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Authors	Stephens, M, Hennefer, DL, Gloster, AS, Barker, M and Mcgrath, D
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/17011/
Published Date	2011

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Paper 113 – Full Paper

Evaluating the effectiveness of Skype as a tool for promoting internationalisation of the nursing curriculum

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Abstract

The paper examines the effectiveness of Skype as a medium for communication, support and internationalisation of student nurse programmes. The researchers sought to examine whether online face to face contact via Skype improved support and communication with students nursing overseas and if the use of Skype for online communications with students in action learning sets within the home university, developed cultural awareness of those nursing students who stayed on native soil.

The study comprised of focus groups and online questionnaires of staff and students. 22 students were included in the study, 18 who had experienced physical mobility and 4 who had experienced virtual mobility. 12 lecturers also contributed in their role as a personal tutor, module team member or international link lecture for the countries in which the students visited.

4 themes arose from the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 stage model) of the narratives of the participants and included operational issues, pastoral care, academic and peer support and cultural awareness and development.

The use of Skype was found to be extremely beneficial in terms of online communication and support for students undertaking an international placement. However the development of cultural awareness needs further work, using Skype to engage students abroad in discussions with students in action learning sets did allow

students at home to take into account social and cultural differences between practices in England and the country their peer was on placement, it did not however allow examination of their own beliefs, biases and prejudices to practice skills of self awareness as would occur in students who experienced international mobility.

1. Introduction

To meet both the vision developed by the International Council of Nurses (2007) so that “United nurses of all nations speak with one voice” and the strategic internationalisation planning by Higher Education Institutions, large-scale projects have been developed to standardise and globalise nursing education, assessment and performance. These include examples such as the Collaboration for Higher Education of Nurses and Midwives in Africa (2002), the Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, (2003) and European Nursing Module Network (1994) to name but a few.

Within the EU context, globalisation is based upon The Treaty of the European Union (Maastricht, 1991) which enabled free movement and mobility for citizens within the EU member states. This led to the signing of the Bologna Declaration (1999) by 33 countries to enable the mobility of both students and staff across the member states, providing a European Higher Education area.

The process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching role of higher education is part of many University’s vision statements and strategic goals. Internationalisation according to Knight (2008, p6) is the “..process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education”. Yet in spite of recent Erasmus Programme Exchange numbers increasing, the figures for participation in 2009 had not reached its target of 3 million students (Europa, 2009).

Nursing students achieve many new personal and professional skills and competencies from an international placement such as cultural competence, cultural awareness, communication and listening skills, personal awareness and confidence (Uys and Middleton, 2011, Wimpenny et al, 2005, Lee, 2004). However this is also fraught with “tensions regarding diversity and difference” (Lee, 2004, p121) and feelings such as reality shock and homesickness are prevalent when evaluating the experience on return to the home country (Ryan and Twibell, 2000).

The questions raised therefore are, how best can students undertaking an international placement be supported? And for those students unable to go out into the world, how could this world be brought to their home campus?

Currently in the University of Salford’s School of Nursing and Midwifery, pre-registration nursing students on international placements use a blog, an online, chronological collection of personal commentary and links (Educause, 2005), to communicate with their peers and lecturers. This was originally developed from a Socrates Erasmus project to allow students to connect with their peers within an action learning group, the facilitator and the course material (Keegan et al, 1996). By using the blog it captured the student’s thoughts and comments about their learning ‘as it happened’, thus aiding their development of analysis and deep reflection, the

additional value of using a blog was the provision of an international perspective of nursing care to the action learning group.

The evaluation from the Socrates Erasmus project made many recommendations, which included better IT training, to include ground rules, increase the level of support and visual improvements to the blog appearance, with regular agreed student contribution. A crucial factor however was that students still preferred face to face communication which was synchronous, they highlighted that they missed this interaction whilst on their international placement. The students also felt socially isolated which reduced their motivation to continue with their studies which has previously been noted by MacDonald (2008).

For the lecturers who were involved in the weblog project, feedback highlighted the limits to electronic supervision and the misinterpretation of the posts. Included was the aspect of not being able to visually see the student so when pastoral care was provided the lecturer's were unable to make a judgement about how the student was coping as there were no visual cues to rely on (Keegan et al, 2006).

An emerging technology from web 2.0 software programmes that permits the student to interact and be present in real time irrespective of where geographically they are located is 'sky peer to peer' which is abbreviated to Skype. Depending upon internet access and connections, users can make telephone calls free of charge over the internet. Extra features of this software include video conferencing, instant messaging and ability to transfer files.

Users of Skype can directly contact other Skype users in many countries which are part of the bilateral mobility agreements where the School has already established links.

Skype was chosen over other forms of synchronous technology such as audio, text chat, whiteboard and synchronised web browsing for 2 reasons: student evaluations from previous weblogging had found they missed the face to face contact and as stated by MacDonald (2008, p 91) "face to face meetings are had to beat". Also because when studying on a nursing programme, the importance of communication both verbally and non verbally cannot be underestimated, is "at the heart of effective care" and is a central part of public service work (Donnelly and Neville, 2008, p3).

Project Aim

The project focus was to gain an insight into the effectiveness of Skype as a medium for student support whilst on international placements and for use within action learning sets to enhance the international experience of the students/staff in the curriculum through virtual mobility.

Objectives

- To evaluate the effectiveness of Skype as a medium of communication between students/staff within different countries
- To evaluate the effectiveness of Skype as a support mechanism for students/staff undertaking an international placement

- To explore the use of Skype as a tool to enhance the international experience of students/staff both physical and virtual

2. Pedagogy

Capability and competence in health and social care often comes from experiential learning. A student who has worked and adapted to the “swampy lowlands of practice” (Schon, 1983) can develop skills and competence that are deeper learning experiences than through academic traditional approaches. How students adapt to the reality shock of working and learning within another country often depends on self efficacy and the available support from lecturers and peers to enable them to apply theory to the practice to deal with these stresses (Dollard et al, 2000).

By utilising the process of action learning to support the student on an international placement, alongside an online synchronous tool such as Skype, then students can meet the challenges of learning from experience and develop adaptive competence (Hager, 1998), keeping them on placement overseas instead of returning home (Simpson, 2000).

3. Methodology

The methodological approach of this study was action research, the cyclic nature of action research from a previous study and then the pilot study were the catalyst for this research. The research is a small scale project addressing a real world problem of finding an online medium to support communication and internationalisation. The research was cyclical as cohorts of students would leave for an international placement twice each year allowing the process of action, reflection and re-evaluation (Denscombe, 2007). The researchers also wanted those involved in the research project to be participatory (Heron and Reason, 2006). Limitations of action research however are the validity of the data and the length of the research. In relation to data generation, a two fold approach was taken, utilising both online individual questionnaires and focus groups. The purposive sample was taken from three cohorts of nursing students embarking on a module situated at the start of the 3rd year on the Diploma and BSc (Hons) in Nursing (Adult, Child and Mental health) programme between September 2009 and December 2010. The participants include those students who have been successful in securing an Erasmus or International Student Mobility Award (A unique University of Salford Travel Bursary Award) to fund an international placement. The countries in which they had opportunity to travel to were America, Australia, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Slovakia and Spain. The rationale was that students from these cohorts were embarking on international placements and Skyping into action learning sets of peers that remained within the home University. The action learning sets provided an excellent opportunity for discussions between students in different countries to discuss the similarities and differences within nursing. The total number of students on international placements between the three cohorts was 18 students. Four students from a potential 24 remained at home and were involved in Skype discussions within action learning sets. 12 lecturers were also questioned in relation to their experiences.

The two methods used to generate data were individual online questionnaires which asked 15 questions, 6 questions were to identify the demographic information and the rating of information technology skills and the remaining 9 questions were to ask about the effectiveness of Skype as a means of communication, support, and knowledge transfer. These questions also formed the basis for the discussions within the focus group. The focus groups were recorded with student permission so that information provided within the session could be listened to within its relevant context.

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the Research and Governance Ethics Committee within the University. The data when gathered was securely stored within locked cupboards and password protected computers to maintain confidentiality in line with ethical guidance.

The narrative of the qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6 stage model of analysis: becoming familiar with the data, creating initial codes, reflecting the participants words, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Themes naturally emerged and broadly fell into categories surrounding operational issues, pastoral care, academic support and cultural and personal awareness development. The themes were then linked back to the aims of the study. Other findings were gathered surrounding curriculum development in relation to assessment and academic support and will be highlighted further in the discussion.

It is important to note that because of the small scale of this study generalisations can not be made however the study may be informative for researchers undertaking similar studies. Other limitations of the study were that an educational theoretical framework such as Salmon's (2000) e-moderating model, Laurillard's (2002) Conversational Framework or Garrison et al's (2000) Community of Inquiry were not utilised in the initial research design, however the evaluation will draw on these, even though Lisewski and Joyce (2003) argue that by doing so the action research can lack flexibility.

4. Findings

Out of the 22 participants, four rated their IT skills as excellent and 18 as good. 11 had previously used Skype, but all were skilled in the use of social software such as Facebook and MSN.

12 Academic staff included in the study, were either personal teachers, the countries link lecturer or action learning set facilitator. Academic staff all rated their IT skills as good. Only 2 had used Skype.

4.1 Operational Issues

4.1.1 Training

On evaluation the training offered should have occurred at least one month prior to departure of the students leaving for other countries and should have involved all

students on the programmes. The students felt that a month would allow for “*plenty of practice using the software and would provide time to resolve any issues.*” The students embarking on an international placement thought that this method would also “*advertise their international experience with students from their programme who were not necessarily their friends, but who might have an interest in their experience.*”

4.1.2 *Ease of use*

All staff and students agreed that both the Skype and the blog were “*easy to use and simple to download.*”

4.1.3 *Accessibility*

Both students and staff felt that Skype and blogs were easy to access, but reliability was variable within the different countries dependent upon internet connections. 3 students in developing countries could neither access Skype or the blog as internet access for them was “*extremely unpredictable*”, instead they relied on older technology and used text messages and the telephone.

Staff also had issues with some of the IT equipment which meant that they had to “*agree to meet the student online at a later time on a one to one basis than in class.*”

4.1.4 *Usage*

Students stated that Skype and blog usage was “*frequent in the first few weeks of their arrival on an international placement and at times when they needed extra support or they needed to discuss an issue raised in practice.*” However lack of engagement with the blog diminished when students on an international placement noted their postings were not reciprocated. They suggested weekly announcements “*reminding others that we are still here.*”

4.1.5 *Timing*

Weekly meetings were seen by some students as a “*good idea*” others reflected that this was “*restrictive in time instead of having the flexibility to access Skype as and when they needed to.*”

4.1.6 *Netiquette*

On some occasions when students were doubting their own abilities in practice or were dealing with difficult situations, emotions ran high and were evident in their postings and discussions, academics had to remind students of their professional obligations to moderate their discussions and maintain netiquette.

4.1.7 *Technological support*

For 3 staff and 3 students Skype engagement became frustrating due to unreliable connections and faulty equipment during action learning sets. After the first cycle of

action learning evaluations a technician was available to resolve any problems, both directly and remotely, although problems with equipment still occurred.

4.2 Pastoral care

4.2.1 Face to face

All those who took part resoundingly said that the use of Skype was preferable to that of the blog citing preference of face to face contact. Comments by all students identified that as soon as they saw a familiar face online, they felt calmer and more at ease. One student said *“just having a smiley face on the other end helped.”*

However 3 students only had the use of text messages and telephone calls as part of their international experience and during their time encountered many distressing events. They stated that *“just hearing the voice of the International Link for the Country made them feel better.”*

The home students reported that they enjoyed the face to face contact they had using Skype they *“felt like he was here in the action learning set.”* They also stated that picking up on the non verbal signals being sent by their peer enabled them to offer support to reduce feelings surrounding lack of confidence and reality shock.

4.2.2 Instructional Immediacy

Students all commended the support of the academics whom they were in frequent contact with during their placement abroad. One student said *“If you had any problems, the support mechanism of Skype was very reassuring especially when you received help from others”*. This was echoed by others, stating that lecturers’ acted as facilitators to their learning, so rather than giving knowledge, academic staff enabled the students to reflect, have their experiences directed and then actions were set to enable deeper learning.

4.2.3 Contact

Students all expressed that Skype was quicker and had a better response than the blog. 5 students stated that having contact enabled them to challenge issues raised in the country they were on placement in, one student stated *“if I had not had the support, I would not have had the opportunity to do it”*.

4.2.4 Support

A consensus between students was that without the use of Skype or as with 3 students, the absence of a telephone they would have felt *“homesick”* and that using Skype to talk to their peers, family and academic staff *“kept me in placement overseas.”*

4.3 Academic / Peer support

4.3.1 Assessment Support

A strong theme was the use of Skype to facilitate support for assessments undertaken whilst on an International Placement. 5 students had to submit assessments whilst on an International Placement and they all agreed that the use of Skype enabled them to have tutorials just as they would have experienced back in University. They could sit and discuss the assessment plans and practice documents with their personal tutor and academic supervisor as if they were in the room. As one student stated “*for tutorials it was an excellent tool.*”

4.3.2 Sharing of the experience

When listening to feedback from their peers overseas, the students in Salford (home) clinical placements stated “*we take so much for granted about our nurse training*” Skype enabled them to share their experiences and allowed the student on an international placement to view alternative perspectives to the issues they brought to the group. This in turn fostered cultural awareness and understanding, as the academic staff said, the students were able to “*debate cultural issues and differences in practice.*”

4.3.3 Cultural awareness and development

The home students reported that during the first few weeks of using Skype they “*were not getting much out of the experience*”. However, as the weeks progressed they actually learned a tremendous amount about care in another country. One student said that the experience from listening about their colleagues’ experiences overseas “*enhanced their awareness without a doubt.*” Another said “*when listening to (student) I realised that in Salford we really do use evidence based practice.*”

4 students who were on international placements felt that their experiences did not benefit other students and believe that their “*presentations on return helped more with developing their peers cultural awareness.*” However these students were the ones who experienced problems with accessibility and usage and do reflect that if they had encountered a really good connection and were able to use Skype then they feel that the development of cultural awareness for others might have improved.

Staff involved in the study felt that this aspect of learning could become “*powerful if we get it right*” and it is something “*the staff want in practice*”.

4.4 Other findings

Other themes that were generated as a result of the focus groups which will not be discussed in detail, but noted include:

All the students felt that action learning should be the way forward for academic supervision from the beginning of their nursing programmes as they felt it was “*not superficial – instead of just doing what the uni want us to do, we are learning to learn*”.

5 students including those who had international placements and those who stayed at home felt that the School should embed IT skills into the assessment processes, so that they learn how to use IT so that it replicates real life practice.

But what was extremely interesting was that all the students felt that only 3rd Years should go on a clinical placement overseas, this they felt was due to the lack of knowledge and confidence in the first and second years to be able to cope and manage with some of the situations they were exposed to . It could be suggested that the home students picked up on the non verbal communication of vulnerability of their peers and felt that as suggested by Green et al (2008) in order to benefit from an international experience the student does require some cultural sensitivity before leaving the country.

5. Discussion

The objectives of the study were to evaluate the effectiveness of Skype as a medium of communication, as a support mechanism for students undertaking an international placement and to explore the use of Skype as a tool to enhance the international experience of students/staff both physical and virtual. Themes that emerged from the findings that explored these objectives include operational issues, pastoral care, academic and peer support and cultural awareness.

On reflection Salmon's (2000) e-moderating framework would have been a useful instrument to have evaluated the project as it is built upon a belief that in order to attain successful online learning, certain considerations require some thought such as operational issues, online socialisation, information exchange, knowledge construction and development. However, according to Lisewski and Joyce (2008) this framework does not afford face to face contact and is too rigid, limiting development of the process.

Laurillard's (2000) Conversational Framework asserts that the communication between student and lecturer is essential to knowledge development. There are 12 recommended stages when teaching students to achieve deeper learning which enable the student to communicate with the lecturer and provide the lecturer opportunity to evaluate the students understanding and correct any misunderstandings. However as this research project includes home students and action learning in the process, Laurillard's framework excludes the learning between action learning set members and the facilitator (Draper, 1997). Not sure what this means

According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p.13) blended learning frameworks must "integrate thought and action and promote an understanding for the importance of sustained critical discourse and private reflection." A method in which this can be achieved is to use the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison et al, 2000). This applies the principles of a group of individuals who work together to engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection, developing learning and understanding. Although this wasn't a consideration at the outset of this research, comparisons can now be drawn in relation to the process which requires 3 interdependent elements: These elements of social, cognitive and teaching presence complemented this research through the use of Skype and action learning. The students and lecturer had to create:

Social presence through identification with each other, communicating in the action learning set, which is a trusting environment that helps to develop interpersonal relationships (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008).

Teaching presence in that action learning supports the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes to achieve the learning outcomes of the module (Anderson et al, 2001)

Cognitive presence as Skype allows students to build and validate meaning through weekly action and reflection during the online sets (Garrison et al, 2008).

5.1 Operational Issues

We believe that sufficient training of easy to use software (Skype) that allows time for students and staff to become proficient users will enable successful implementation of online learning and this is supported by (Choy and Chi Ng, 2005, Volery and Lord, 2000). However as suggested by Pallof and Pratt (2001) careful consideration of students ability to access web 2.0 software should be gauged against the country visited and alternatives explored.

Usage should be flexible enough to accommodate student's needs in the first few weeks of arriving in a new country, as these are considered crisis times, however weekly meetings should continue, to allow home students access to an international online experience.

5.2 Pastoral Care / Academic and Peer support

In terms of support online face to face communication allowed students abroad to reaffirm their decision to experience nursing in another country and ensured they remained supported overseas, as they can often become easily upset to ordeals that occur (Lee, 2004). Having the opportunity to verbally and non verbally see their peers and lecturers allowed the provision of a 2 way interactive process, constructively aligned with appropriate support that enabled personal growth, development and cognitive learning (Biggs, 2003, Hutchins, 2003, Sims, 2003, Ryan and Twimbell, 2000).

5.3 Cultural Awareness

Although Skype did allow home students to take into account social and cultural differences in practices, it did not allow self examination of their own beliefs, biases and prejudices to practice self awareness, as would occur in students who experienced international mobility (Duffy et al, 2005). Perhaps all students should explore an issue that relates to a religious or ethnic group different to their own to aid internationalisation and examination of self.

5.4 Curriculum development

What the research findings have also identified are areas for improvement in relation to support and deficits in cultural awareness of our home students which will now inform our curriculum.

6. Conclusion

This research aspired to develop further discussions, to the ways in which Higher Education Institutions can enhance internationalisation of pre-registration programmes with the use of web 2.0 software platforms as a support mechanism for students on an international placement and in the provision of virtual mobility, internationalising the curricula at home. The main themes from the focus group narratives surrounding the use of Skype as a medium for support and communication are the importance of ensuring operational issues are addressed prior to the student's departure. Pastoral care is face to face and of a level that enables personal growth and development. Academic and peer support is interactive and meets the same expectations as if in the room within the University and if Skype is used in conjunction with a pedagogy such as action learning it can enhance cultural awareness, although in this study this was development of social and cultural differences in practice.

Skype therefore can be considered a useful medium of communication and support between staff and students in different countries, the added value is being able to see the face of the person who one is communicating with, providing extra non verbal communication signals to both recipients. With regards to internationalising the nursing curricula, more work is needed to ensure that students on an international placement can meet up online with their peers to discuss their experiences with students from all levels of pre-registration nursing programmes, not just in the action learning sets in which they are placed. This is to ensure students on international placements feel valued and can share their experiences to aid the development of cultural awareness and understanding of their peers.

7. Recommendations

From the findings of the project the team are ready to complete another cycle of action research with a cohort of students due to leave later this year. Other recommendations are:

To develop blog and Skype training for all students on pre-registration nurse programmes with at least one month practise.

To continue to use Skype and have a designated Blackboard site that all pre-registration students can access so first and second years can contribute to the discussions and aid internationalisation of their nurse education.

To explore the use of IT skills in nursing assessments, within the School.

To develop a research proposal that compares traditional academic supervision to action learning facilitation.

To explore other ways of using Skype to internationalise the nurse curriculum of students, who for whatever reason cannot experience an international nursing placement.

To utilise the findings of this research study to develop best practice guidelines for Skype implementation and use.

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