



Achievements and challenges: Understanding how students manage palliative care on-line higher education

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Introduction

On-line education offers flexible ways to develop new knowledge and participate in continuing professional development anytime, anywhere. It is becoming a common form of instruction in health for formal education and for continuing professional development.

However, it is known from the literature (Selim, 2004; Shih, Munoz & Sanchez, 2006; Garland & Noyes, 2004), student report and informal teacher observation that some students have more difficulty with the on-line environment.

Understanding issues associated with computer and internet use and the type of support needed to help students in addressing technical problems could be valuable in encouraging ongoing education.

Purpose of this analysis

This analysis is part of a broader study looking at the characteristics and performance of students undertaking on-line studies in palliative care. It is exploring how students managed and felt about on-line postgraduate studies.

Ethics approval was received from the Social and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee, Flinders University.

Sample and Analysis

All students enrolled in Semester 1 2008 units through Palliative and Supportive Services, Flinders University, were invited to participate in a study of factors associated with performance in on-line study. Eighty five students (41%) agreed.

This analysis is a qualitative thematic investigation of answers to the two open-ended questions included in the study:

We would like to know about any computing or internet problems you faced during the last semester. Please describe.

Is there anything else you think would help us understand how you feel about and manage on-line study?

These questions were posed at the beginning and end of the semester.

Characteristics of those participating in the study (N=85*)

Mean Age (SD)	45.9 years (8.6 years)
Gender	
Females	73/85 (86%)
Males	12/85 (14%)
Studied before on-line	34/84* (40%)
Currently working	82/84* (98%)
If working, computer at work	77/82 (94%)
If working, internet at work	69/82 (84%)
Computer at home	85/85 (100%)
Internet at home	84/85 (99%)
If home internet, broadband access	71/84 (85%)

*Not all participants answered all questions.

Results: Students' Feelings

Students wrote of their own feelings of isolation at studying by distance, nervousness of what would be expected of them and frustration at dealing with information technologies. However, students also wrote about increased feelings of confidence in scholarship and computing over time:

"As I am progressing with my study I am becoming more confident and probably am quicker when researching appropriate articles"

"Feelings of isolation initially but now quite confident"

Results: Scholarly & IT necessities

Some students wrote of their feelings of dread of computers but realised the positive contribution to the flexibility of learning and their increasing skill base:

"I find it very time consuming to find relevant information as well as trying to find relevant links, I can spend hours and still not get anything"

"I hate being in front of a computer. However, it has made study/ research/ writing and posting assignments so much more convenient and also I can do so much more from home"

Results: Technological know-how

Students wrote about their age as being a disadvantage having gone through school and undergraduate studies often without needing computing and information technology skills:

"Personally had I grown up with computers I may feel and be more knowledgeable. At 43 I feel very ill equipped to use such devices."

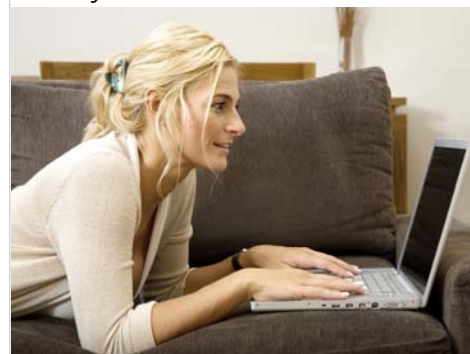
"Computers are scary"

Results: Staff and Peer Support

Students expressed the importance of having responsive staff and students around them – people who understand on-line media and students' issues:

"It was important to me when I first started to have simple instruction even about the basics. Then it was important for me to know that others felt as dumb as I did when I got it wrong. So the (on-line) chat were really helpful"

"I feel that there are variable levels of IT expertise amongst teaching staff . . . This impacts on the quality and delivery of subjects"



Conclusion

A wide range of factors influence students' attitudes and experience of on-line learning. Quality on-line education requires attention beyond curricula to incorporate information technology and on-line media issues.

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