Open Distance and e-Learning: Students' Experiences of Online Portfolios for Assessment

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Declaration of interest

- There was no external funding to conduct the study.
- The College of Graduate Studies (CGS) and the College of Human Sciences (CHS) funded the presenters from the college research funds.

Introduction

- Open distance and e-learning (ODeL) students are regarded as part-time and non-traditional students

- Student support therefore needs specific attention to meet their needs

- In an attempt to demystify the complexities of ODeL various models of student support are used

Introduction (cont)

- Student support forms an integral part of teaching and learning and refers to a range of services that could assist students to meet their learning outcomes and become successful in their studies

- Support should be comprehensive and include systemic, cognitive (academic) and emotional support

- In order to assess whether student support is successful and what the needs of students are, reflective practices are used

Background

- Completing an online portfolio as assessment activity may be new to many students and requires extensive support from the educator

- An online portfolio with online curriculum content activities, is an innovative teaching and learning strategy that enhances the computer and internet surfing skills of the adult students over and above the mastering of the curriculum content

Background (cont)

- The setting for the study is an open and distance learning (ODeL) institution, that is gradually progressing from a blended approach to an online facilitation of learning

- The Health Sciences Education (HSE) module reflected upon, is one of the pilot modules selected by the university for online facilitation

- The students were professional nurses registered for a post registration Bachelor's degree

Portfolio goal 1

- The HSE students participated in an evaluative type of portfolio. The set goal for their participation in the portfolio was to reflect on the effectiveness of the portfolio activities in teaching them about the processes of curriculum planning, development, implementation and evaluation

- The expected outcome of the module was to have the knowledge regarding how a nurse educator should contribute to the processes of curriculum planning, development, implementation and evaluation

Portfolio goal 2

- HSE students should value themselves as growing professionals, who take responsibility for their professional learning and development

- HSE students were expected to demonstrate a commitment to self-evaluation and continuing professional development. Demonstrate commitment to participate in a group, engaging in peer teaching, peer support and peer evaluation, giving each other constructive feedback

Problem statement

Reluctance to participation in the online portfolio, even though it was a formal summative assessment for the module. The reluctance to participate in this innovative assessment strategy, was evidenced by:

- incomplete portfolio activities
- poor participation in online discussion forums
- discussion forums turned to complains forum

Purpose of the presentation

- The question that arose was:

  How could students be supported in the use of online portfolios as assessment strategy?

- In this presentation the experiences of students having to complete an online portfolio as both formative and summative assessment will be shared

Research design, aim and objective

- The study was qualitative descriptive and contextual
- The aim of the study was to develop effective student support strategies in an ODeL context
- The objective addressed in this presentation was to explore the reflections of the HSE students regarding their participation in the portfolio assessment

Population and sampling

- Population: 600 students registered for the HSE module in both semesters for 2017

- Sampling of reflective essays was purposive

- Sampling criteria:
  - consent to the use of the reflective essays for research purposes
  - reflective essays should be 200 words and above

- Sample size: 36 reflective essays met the criteria

Data collection

- HSE students were invited to write 200 words or more, reflecting on the portfolio as a form of assessing the HSE module content

- The facilitator provided the students with a space for the reflections at the end of the portfolio

- Reflective essays that met the given criteria were copied onto a word document and saved as 'transcripts'

Data analysis and ethics

- The reflective essays were analysed for content using thematic analysis, a process of organizing and integrating narrative, qualitative data according to emerging themes and concepts

- The study was approved by the Department of Health Studies Research Ethics Committee (HSREC) at UNISA, after ensuring that the ethical concerns were addressed

Theme1: Orientation to and planning for the activity

- The participation in the orientation phase was not well-attended

- Difficult and challenging module especially for students who did not participate in the online discussion forums, who did not read the welcome page for orientation and announcements

  I found the module so challenging and so difficult, very unfriendly at all. I feel the module needs some kind of orientation or class for the students to be acquainted

Theme 2: Support needs

Subtheme 1: Peer support needs

- Used social media (WhatsApp) to communicate with peers; worked together with fellow students; formed study groups; peer encouragement / peer support; working together encouraged; peer interaction enforced; peer evaluation and team work

  I was forced to interact with other students by forming groups for certain activities, which was good because you feel alone when studying with (**** university). I learned how to give constructive feedback to my colleagues and get feedback from them

Theme 2: Support needs (cont)

Subtheme 2: Support to alleviate negative feelings

- demotivation, frustration, stressed, self-doubt, daunting, overwhelming (activities), negativity, regret

At first, I was demotivated, but after engaging with other students on the discussion forum, I felt relieved and realized that I wasn't alone. It gave me courage seeing other students' mind maps on the forum

Theme 2: Support needs (cont)

Subtheme 3: Support enhances positive feelings

- sense of relief, sense of achievement, sense of gratitude / appreciation, excitement, confidence, elation, enjoyed the activities

   I did feel a sense of achievement completing this portfolio, because it was so challenging

Theme 3: Challenges and lessons learned

- Mastering of content regarding curriculum development processes; time management skills; enhanced computer skills; team spirit / working together; discovered innovative strategies; peer teaching / learning from peers portfolio encouraged creativity; enhanced critical thinking and professional development

Theme 3: Challenges and lessons learned (cont)

- *I learned so much because of the extension activities in this module. I also enjoyed using technology and being creative when doing so. Creating mind maps, word cloud and pie charts helped me use my computer skills in a creative way*

- *I now understand the depth of Curriculum Development and Evaluation, something I certainly was lacking prior to engaging in this module*

Theme 3: Challenges and lessons learned (cont)

- Portfolio activities too long, work overload, poor response from peers regarding posted work for feedback, living in rural area with poor network / connectivity, time consuming activities, inadequate time allocation for module activities and challenges related to computer literacy and support from peers

Theme 3: Challenges and lessons learned (cont)

- *Some students not responding to other students' work, (whereas) Instruction (is) to include minimum number of commends made to other student' work. Fear to criticize each other's work constructively is holding us back*

- *There was a lot of work considering the time allocated moreover other modules had to be looked into at the same time. Sharing mind maps comments on the e-portfolio was a great challenging, as students work at different paces*

Discussion

- Evaluating students' performance is part of being an educator

- Reflection in the context of learning involve intellectual and affective activities which individuals engage in, to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations

Discussion (cont)

- In this study, students reflected by thinking back about their experience of writing the evaluative portfolio, going through the activity of writing the portfolio (seeking of information from internet using provided links, watching YouTube videos etc)

- They critically evaluated the action and feelings associated with the portfolio

Discussion (cont)

- A purposeful e-portfolio can be successfully implemented as an alternative, innovative assessment method that can overcome the weaknesses of traditional assessment practices

- The students can be assessed in a holistic manner, thus equipping them with a lifetime of learning

Conclusions

- A portfolio to be a form of assessment from the 1st year of the programme

- A signature module on computer literacy in the 1st year of the programme will assist students in successful completion of an online portfolio

- An orientation to the module and the portfolio way of assessment is essential

- Strengthened ICT support from the university

Final conclusion

- The study concluded that an online portfolio can be a successful assessment strategy in health sciences education.

- University ICT support is essential for the online activities, including the discussion forums to enhance peer support, peer evaluation and peer interaction

- Urban and rural environment students rose to the challenge of online assessment

Thank you

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