making the Shift to e-Learning: Eliminating Blocks and Barriers to the Effective and Active Participation of Adult Learners in Online Courses

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Abstract

Distance e-learning can help adult learners cope better with workplace, family and social commitments, even in micro-states like Malta. However, the transition from face-to-face education and training to e-learning can create blocks and barriers to the effective and active participation of adult. This paper explores the findings of a Grounded Theory investigation of an online top-up degree for nurses provided by the University of Malta. It reports on the experiences and perceptions of the learners' transition to online learning inspired by social constructivist learning theory. The findings indicate that adult learners were indeed challenged by the lack of interaction and sense of immediacy of real-time, verbal, face-to-face mode of communication. They were also challenged by the learner-centred pedagogies adopted in the course which required their active participation of the students in dialogic pedagogies. The paper therefore argues for a stronger scaffolding structure, adequate student support, increased social interaction, the creation of a sense of community and an enhanced teacher presence.

Keywords: *e-learning, online courses, adult education and training, Grounded Theory, workers;*

1. Introduction

In Malta, all mature nurses (50 years or over) possess a nursing certificate or diploma and a warrant to practice their profession in the state-run and private hospitals. However, many do not possess a Higher Education degree and, consequently, are missing out on opportunities for career advancement when in competition with younger nurses who joined the profession already possessing a degree. Despite their need for a part-time undergraduate course, the mature nurses cannot attend a campus-based programme because they cannot reconcile workplace hours with fixed classroom schedules. They also find it difficult to cope with work, social and family commitments. Moreover, those nurses living on the smaller island of Gozo face more hardship because need to travel to the main University campus in Malta and then back home (a voyage that requires two crossings by ferry of 30 minutes each and journey by car or public bus transport of around two hours). For these reasons, the Department of Nursing of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the University of Malta has developed a distance online 'top-up degree'.

The literature [1] indicates that the most successful online courses in nursing education used pedagogies - including text-based asynchronous discussions - inspired by the social constructivist learning theory. However, adults, who only have experience of conventional teaching and learning approaches, do not engage well with learner-centred approaches. Moreover, as Baldacchino and Mayo [2] argue, in the typical Maltese classroom

> 'the content and process of educational activity emanates from the teacher illuminary, while the pupils dutifully interface with the knowledge, values and mores of the formal and hidden curriculum'.

More recently, the former Dean of the Faculty of Education, Carmel Borg, noted that Maltese students are not faring well in international studies, such as PIRLS (the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment), because

> 'generations of (Maltese) students have been schooled in lower order cognitive skills … memory work and regurgitation' rather than being engaged in an education that develops their 'higher cognitive skills … including problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, enquiry-based learning and reasoning' [3].

Moreover, Borg also notes that most Maltese 'students identify themselves with the traditional conservative transmission model, which sees teachers sitting upfront imparting knowledge while students absorb and consume the information passively'. Paulo Freire called this teaching and learning model 'banking education' [4]. He argued that this is

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> an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorise and repeat. [5]

Freire [6] argued that these 'prescriptive' methods encourage submissiveness, stifle creativity and critical thinking, and thereby create resistance against and pessimism for non-traditional forms of learning.

Thus, this paper attempts to explore, through a grounded theory (GT) approach, the mature students' transition from traditional face-to-face class-room based education and training to an online learning environment dominated by pedagogies inspired by social constructivism. The open research questions of the investigation were:

1. What are the students' experiences and perceptions of the transition to an online pedagogy?
2. If blocks and barriers exist, how can these be eliminated?

3. Methodology

This study used constructivist GT [7, 8] as the primary methodological approach. GT provided the flexibility and strategy needed to collect data and generate theory from the empirical data. The main data collection methods were online participant observation and semi-structured intensive interviews. This strategy allowed for a range of rich data to be gathered, and for these data to add depth to the inductive conceptual conclusions. Consistent with constructivist GT principles and practices, the data collection and analysis was iterative and occurred throughout the study, as did the review of the literature. The analysis of the data involved line-by-line coding, writing of analytic memos, the generation of categories through constant comparison, and theoretical sampling. The sample was made up of 9 nurses.

The study was conducted and approved by the research ethics committee of the University of Malta. The participants were informed in writing about the research project and voluntarily agreed to participate without any duress. The participants clearly understood their right to withdraw at any time, and their signed consent was obtained before the research started. The names of the respondents reported in this paper were changed to ensure anonymity.

4. Findings

The students possessed, although at different levels, good academic and communication skills, the necessary computer and internet skills (basic qualifications in ECDL – the European Computer Driving Licence – was a core requirement for enrolment in the course), as well as adequate technology and internet access at home and their workplace to participate effectively in the online course. However, they enrolled in the online programme not because they 'preferred its online nature' (Albert) but rather because it was their only 'adequate opportunity … to gain an undergraduate degree' (Carmen). They were indeed 'fearful' of the online programme and its 'unknown … (and) new way of learning' (Susan). They agreed that, before they started the course and up 'until, at least a few months into the course' (Thomas), they 'preferred the type of teaching and learning that (they) were used to … at school … and at the Nursing School' (Rita), mainly face-to-face conventional teaching and learning.

The top-up degree however used pedagogies, including text-based asynchronous discussions and collaborative tasks, which required the students to take up new roles 'as active rather than passive learners' (Doris). For this reason, the faculty organised a face-to-face workshop in which the students were introduced to the basic functions of Moodle and the new pedagogies.

Despite this meeting, and constant feedback by the educators involved, the students still found the transition to the online dimension to be problematic, particularly in the early stages of the programme. Various challenges were identified with the most frequently mentioned was isolation. The narratives indicated that, despite the students' efforts (including taking constant and active part in the online discussions, working collaboratively with peers and meeting task deadlines), the students often found it hard to beat the 'isolation trap' (Rita). This, they argued, was created by the 'lack of physical interaction' (various students) which they had never dealt with before in their classroom-based courses. This isolation, the students noted could however be reduced by interacting with peers and faculty through course-relevant discussions, and informal interaction, such as through Facebook, as well by the use of e-mails and telephone/mobile communication. They also noted that they felt less isolated when an educator was more present (compared to other educators) during formal and informal interactions.

The virtual observations of the course and the narratives indeed indicated that the educators adopted various pedagogic techniques to facilitate their students' transition to online education. The data

indicated that the students valued 'being treated as adult' (various students) and a number of approaches that achieved this were identified. The educators:

(i)   assumed non-authoritarian attitudes towards their students,
(ii)   encouraged the students to share their knowledge and experiences during discussions and group assignments,
(iii)   reinforced the importance for independent learning,
(iv)   created and maintained camaraderie among students.
(v)   maintained 'regular and continuous informal support and feedback' (Albert)
(vi)   incorporated the students' 'prior knowledge and experiences … into the course' (Theresa).

5. Discussion

All the students had the required skills and possessed the necessary technology to participate effectively in the online course. They also participated in the course by accessing the course online pages frequently, and contributed actively in the online discussions. The course co-ordinators also adopted a scaffolding process which, gradually but constantly, immersed the students into social constructivist pedagogies. This notwithstanding, the students, at times, suffered from loneliness and a sense of isolation during the course. A similar phenomenon was observed in the study by Duranton & Mason [9].

As the students themselves explained, in the online dimension, there was no physical interaction. Moreover, the online communication provided no visual cues other than words or images and lacked the sense of immediacy of real-time, verbal, face-to-face mode of communication. Garrison explained that the main pedagogy, the asynchronous discussion, presents 'a special challenge in creating a social environment and a community of enquiry' [10]. While Miller [11], though writing about distance education and not online learning in particular, argued that 'the educator must be conscious of the isolation of the individual learner' and must create opportunities for the learner to participate in a learning community, and thereby 'decreasing loneliness, and increasing the sense of belonging to a social group'. Rovai [12] also argues that 'feelings of community … not only increase persistence in courses', but they 'also increase the flow of information among all learners, availability of support, commitment to group goals, cooperation among members, and satisfaction with group efforts'.

The data also indicated that for students, being 'treated as adult' was very important in helping them make the transition to online learning. This key element is also considered as being an indispensable requisite for any adult education for any adult education initiative. According to Knowles [13] an adult has a

> reservoir of knowledge that causes him (sic.) to become an increasingly rich resource for learning, and at the same time provides him (sic.) with a broadening base to which to relate new learning.

It is therefore important that adult learners engage in collaborative activities in which every adult's experience is never devalued or ignored, otherwise the adult would not only perceive this as a rejection of his or her experience, but a rejection of him or her as a person [14]. Each adult must thereby be valued within a community of learning. This concept is also a key element of the Community of Inquiry (COI) model proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer [15]. This model assumes that the tutor's role, the learners' active participation through dialogue, and non-traditional teaching techniques are critical for ensuring an efficient transition from a traditional to a social constructivist educational dimension. The model proposes that social, cognitive, and teaching 'presences' all contribute significantly to learning effectiveness and belongingness within an online community.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that both the students and educators must make a paradigm shift from traditional conceptions and practices of learning to the more active social constructivist models. The instructor must create learning activities in which dialogue plays a key role. These activities must also create adequate social and cognitive presences so that an active community of enquiry is developed and maintained. On their part, the students must be more actively engaged in non-traditional practices, such as asynchronous, text-based discussion. They can no longer act as passive recipients of knowledge. They must also beat the isolation trap by engaging actively in the collective learning process. It is also essential that the faculty provides adequate support to all learners, particularly those who have only experienced 'pipeline models' of knowledge transmission [16].

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