Using Educator Portals and Vignettes with Adult Online Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for success for adult educators in the online learning and teaching environment may be achieved through two different strategies: by the introduction of an educator's portal via a hybrid online institute and through vignettes in asynchronous discussions. Both strategies take into consideration techniques or methods used effectively approaching the adult learner, acknowledgment of the learner's prior knowledge and experiences, meeting the participants' needs, and what is important to facilitate a productive online experience.

The concept of a portal, as an educational tool, is in its evolutionary stages and, therefore, many adults require an introduction of this tool and its use. Portals facilitate the discovery of people, organizations, and content in a meaningful context (Ethridge, Hadden, & Smith, 2000); are secure offering user authentication, credential mapping, sensitive encryption and personalization as well as providing tracking of activity for the user (Morrison, Buckley, Coppo, 1999; Ethridge, Hadden, & Smith, 2000). To introduce this educational tool a hybrid distance education program, an institute, was used combining face-to-face presentations with online instruction and project-based learning. Qualitative data, obtained through surveys and interviews conducted by Crame (2003), as well as information from case studies were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and to analyze both the theory and practice of using an educator's portal as a communication tool to engage educators in their establishment of school improvement goals and in the effectiveness of an institute to present this information. The educators in three Western Pennsylvania school districts (systems) demonstrated in the study that the concept of an educator's portal could be an effective tool in working on project-based initiatives toward the improvement of teaching and learning.

The term "vignettes" is interchangeable with a number of terms describing case studies (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2000, p.311), and scenarios (Dede, 1998; Fogarty, 1997, pp. 28-29). For the purpose of this article, vignettes are defined as "incomplete short stories that are written to reflect, in a less complex way, real-life situations in order to encourage discussions and potential solutions to problems where multiple solutions are possible" (Jeffries & Maeder, 2004, p. 8). Vignettes have been used as a teaching strategy (Campbell, 1996; Brown, 2000; Maeder, 2002; Kish, 2004; Jeffries & Maeder, 2005a), and as an assessment method (Maeder, 2002; Kish, 2004; Jeffries & Maeder, 2004; 2005a; 2005b). Vignettes are short narratives, which have been shown to benefit adult learners (Wiles, 1989; Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 1998; Marsick, 1998; Galbraith, 1998; Dottin & Weiner, 2001). Kish (2004) showed that vignettes could be used to benefit adult learners, especially for academic achievement and higher order thinking in an online environment.

ADULT ONLINE LEARNERS

When using these strategies in an online environment, both Crame and Kish worked with educators who taught either children or adults and who had a wide range of experience with online technologies from teachers who did not know how to send and open an e-mail to technology coordinators. Research shows that the needs of these individuals included problem solving; analyzing; making sense of the world of teaching and thereby increasing the possibility of their improving that world (Dottin & Weiner, 2001); balancing work, family, and school expectations successfully (Thompson, 1997; Martin & Johnson, 1999); and improving professional skills (Moore & Bogotch, 1993; Thompson, 1997). These learning needs are similar to those noted by adult educator theorists such as Knowles, who indicated the importance of providing a learning environment supporting mutual trust and respect, acceptance by the learners for their own learning responsibilities, active engagement of the participants in the learning process, and making use of the students' previous experiences (Knowles, 1970, pp. 52-53).

Brookfield (1986, pp. 9-11) wrote that effective practice is characterized by a respect among participants for each other's self-worth; praxis is placed at the heart of effective facilitation; facilitation aims to foster in adults a spirit of critical reflection; and the aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults. Wlodkowski (1999, p. 83) presents four issues that instructors need to consider when designing courses: 1) establishing inclusion; 2) developing a favorable attitude; 3) enhancing meaning through engaging and challenging learning experiences, and 4) engendering competence by having learners understand they have effectively learned something valuable they can apply in their own world. Both Crame and Kish incorporated these premises when designing the learning experiences for the online environment that ultimately encouraged exchange of significant ideas.

The online learning environment considers the needs of adult learners by providing meaningful activities (Wojnar, 2000; Maeder, 2002) and comparing past experiences with new experiences, sharing experiences, feedback, and practical learning (Stilborne &Williams, 1996). "Systematic reform requires policies and practices different from fostering pilot projects for small-scale educational improvement," explains Chris Dede (1997). It was shown possible that when the strategies employing portals and face-to-face institutes, and the creation of vignettes are used in an online learning environment that the adult learner's basic needs are met. These needs also included motivation, which, in studies done by Crame and Kish was educational advancement for the participants.

Raymond J. Wlodkowski (1999) states, "Before people can learn, they must be motivated to learn." Effective learning, according to Wlodkowski, does not occur without motivation (p. 3). To achieve the highest quality of teaching and learning at a distance, consideration must be equally made in the theoretical perspectives of learning, subject content, and learning context such as delivery mode and learner characteristics (Naidu, 1994).

When conducting studies that focused on these strategies, Crame and Kish used case studies. Qualitative researchers study behavior holistically because this type of research is "ongoing and emergent" (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied according to Robert Stake (1994). It is designed by the interests of the participants and not by the method of inquiry employed. Case study design was appropriate for this research to follow because of the "bounded" nature of this study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). As recommended by Robert Yin (1994), only the "broad features" of projects of each of the school districts were introduced at the start of the case study (p. 4).

When learning new material, adult learners need to have choices. The following paragraphs explain how educator portals with face-to-face institutes and vignettes were used to enhance teaching and learning.

EDUCATORS' PORTALS AND TRAINING

As educators and the general population continue to define portals as gateways for learning, consideration must be made to the related issues of social and cultural context in which portals are used (Jafari & Sheehan, 2003). "Teaching is a cultural activity" according to Jim Stigler and Jim Hiebert (1999). As a cultural activity, teaching is a complex system that cannot be changed easily; however, to improve teaching, both its systemic and its cultural aspects must be recognized and addressed (p. 97). It is the patterns of relationships and forms of association between educators that make the real difference in determining a successful enterprise (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Fullan, 2001 p. 51). Teachers learn from many groups, both inside and outside of their schools, but they learn most from other teachers in several ways among them through discussions, meetings, and peer coaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 219). "In applying new technology, teachers often use each other as resources; thus increased learning in a collective group is not surprising" (ASCD, 2003). One strategy to improve teaching and learning is the effective use of technology as a professional development tool and a vehicle for ongoing and sustained communication. To accomplish this, a hybrid distance education program was used combining face-to face presentations with online instruction and project-based learning using an educator's portal and classroom instruction as evaluated by Crame (2003).

A multi-method strategy was followed in Crame's study using a structured questionnaire, case studies, review of documents and semi-structured focus group discussions. These strategies determined the effectiveness of the design, development, and implementation of the educator's portal and institute as a communication tool to engage educators in their establishment of goals.

A qualitative paradigm offered the opportunity to explore new questions by not restricting or diminishing the occasions for further investigation that emerged during the study. Qualitative research is essentially multi-method in focus as it permits the examination of content knowledge frequently used when little is known about a certain program, project, or topic and when an inductive approach is considered more appropriate (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Crame's study was both exploratory and analytical.

Exploratory investigations scrutinize new or relatively unknown programs to lead to better understanding while analytical studies are conducted to determine principles that may guide future action (Mauch & Birch, 1998). The exploratory nature of the study was concerned with the use of an educator's portal for communication and collaboration as well as for ongoing continued education for K-12 educators. The use of an educator's portal developed by a not-for-profit and non-academic organization is a new phenomenon, accordingly, which required Crame to use an a posteriori approach. She examined the issues of the participants involved in the institute utilizing a method similar to a 360-degree approach (Shaver, 1998) involving persons from various educational roles including superintendents and other administrators, classroom teachers, and technology coordinators.

Crame's study indicates that the introduction of new technology such as the portal needs to be presented to adult learners in a manner appropriate to their skill levels and professional knowledge base. The learners in her research stated that using project- based learning and the hybrid on line approach contributed to the successes of their involvement in the institute and sustained knowledge of the use of an educator's portal.

USING VIGNETTES IN ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSIONS

Kish (2004) conducted a case study to describe, both qualitatively and quantitatively, how vignettes enhanced academic achievement and higher order thinking in an adult online course, and whether participants preferred vignettes as a teaching strategy and learning activity. The case study involved master's level students enrolled in a three-credit course in the School of Education at Duquesne University, Instructional Techniques, GITED 631. All of the participants were educators, as in Crame's study, either of children or other teachers in a K-12 environment or of adults in post secondary institutions. Results indicated that the use of vignettes did enhance academic achievement and promote higher order thinking, and were a desirable teaching strategy and learning activity.

In her three-part study, Kish first addressed the needs of the adult learners by providing a background questionnaire, a diagnostic pretest, having participants complete the first part of a K-W-L chart, and talking to the participants directly in the first session. Based on the participant's background and interests, as well as the course material, she developed two sets of vignettes for consideration. The first set focused on course material from the text *Methods that Matter: Six Structures for Best Practice Classrooms* (Daniels & Bizar, 1998) and the second set focused on course material from the text *Professional Portfolios for Teachers* (Tomei & Wilcox, 2000). Both sets considered the backgrounds and interests of the participants, based on the information gathered from the instruments used in the first session.

Before posting the vignettes online, Kish defined vignettes, explained when they were used previously, and noted benefits of working with vignettes. She also went through the scoring guide and rubric that would be used to evaluate the participants. Kish then instructed the participants to submit their responses direction to her via digital drop box in the Blackboard course management system. Once these responses were received, she posted them in two different asynchronous discussions (one for each set), where participants were required to take three actions: read through all of the vignette response postings, respond to two of the postings, and to rate all of the postings in terms of how helpful they were in understanding the material or in providing insight for the situations considered (which were to be sent to the instructor directly, and not seen by the other participants).

For the second part of the study, Kish directed the participants to write their own vignettes. By this time, participants had seen several examples of written vignettes. She also provided a face-to-face meeting to show participants how to write their own vignettes for their own students. This meeting reviewed the different parts of the vignette, explained the "Vignette Starter," which was a series of questions to help participants write their vignettes, and explained the scoring guide and rubric used to evaluate the participant-generated vignettes. The participants were required to write three vignettes, all of which were posted in three different asynchronous discussions.

In the third part of the study, the participants were to comment and rank the various teaching strategies and learning activities used during the study, which included online slide presentations (developed in PowerPoint), lectures, teacher demonstrations, student demonstrations, and projects.

Results showed that using vignettes enhanced academic achievement and higher order thinking, and were preferred over other teaching strategies and learning activities. There was a definite improvement in participants' demonstration of their application of the course material from the first set of vignette responses to the second set of vignette responses. Evidence of higher order thinking was shown in the participant-generated vignettes, which included the following levels of higher order thinking: application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Finally, the use of teacher-generated vignettes was the most preferred over the other teaching strategies and learning activities. As a teaching strategy and learning activity, teacher-generated vignettes received the highest rating (4.88 out of 5). Most of the teaching strategies and learning activities received an average of a 4.5 rating, including the use of participant-generated vignettes. Even though teacher modeling received the highest ranking of all of the teaching strategies, teacher-generated vignettes received the second highest ranking (out of 10). Participant-generated vignettes ranked sixth out of 10. Data also

showed that among the learning activities considered by participants when learning other content material, completion of teacher-generated vignettes ranked the highest. Teacher modeling was ranked second highest, after which both learner-generated vignettes and rubrics received the same ranking. Lectures received the lowest ranking.

The comments in the questionnaires and learning logs indicated that overall, the participants thought the use of teacher-generated vignettes was valuable. As a learning activity, participants found answering teacher-generated vignettes helped them when they read and applied what they learned and to achieve higher order thinking, including solving problems. Several participants indicated that they found it helpful to look at the way others had completed the teacher-generated vignettes. The participants also indicated that they thought creating vignettes was challenging, but provided a number of benefits, including helping them think creatively, helping them address certain issues they were currently facing in the teaching of their own classes, and realizing the significance of creating them for their own classes.

Several educational implications were made in regard to the use of vignettes with adult learners. Completing teacher-generated vignettes and writing vignettes can 1) enhance academic achievement, regardless of whether they are combined with other learning activities and 2) can measure different course content from more traditional forms of assessment. Completing teacher-generated vignettes is a useful assessment tool and an effective instructional method as well. Because they are text-based, vignettes can be used effectively in a hybrid online course, partly face-to-face and partly online. Teachers can learn how to write appropriate vignettes for students of any grade level; however, age level is likely to be a factor when determining if students are ready to write their own vignettes. Also, unlike other forms of narratives which take longer to create and analyze, (e.g., case studies), vignettes can be written by students who do not believe they are sufficiently creative or able to write long narratives

SUMMARY

Both of these strategies were unique in presenting information in an online learning environment, as there was not much research done previously for either. In Crame's study, the use of the portal in the institute resulted in school districts creating new programs to improve teaching and learning. In Kish's study, the use of vignettes enhanced academic achievement, enhanced higher order thinking, and was shown to be preferred over several other teaching strategies and learning activities. As these case studies showed, both strategies met the needs of adult learners, in a hybrid online environment. In both studies, participants were motivated to complete meaningful projects resulting in successful applications in their own teaching and learning environments. For example, Crame's work revealed that through the use of the educator's portal and institute participation that school districts established permanent reform projects and one school district received state and national recognition. During Kish's study, there were several teachers who used vignettes in their own classrooms and reported that their students appreciated them as a meaningful learning activity.

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