PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING ON-LINE FOR NURSERY MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Liverpool Hope University College has introduced a new Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Degree in Nursery Management. This programme has a traditionally taught cohort of students and another, separate ‘on-line’ cohort. This paper illustrates the management team’s rationale and process in creating the initial programme and then adapting it to cater for the needs of the new ‘e-learning’ students. The team has chosen to adopt a ‘Problem Based Learning’ (PBL) approach for the e-learning programme as this approach has been found to facilitate the acquisition of professional knowledge along with the requisite practitioner skills. The University College’s chosen virtual learning environment (V.L.E) is Granada’s ‘Learnwise’. This V.L.E has as one of its features collaborative ‘Forums’ in which students take part in asynchronous discussion in small teams and work on specific management and education problems. The PBL approach offers a perspective on learning that emphasizes social learning processes within communities of practice where individuals engage in the negotiation of meaning and the mutual construction of knowledge. This contrasts to theories of learning that highlight individual and isolated cognitive processes and where learning is viewed as the absorption of an abstract body of knowledge that stands apart from practice. The PBL approach and early evaluations are presented.

Keywords: Problem-based Learning; E-learning; Nursery Management Education.

BACKGROUND

Liverpool Hope University College has a 150-year tradition of widening participation and has over the last decade expanded degree provision to a number of Network of Hope locations across the Northwest of England to further provide access to those groups of students currently still under represented in Higher Education in the United Kingdom (U.K)

Against this institutional backdrop the B.A. (Hons.) Nursery Management commenced as a taught part-time programme for Early Years Educare practitioners in September 2001. To date this degree remains the only one of its kind in the U.K. providing a higher-level management qualification in a rapidly expanding Service sector.
The market in the United Kingdom for a Nursery Management programme is large and is growing in line with U.K. Government initiatives. For examples, childcare spending is set to double to £1.5bn in 2005-06. This should create 250,000 new childcare places by 2005-06 on top of an earlier target of new places for 1.6 million children by 2004. This expansion of childcare places is only possible through a rapid increase in the childcare workforce. According to the Department for Education and Skills (DES) the number of professional in the childcare sector grew by 21% between 1998 and 2001, while the numbers of workers in nursery and after school provision doubled over the same period. The number of day nurseries has risen by 42% over the last four years (Murphy, 2002).

This rise in provision and staff involved in the sector is leading to a demand for higher-level management qualifications. Publicity in Nursery World and Nursery Management Today during 2002 about Liverpool Hope’s B.A. Nursery Management generated 100 plus enquiries from across the U.K. and abroad.

To enable Liverpool Hope to respond to the demand from individuals and organizations in the Early Years Educare sector, the programme team explored a number of distance and e-learning modes that could be adopted to enable interested practitioners from across the U.K. to participate in the Degree. An adoption of a format that would allow students to participate from a distance is also in line with Liverpool Hope’s mission to widen participation to previously disadvantaged groups.

As stated by Hedge (1996) distance education “…represents opportunities for continuing education that are, already, enabling notions of lifelong learning to advance beyond rhetoric and into reality.” Employer and employee organizations in the sector such as the National Day Nurseries Association are concerned that such programmes are available.

The British government is also investing in training, developing a career ladder, improving salaries, tightening regulations and attracting the right quality of person into childcare (Guardian, September 12th 2000). The Educare sector is set to continue to grow because, although the private sector for nursery provision has increased by 400% over the last 10 years, it still only meets 2% of the current demand. Significant child care recruitment targets have been set by the U.K. government and this will require a considerable amount of training provision, much of which will need to be distance learning oriented. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study found that the current provision for training and development of child care staff is only of a pedagogic or vocational nature, with no specific training and development opportunities in childcare management, even though it is clear that the Early Years staff are expected to perform these management roles. At the same time, workers face many practical challenges to access in-service training, especially in obtaining release time with pay to attend courses (OECD, 2001). In addition to the training and management skills development, there are
issues of equality of opportunities to address. The U.K. labour force survey 1991-1995 reveals that Nursery Nurses are 99.2% female with only 1% educated to the degree level. These areas of development are further highlighted in the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee “Early Years” report (2000). Section 108 of the report calls for all nursery managers to be qualified to degree level for professional management of the childcare facilities and provision. This study shows the need for an open and distance learning education and training.

E-LEARNING RATIONAL

Two issues are described here, that is the development of a degree level programme for Nursery Management and the provision of such programmes over the Internet. The B.A. (Hons.) Nursery Management programme team decided on an e-Learning mode of delivery, as this was seen to provide the best vehicle to widen participation. This delivery mode will provide an accredited route for the attainment of a relevant degree level qualification for careers and managers within the childcare sector, and assist in attracting suitable people into this employment sector to meet the childcare demand over the next 10 years. It provides a means which enhances the skills in management which are needed in this expanding sector and prepare students to meet the demands of future employment.

The modification from a taught mode to an e-Learning delivery mode will embrace the use of computer technology and communication systems through the use of a V.L.E and the World Wide Web. This allows the broadening of access to the target group, as delivery will be achieved while students continue to be active within the workplace. This will enhance the learning experience and the employability factors, as the knowledge will be directly transferred to the work environment. Delivering the program via e-learning means that instead of the students moving to the location of the resource provider, i.e. Liverpool Hope and studying at times convenient for the institution, the program can be accessed by the students at any time of their choosing, thereby allowing them the freedom to study at their convenience. Through this mode of delivery, the B.A. Nursery Management E-Learning will contribute towards achieving one of Liverpool Hope’s prime strategic objectives, widening participation by providing study opportunities for groups of students previously excluded from higher education.

In deciding on an e-Learning mode the team takes cognizance of the fact that e-learning can be misunderstood as an ‘information dump’ and not as a process. This is in response to Honey’s (2001) assertion that “The common thread running through...forms of e-learning is that they offer the possibility of learning from information delivered to us electronically”. Honey furthermore asserts that “E-Learning more often than not amounts to e-reading”
PBL FOR THE NURSERY MANAGEMENT DEGREE PROGRAMME

It is the stated aim of this programme that students will develop a knowledge and understanding of the educational and management issues pertinent to their sector, and that they will also develop the requisite skills to critically analyse, evaluate and apply this knowledge. As professional knowledge requires functioning knowledge that can be put to work immediately, the management team chose to adopt a ‘Problem Based Learning’ approach for the programme. This approach has been widely used in Higher Education in recent years particularly in health related professions and has been found to facilitate the acquisition of professional knowledge along with requisite practitioner skills (Newble and Clarke, 1986).

Problem based learning simulates everyday learning and problem solving. Knowledge is acquired in a working context and is put back to use in that context. Students learn the skills for seeking out the required knowledge when the occasion arises. They are motivated immediately by the interaction with a ‘real’ problem and are active early in the process. There is a large body of literature to support the motivational aspects of collaboration on learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Sharan and Shaulov, 1990; Dobos, 1996). Students are assigned to small problem solving groups and begin cooperating with tutors and peers, to build up a knowledge base of material; they learn where to go and check it and seek out more. They are guided to a wide variety of resources. Knowledge is elaborated, consolidated and applied.

The university college’s chosen V.L.E. is Granada’s ‘Learnwise’. This V.L.E. has as one of its features a collaborative space for a ‘Forum’, where students take part in asynchronous discussion in small teams and work on specific management and education problems. Wenger (1998) offers a perspective on learning that highlight individual and isolated cognitive processes and where learning is viewed as the absorption of an abstract body of knowledge that stands apart from its practice where individuals engage in the negotiation of meaning and the mutual construction of knowledge. This perspective contrasts to theories of learning that highlight individual and isolated cognitive processes and where learning is viewed as the absorption of an abstract body of knowledge that stands apart from its practice.

In the first session the students are presented with a problem. This will frequently take the form of written ‘case study’ but can also be a video, or audio format. Simmons (2000) identifies the powerful role of stories in learning. Students attempt to broadly identify the problem and its key features and using their own experience and existing knowledge, they generate a number of potential causes and solutions. This ‘brainstorming’ of ideas is permanently recorded in the forums and allows the students to create a picture of their group’s collective understanding of the issues. They then convert their questions into learning objectives for the problem.
Problem-based Learning On-line for Nursery Management

Once the learning goals have been identified, students share these out. They individually use the available resources to develop an understanding of the information, which they bring back to the group for the second phase. The students are strongly encouraged to get information and develop an understanding relevant to the problem as their group defined it. The information they gather must be presented to the group in an easily understood and relevant format. After further discussions the implications of the new information allows the group to refine their early assumptions and uncover their knowledge gaps. Students therefore develop their explanation of the problem and discover more pertinent information for resolving it.

The final session is followed by a period of reflection where students identify some of the barriers to their learning and issues they will encounter when dealing with real problems. Students are also given an opportunity for two-way feedback; tutor to students and students to tutor. They describe the things they think worked well and those that could be improved upon. These can be incorporated into the learning objectives for this group with their next problem.

The tutor’s role throughout this process is that of a facilitator. The tutor encourages the students to explore their own knowledge and determine their own learning needs and generally refrains from providing information, instead, prompting discussion and learning amongst the students. The tutor will motivate discussion by asking pertinent questions and checking all lines of enquiry, the currency and validity of the information they provide (Goldborough, 2001) and encouraging students to consider their priorities. They will also intervene in negative group dynamics to examine what may be going wrong and determine how to proceed.

Using a problem based learning approach is particularly important as these students will be working at a distance and it is anticipated that the students will maintain their sense of belonging to the group and the programme by working together on shared problems. In so doing their skills of communication, self-direction and team working, problem solving and creativity are all developed.

Collaborative learning is a natural process of social interaction and communication (Flannery, 1994; Gerlach, 1994) and by using problems to define the curriculum, students acquire necessary knowledge and skills. Honey (2001) identifies that ‘learning has always flourished when it has been actively encouraged and supported’. The learning and assessment on the programme is aligned (Biggs, 1999) to everyday work experiences. This type of social interaction, learning and decision making is expected in the workplace today and this approach should ultimately therefore promote a desire for and ability to partake in ‘life long learning’. Students will have gained the skills for acquiring new knowledge and for evaluating knowledge, whilst also understanding the necessity of analyzing and reflecting upon the outcomes of their proposed solutions.
THE PILOT GROUP

The team has decided on a highly innovative e-Learning and PBL approach to satisfy the demands of an emerging student market. A cohort of 20 learners has been recruited for the pilot group and those students have started in February 2003 to work through their modules and group problems.

This pilot is throwing up new challenges in terms of engagement between teaching staff and students. The team intends to monitor and evaluate student experiences and attainment. This is particularly pertinent as students are at a distance and there is a need to give our invisible and silent students a voice so that they can contribute to public evaluation processes” (Gilroy, Rangecroft Tricker, 2001). To give students their ‘voice’ in evaluation, they will be encouraged to participated in module evaluations as is standard practice at Liverpool Hope University College. In addition a continuous review of the programme’s coherence is undertaken via the V.L.E.’s anonymous evaluation tool. The authors intend to publish the results of these evaluations in subsequent papers and provide a detailed assessment of the programme’s rationale and learning and teaching strategies.

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