

A CASE REPORT OF AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO HARNESSING HUMAN RESOURCES AT A NURSING SCHOOL IN BOTSWANA

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Abstract

The paper aims at sharing how human resources limitation drove collaborative teaching at an international level. In 2012, shortage of manpower in face-to face teaching prompted the nursing school to harness human resources outside the country to teach through an on-line mode. A gentlemen's agreement was made with a visiting Pharmacist from the USA to offer the course online as a community service gesture. The USA team consisted of five pharmacists while the Botswana team consisted of the head of school, a faculty member, and a clinical pharmacologist. The course offering was limited to exchange of written materials between students and the facilitators through e-mails. Interactive platforms were not possible as the facilitators could not access the university's learning/teaching tools. Five (5) students completed the course and passed; and all have since graduated. The course evaluation from both the facilitators' and the students' perspectives revealed both benefits and challenges.

Key words: Human resources shortage, Collaborative teaching, Innovation, Online teaching, Botswana

Background

The Master's degree programs of the nursing school offers both nursing core and other courses that though complementing nursing core, need to be offered by faculty in non-nursing disciplines. Such disciplines include public health, medicine, pharmacy, and others. The school has used both part-time lecturers employed by agencies outside the university (mainly government) and faculty from other departments within the university. Because the use of part-time lecturers requires financial resources, financial constraints have made it difficult to

continue employing them. However, because other university departments are as challenged by the high workloads for faculty as the nursing school is, often they have not been able to teach non-nursing core to nursing students.

Setting the stage

In 2012, the nursing school found itself at the dead-end after it had suspended offering a graduate level pharmacology course to family nurse practitioner students until the students had only one semester to graduate. Sourcing out lecturers locally to teach the course had proved futile. The medical school that usually provided assistance was equally short-staffed and was already offering undergraduate level pharmacology course to nursing students. The two schools then started brainstorming on solutions to the problem that was threatening to turn into a crisis as student's graduation would be delayed indefinitely. It so happened that at the time of the brainstorming, there was a visiting professor from USA at the medical school and he was approached to assist. Unfortunately, his time had elapsed and he was about to return home. Then the idea of online learning was explored. There were only five (5) students who were supposed to take the course, and this was seen as a manageable number

The visiting Professor presented two conditions: (a) He could try on-line course offering provided there would be a local person to coordinate the course offering, (b) he could not offer the course by himself as he had a demanding job. He asked for the course syllabus so that he could share that with his colleagues whom he could team up with to offer the course. Now the challenge was how the initiative would be financed. The nursing school had no finances for paying team members should they offer the course. In addition, the negotiators were not aware of any precedent cases that they could learn from. It was a relief for the nursing school to learn that the visiting professor was not thinking of payment. Rather, he was thinking of a voluntary work that his team would provide as community service.

The visiting professor went back to USA, assembled a team of five pharmacists, and provided feedback to the nursing school through the e-mail. A series of e-mails were exchanged between the nursing office and US professor. At one point, the nursing school re-considered its decision and took some time to get back to the Professor. This was after the latter had demanded a letter of commitment from the former. After some thoughtful reflection, a letter of commitment was written, and "voluntary work, work without pay" was emphasized; lest the school might be making promises it could hardly fulfill. The e-mail exchanges started flowing again; and after consulting with students, a gentlemen's agreement was reached between the nursing school and the US professor. Approaching students was not easy but they needed to be informed about the situation that the school was in. At first, the students were not really excited about the on-line course offering. However, they offered to give it a try. The school considered that masters' degree students were better positioned, than undergraduate students to engage in an on-line mode of learning. (Chen et al. 2008) reported that senior distance learners perceived the learning environment to be more supportive than the in-house mode. Being non university employees, the facilitators did not have access to the Blackboard e-learning system that has several tools that could have been used to enhance active learning and students' interaction.

Case description

The structure

The structure consisted of the personnel who were participating in coordinating and offering the course as well as their relevant qualifications and positions within their respective institutions. The Botswana team was made up of the chairperson of the nursing school, a family nurse practitioner faculty member, and a clinical pharmacologist specialist from the medical school. The USA team consisted of five pharmacists from both clinical practice and education. The other resources were the materials such as computers, the Internet, and the time available for faculty and students. All the masters' students had computers and the Internet was available around campus. Besides computers and the Internet, a space was arranged for introducing the course and for sharing the new modality and the roles of different players, as well as for evaluation of the course offering at a later time. The course offering did not demand much material resources from the school. However, the coordinating family nurse practitioner faculty member had to take that role over and above other teaching and non-teaching responsibilities. Expenses incurred by students mainly involved printing of course materials from facilitators sent by e-mail. At no point were telephone facilities, which could have been expensive, used.

The process

The process concerned various activities that faculty and students were engaged in during the teaching learning process. The nursing and the medical schools collaborated with a pharmacist from the USA to explore modalities of meeting the needs of students who were already enrolled in a family nurse practitioner program. A dialogue was initiated that led to the formation of a team of five pharmacists in the USA to offer the course online. The on-line course offering was coordinated by a faculty member from the nursing school whereas a faculty member from the medical school was charged with overseeing the content area for contextual relevance. Communication between all parties involved, including the students, was kept open throughout the period. The facilitators engaged the students through giving case study assignments for analysis and relevant articles for specific topics. Being non university employees, the facilitators did not have access to the Blackboard e-learning system that has several tools that could have been used to enhance active learning and students' interaction. This left the school with no more options but to rely on the use of e-mail to facilitate learning. Students were given the liberty to communicate directly with the facilitators for any individual needs. The opportunity was envisaged to be a great one for knowledge sharing from international pharmacology experts. Coughlin and Lesley (2009) pointed out that as in any learning space, diversity of ideas, experience and perspective are resources for a learning community.

The outcome

The outcome addresses whether or not the objectives of the course were achieved, merits and challenges of the modality, as well as recommendations for future work. The students' performance on the course and the responses to an open-ended evaluation tool that had both the facilitators' version and the students' version were used to come up with the summary of outcomes of the initiative. Students appreciated that the on-line modality provided them with an opportunity for self-directed learning. However, when students were asked to compare the on-line offering that they had just gone through and the face-to-face modality that they were used to, they rated the face-to-face higher, arguing that it offered an opportunity for immediate clarification where there were misunderstandings and that it could stimulate discussions to integrate theory and practice. Students recommended a combination of face-to-

face and on-line learning as the best approach as it could facilitate tapping from the advantages of each approach. The students' position was consistent with prior research findings (An et al. 2008; Chen et al. 2008; Dixson,2010). Another recommendation from students was that the learning be contextualized through the use of local scenarios.

Initially, the facilitators had some anxiety related to the new undertaking because one could not tell if everything would run smoothly. However, a well-thought out planning gradually dissipated the anxiety. Such provisions as the team approach and a local course coordinator were the major strengths of the planning. Local coordination was important for keeping lines of communication with students open while the team approach made it easier for the facilitators to do their regular work and offer the course at the same time. The facilitators appreciated the students' motivation for completing assignments and their good performance on such assignments. They were a little disappointed though that the students failed to be as active as they had expected and that their performance on examinations was just above average. Facilitators recommended that future course offering be improved through the incorporation of discussion boards, web-conferencing, and case-based approach. They also recommended organization of content in blocks in order that it could be manageable considering the time within which the materials must be covered.

Recommendations

Future offerings could be improved by incorporating active student's involvement and increasing the use of local case studies for contextual relevance. Dixson (2010) noted that it is important that instructors create active learning situations in which students can meaningfully apply what they are learning. Other types of social media such as WhatsApp groups could enhance students' interactions. However, it needs to be noted that the students had already taken face-to-face classes together and that as such, they were probably engaged in cooperative learning.

Conclusion

The semester-long project reported here was a collaborative initiative to respond to a human resources situation that needed an immediate attention. It was risky because it had not been done before and it involved students, both local and international, who expected to complete their program of study as scheduled. Though its evaluation pointed to a number of challenges, it was largely positive. More importantly, all the five students who were enrolled passed the course and graduated. The initiative simultaneously addresses the university's value for global partnerships and its learning and teaching policy's demands for innovative teaching strategies.

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