THE TRANSITION TO BLENDED LEARNING IN A SCHOOL OF NURSING AT A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: AN EVALUATION

By

ADHAM ALARBEED * DIALA AL HAKIM **

* Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan.
** Lecturer, Syrian Private University, Syria.

ABSTRACT

Within the past two decades, Blended Learning (BL) programs have become very prevalent. The number of offered courses is continually increasing. The factors which support this fact are mostly related to the technological advances that have made the obtainability both efficient and practical. A School of Nursing (SoN) started a Faculty Professional Development Program (FPDP) for preparing its faculty for the initiation of the BL courses. This paper presents an evaluation project for this FPDP in order to provide empirical evidence on its importance as a way to smooth the transition to the BL. This evaluation project used a non-experimental descriptive quantitative research design. The Context, Input, Process, Product evaluation model (CIPP) was the theoretical framework for this evaluation project. The data collected through survey utilized an internet-based questionnaire. The analysis of the data adopted the Fit Gap Analysis (FGA) framework. The analysis results showed change in the SoN faculty's attitude, due to FPDP program, ranked between 44.44% and 88.89%; behavior ranked between 0.0% and 66.67%; and, knowledge ranked between 33.33% and 55.56%. Based on the analysis findings, this project recommends that the FPDP should be considered as an essential step and a successful way toward smoothing the transition to the BL, and should be considered as an example for other Universities.

Keywords : Educational Administration, Evaluation Projects, Faculty Development.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Within the past two decades, blended learning (BL) programs have become very prevalent. The number of offered courses is continually increasing. The factors which support this fact are mostly related to the technological advances which have made the obtainability both efficient and practical (Totaro, Tanner, Noser, Fitzgerald, & Birch, 2005). Besides, the economic advantages of distributing scarce resources, geographically and temporally, to those students whom they are in distant locations, provide even a broader market for BL (Roberts, 1998). In addition, there is an increase of the student demand for acquiring education at a convenient time. This is given in their busy agendas and personal obligations which in its turn makes the BL attractive to working learners (Roberts, 1998; Totaro et al., 2005). Indeed, the major trend in education in this era is evidently the BL. The transition towards this new trend is happening very fast especially in nursing education (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, Ryan, Flowers, Rose, & Wayda, 2005). This holds potential weaknesses in the transition process. These weaknesses vary a lot. One of these weaknesses is the presence of less prepared faculty in the BL system.

A School of Nursing (SoN) in a developing country started offering BL courses. The SoN's top directors were aware of the need of providing an adequate learning and support for the entire faculty toward the BL. This is in order to make this transition process a weak-free one. Due to that, a Faculty Professional Development Program (FPDP) for BL was offered.

1. Significance

Depending on Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011) work, it can be said that evaluation projects hold a great significance. This is due to two reasons. First, it provides knowledge which is the real purpose of all research kinds. Second, it provides the opportunity to test theories and concepts in the real world. This means, it provides the

chance to test the research findings in different contexts.

2. Purpose

This study is purpose was to present an evaluation project for FPDP in order to provide empirical evidence on its importance as a way to smooth the transition to BL.

3. Objectives

The objectives of this study was to provide other Universities looking to start BL courses with an example that can be utilized, besides other researchers exploring the FPDP effectiveness in their own context.

4. Research Question

How did the FPDP program impact the faculty's attitude, knowledge, and behavior at SoN?

5. Literature Review

A study made by Ali et al. (2005) titled "Online Education: Needs Assessment for Faculty Development" had a purpose which was to "identify the level of perceived expertise of faculty in online teaching and the priorities of areas to be addressed in faculty development sessions" (Ali et al., 2005, p 2). The findings of the study were "faculty who taught online perceived their level of expertise to range from advanced beginner to competent, whereas faculty who had not taught online were at the novice and advance beginner levels" (p. 1). The study results suggested that, first there is a need for organizing continuous educational programs toward the BL for the facility to improve their skills and abilities to perform a quality BL. Second, Administrators in the Universities should be aware of these needs and should plan and implement such continuing educational session toward BL for their faculty. Third, more studies should be made in this area. Another study made by Totaro et al. (2005) to determine the attitudes of business faculty toward BL courses showed similar results. The purpose of Totaro et al.'s study was to determine the perceptions of the business faculty members toward BL courses. Yet, the study results can be generalized to all kinds of online teaching courses. This is since BL method has approximately the same advantages, disadvantages, and requirements in all the science fields (Totaro et al., 2005). Totaro et al. (2005) study results recommended that, the offering of online courses in business is still in its developmental stages, and that only a "small percentage of the respondents indicate that they would teach online courses in the future" (p. 18). The reason behind that, as the study suggest, can be for a combination of reasons like "labor-intensive requirements of online teaching (Easton, 2003), the view that quality of course material is lower than comparable traditional courses (Inman, 1999), the requirement that support systems, technology partnerships, and policies be in place prior to online course deployment (Ryan, et.al 2004) (p. 18). Those reasons contribute altogether in the justification of the faculty attitude toward working in BL courses. It became clear depending on Totaro et al. (2005) study's results that, there is a need for familiarizing faculty with the BL and what to expect from working in it. Besides, flexible education must be present, and unceasing development depending on the faculty feedback should become the standard. Finally, a road map study made by Cuellar (2002) designed the logical steps to be followed in the transition process from the classic classroom teaching style to the BL one. The study depends on an intensive and in-depth review for the published literature and aimed to describe the "pedagogical transition that needs to be considered before putting a class online" (Cuellar, 2002, p. 5). Cuellar (2002) explained the in-details how a successful transition toward BL style should be prepared. In her study results, she asserted that well-prepared faculty and administrators will play the most important role in assuring successful transition from class-room style to the BL one. It is evident in the literature that, providing organized and well prepared programs for the faculty development processes are a major and critical factor in the successful transition to BL style (Ali et. al., 2005; Cuellar, 2002; Lan, 2001; Totaro et. al., 2005; Van Der Velde & Rawl, 2000).

6. Theoretical Framework

The Context, Input, Process, Product model (CIPP) is one of the decision oriented approaches for evaluation. This project will utilize the CIPP model for evaluating the FPDP. The CIPP model is widely used in the United States of America and around the world especially in educational evaluation (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011). The CIPP model helps making mangers and evaluators thinking of

the evaluation as a cycle based process. Furthermore, Alkin and Christie (2004) stated that the CIPP model provides a "continual information stream to decision makers to ensure that programs continually improves their services" (p. 44). This means, CIPP model provide managers a performance-monitor for their programs. The CIPP model divided the evaluation process into four parts all integrated with each other. The fourth part is the product evaluation which serves recycling decisions.

7. Methodology

7.1 Study Design

This project design was a non-experimental descriptive quantitative one. Quantitative research is usually used for testing objective theories by investigating the relationship among variables. These variables should be measurable, typically on instruments, so that the numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2008). In this project, the ordinal variables of the study were measurable. The change in faculty's attitude, knowledge, and behavior due to the FPDP are measurable. Furthermore, the quantitative research design, with a survey as a data collection tool, has unique characteristics including high applicability and low cost (Knapp, 1998). This made it the most appropriate design for this project. This is due to the time and the financial limitations this project had.

7.2 Study Setting, Population, and Sample

First, the project was conducted at the School of Nursing of Aga Khan University. Second, its population was the entire SoN's faculty who participated in FPDP. Third, its sample was the whole population due to the fact that the population was limited to only 11 faculty. Furthermore, this ensures a complete representativeness of the population.

8. Data Collection process

The data was collected through a survey. The survey utilized an internet-based questionnaire. The website *Surveymonkey. com* had been used for designing the questionnaire and collecting the data. The questionnaire was designed especially for the study. Creswell (2008) noted that surveys provide a numeric description of the trends, attitudes, or opinions within a given population. Furthermore, the process of collecting the data was divided into three parts. First part was obtaining the names, the phone numbers, and the e-mails of those participants in FPDP programme from SoN's faculty. Second part was approaching them via phone calls requesting appointments; then, meeting them in order to give them the participant's information letter; finally, obtaining their verbal acceptances toward the voluntary participation in the project. Third part was to send to the participants the on-line questionnaire link directly to their e-mails.

The project questionnaire was designed depending on information retrieved from the literature (Creswell, 2008; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2009). This is in order to increase its validity. The questionnaire contained questions to determine how the FPDP impacts the facility attitude, knowledge, and behavior at SoN. Furthermore, the questionnaire design was appealing to the eye, simple to use, and contained complete and explicit instructions (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2009). This was in order to ensure collecting the desired data. Finally, pilot trial for the questionnaire was made. Changes were made for some of the questionnaire's questions. This was depending on the feedback received from the pilot trial. This was in order to support the validity and reliability of the data collection tool. Besides, an English language expert's consultancy was obtained to ensure that the questionnaire's questions are understandable and clear from the language point of view. Thus, validity which is defined as the capacity of the instrument to measure what it has invented to measure, and reliability which is the instrument's capacity to constantly and correctly measure the concept under study which were both ensured (Wood , Ross-Kerr, & Brink, 2006; Coughian, Cronin, & Ryan, 2007).

8.1 Ethical Considerations

The permission to collect data from the project site was obtained. The permission from the participants to collect data was obtained as well. Furthermore, the participants were assured that anonymity and confidentiality of data will be firmly maintained. Moreover, no compensation of any kind was offered for the participants.

8.2 Data Analysis Plan

The analysis of the data in this project adopted the Fit Gap Analysis (FGA) approach. The FGA is more commonly used in the electronic businesses field. The FGA is an approach which can be defined as a methodology by which enterprises, processes, and systems functions are compared and evaluated to arrive at matches (fits) or mismatches (gaps) (Pol & Paturkar, 2011; Li, Yen, & Cheng, 2008; Davis, Siau, & Dhenuvakonda, 2003). Basically, the FGA aim is not to provide solutions, its aim is to assess the status of a certain process or program. After that, suggestion for solutions, if needed, can be identified from the literature.

This project adapted this methodology to serve its objective. This is in order to identify how the FPDP impacted the faculty attitude, knowledge, and behaviors. In fact, by comparing the current status of SoN's faculty who attended the FPDP with the desired status to be achieved, as listed in the FPDP objectives, we can determine if the program achieved its objectives or not. Keep in mind that, the FPDP soul objective was to prepare the faculty for a quality transition toward the BL. In other terms, the FPDP's soul objective was to impact the attended facility's attitudes, knowledge and behaviors in a positive way toward the BL.

The questions in the study's questionnaire were designed in a multiple choices form; each question's answer included four choices. Third and fourth choices, in each question's answer, presented the desired project outcome. This design had been reviewed and approved by a data analysis specialist. The study's results, stemmed from the integration of all the questionnaire questions' answers, were presented in the study's FGA three diagrams which showed the change in the faculty's attitude, behavior, and knowledge separately.

9. Findings and Discussion

The first part of the analysis process was focused on the change of the SoN faculty's attitude due to FPDP program. The trend of the gathered data showed a change ranked between 44.44% and 88.89% toward the FPDP objectives' complete achievement (Figure 1). Thus, the faculty's responses denoted a change in their attitude toward BL, due to FPDP, in significant positive manner.

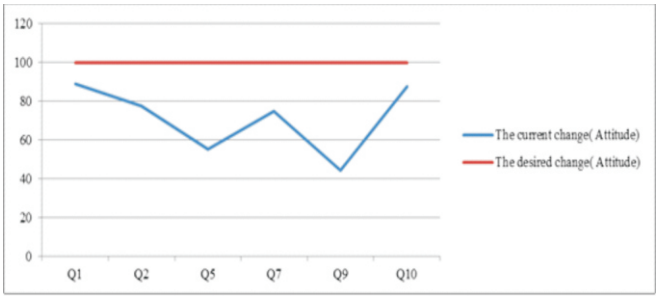

Figure 1. The project FGA diagram for comparing SoN faculty's attitude change due to FPDP comparing with FPDP targeted change

The second part of the analysis process was interested in the change of the SoN faculty's behavior due to FPDP. The trend of the gathered data showed a change ranked between 0.0% and 66.67%. This is toward the FPDP objectives' complete achievement (Figure 2). The faculty's responses denoted a change in their behavior toward the BL in significance positive manner, due to FPDP, in question four and nine. However, the faculty's responses denoted no change in their behavior toward BL, due to FPDP, in question three.

In fact, question three which was 'How do you assess your scholarly outcome in the shape of research publications in terms of the BL, and after completing the FPDP course?' received a lot of comments within the text box in the questionnaire. This text box was added for the reason of receiving any possible comments from the participants that may enlighten the analysis toward any possible hidden issues. Some of those comments were "I have completed the research but not published the paper yet" (participant 1); and "Our team has completed the research, currently, we are in the process of writing the paper" (participant 6). Thus, in the light of these comments, it can be said that, the work is in progress towards achieving the required scholarly outcome in research publications from the FPDP. Keep in

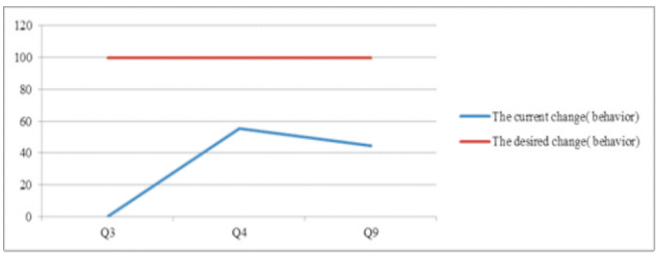

Figure 2. The project FGA diagram for comparing SoN faculty's behavior change due to FPDP comparing with FPDP targeted change

mind that, the FPDP was just finished a few months ago at the time of collecting the data for this project, thus it is acceptable that the scholarly outcome in the shape of research publications had not been finalized yet.

The third part of the analysis process was interested in the change of the SoN faculty's knowledge due to FPDP. The trend of the gathered data showed a change ranked between 33.33% and 55.56% towards the FPDP objectives' complete achievement (Figure 3). Thus, the faculty's responses denoted a change in their knowledge toward BL, due to FPDP, in significant positive manner.

The findings of this project toward the change of the faculty's attitude, knowledge, and behavior align with the findings of the available studies in the literature. Graff (2008) stated that "Extensive articles have been written about the value and need for faculty development. Furthermore and from the reviewed literature within this project, Ali et al. (2005) study's results suggested that, there is a need for organizing continuous educational programs regarding the BL for the facility, in order to improve their skills and abilities to perform a quality BL. Moreover, Cuellar (2002) asserted that well-prepared faculty and administrators will play the most important role in assuring successful transition toward BL. Based on the above discussion, it is clear that this project stands in a supporting position for the existing knowledge in the literature. Furthermore, this project achieves its goals toward clarifying how the FPDP affects the SoN faculty's attitude, behavior, and knowledge. Through that, this evaluation project provides an objective evidence for the importance of the FPDP.

10. Recommendations

The findings of this evaluation project showed that the faculty in SON supported the importance of the FPDP. This is due to the positive role that the FPDP plays in improving their attitude, knowledge and behaviors regarding BL. Depending on these findings, it seems proper to suggest that the FPDP should be considered as a successful approach to smooth the transition to the BL. Other Universities looking to start BL courses should consider the FPDP as an essential step and one of the best available options to ensure a successful transition to the BL.

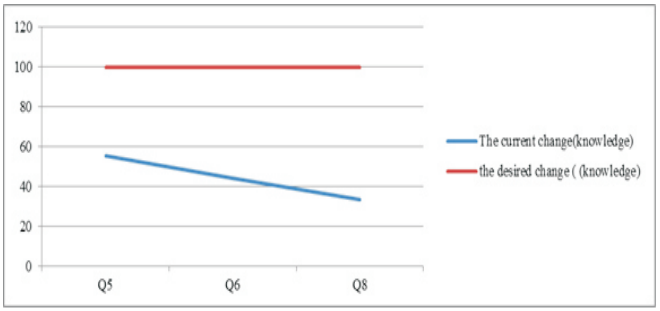

Figure 3: The project FGA diagram for comparing SoN faculty's knowledge change due to FPDP comparing with FPDP targeted change

Conclusion

The BL programs have become very prevalent. The number of offered courses is continually increasing. The transition toward this new trend is happening very fast especially in nursing education. This holds potential weaknesses in the transition process. One of these weaknesses is the presence of less prepared faculty in the BL system. This study's purpose was to present an evaluation project for the FPDP in order to provide empirical evidence on its importance as a way to smooth the transition to the BL. The objective of this study was to provide other Universities looking to start BL courses with an example that can be utilized. The findings of this evaluation project showed that the faculty in SON supported the importance of the FPDP. Based on that, this study suggested that the FPDP should be considered as a successful approach to smooth the transition to the BL.

References

[1]. Ali, N. S., Hodson-Carlton, K., Ryan, M., Flowers, J., Rose, M. A., & Wayda, V. (2005). Online education: Needs Assessment for Faculty Development. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, Vol. *36*(1), pp. 32-38.

[2]. Alkin, M., C. , & Christie, C. A. ,(2004). *An evaluation theory tree*. In M. C. Alkin(Ed.) Evaluation roots (pp.12-65). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[3]. Coughian, M., Cronin, P., & Ryan, F. (2007). Step-by-Step Guide to Critiquing Research. *Part 1: Quantitative Research*. Vol.16(11), pp. 658-663.

[4]. Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (1st ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J:Pearson/ Merrill Prentice Hall.

[5]. Cuellar, N. (2002). The Transition From Classroom to Online Teaching. *Nursing Forum*, Vol. *37*(3), pp. 5-13. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6198.2002.tb01005.x

[6]. Davis, S. A., Siau, K., & Dhenuvakonda, K. (2003). A fit-gap analysis of e-business curricula vs. industry needs. *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 46(12), pp. 167-177. doi:10. 1145/953460.953497

[7]. Easton, Susan S. (2003). Clarifying the Instructor's Role in Online Distance Learning. *Communication Education*, Vol. 52(2): pp. 87-105

[8]. Fitzpatrick, J. L., Sanders, J. R., & Worthen, B. R. (2011). *Program Evaluation* (4th ed.). New Jersey, United States: Pearson.

[9]. Graff R. (2008). *Faculty perceptions of readiness to teach online*. University of Florida, Florida, USA. Retrieved from http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0022535/00001/pdf

[10]. Inman, Elliot, Michael Kerwin, and Larry Mayes (1999). Instructor and Student Attitudes Toward Distance Learning. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, Vol. 23, pp. 581-591.

[11]. Knapp, T. R. (1998). *Quantitative nursing research* (1st ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[12]. Li, E. Y., Yen, H. J., & Cheng, C. Y. (2008). A fit-gap analysis of e-business curricula and job demand in Taiwan and the US. *Computers & Education*, Vol. 51(1), pp. 969-987. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2007.09.013

[13]. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2009). *National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration: Designing Education Projects* (2nd ed.). Silver Spring, United States of America: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Retrieved from: http://www.oesd.noaa.gov/leadership/DEP_Manual_2ndEdt_Final.pdf

[14]. Pol, P., & Paturkar, M. (2011). *Infosys - White Papers | Business Application Services*. Retrieved from http://www.infosys.com/business- application -services/white- papers/Pages/index.aspx

[15]. Ryan, Marilyn, Kay Hodson Carlton, and Nagia S. Ali (2004). Reflection on the Role of Faculty in Distance Learning and Changing Pedagogies. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, Vol. 25(2), pp. 73-80.

[16]. Roberts, B. (1998). *Training via desktop*. *HR Magazine*, Vol. 43(9), pp. 98-104.

[17]. Totaro, M. W., Tanner, J. R., Noser, T., Fitzgerald, J. F., & Birch, R. (2005). Faculty Perceptions of Distance Education Courses: A Survey. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, Vol. *2*(7), pp. 13-20.

[18]. Van Der Velde, R. J., & Rawl, C. D. (2000). Building a faculty development institute: a Case study. *Online Journal of distance learning administration*. Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/distance/ojdla/fa1133/vanderveldee33.html.

[19]. Wood, M. J., Ross-Kerr, J. C., Brink, P. J. (2006). *Basic Steps in Planning Nursing Research: From Question to Proposal* 6th edition. Jones and Bartlett, USA.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Adham AlArbeed has a Master degree in Nursing from the Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan and a Bachelor degree in Nursing from Tishreen University in Syria. He was a nursing supervisor in Sweida health directorate in Syria;a nursing manger in Al Enaya private hospital in Syria:a nursing teacher in Sweida nursing school; a first aid instructor in the Middle East Safety and Security Institute at United Arab Emirates; and a nursing instructor in the affiliated nursing colleges for the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia.

Diala AL hakim is a Lecturer in the Syrian Private University. She has a Degree in Biology and a Masters in Human Genetics from George Mason University in the United States of America. Diala has a second Master's Degree from the American University of Beirut in Public Health. She was a teacher at the International School of Choueifat in Syria; a Lecturer at the Arab International University in Syria; and currently she is a lecturer at the Syrian Private University in Syria.