On-Line Discussion Forums:
New Platforms to Supplement Face-to-Face Professional Development at a Comprehensive University

Zwelijongile Gaylard Baleni

Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa, 5099
E-mail: zbaleni@wsu.ac.za

ABSTRACT Academic staff development has become a challenge due to academics' tight schedule and workload at University. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the level of participation and perception of effectiveness and value among participants in using online discussion forums in Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The study adopted a mixed method approach. Instead of a normal five day face-to-face workshop, it was conducted over three days as other areas were covered through the discussion forum. Thirty lecturers with access to Blackboard were invited to participate in an on-line discussion forum on an assessment topic. Data was collected through monitoring the on-line discussion forum for five weeks and a questionnaire which was sent by e-mail. Data was analysed through SPSS. Employers' experienced relative advantage as their employees would have minimal work time loss and no travel time loss. The findings of this study suggest that Blackboard has a potential to become a widespread medium for continuing professional staff development at university. The on-line discussion forum was found to be observable, trialable, valuable and acceptable to supplement face-to-face workshops. It is recommended for further use to supplement face-to-face staff development workshops at university with room for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Due to constant change in the working conditions and due to the impact that information and communication technologies (ICT) have in practice, lecturers are in continuous need of staff development. The teaching-learning pedagogy is upgraded with change of time and needs of the curriculum therefore university lecturers have to be kept abreast of all developments that enhance their teaching skills in line with students' needs. Research on professional education indicates that the capacity to support collaboration, reflection and professional development as well as to overcome barriers of time and place makes the use of on-line forums a potentially useful and cost effective innovation (Anderson 1996). However, in spite of this research face-to-face learning environments are still generally assumed to be better than on-line forums to support such collaborative learning processes (Harasim et al. 1995). Harasim et al. (1995) claim there is no evidence to support this assumption. The debate continues to rage on.

Fundamentally however, it really does not matter what the research indicates as the best method for learning when determining whether or not on-line discussion forums will be used in continuing professional education. What matters is whether or not the participants perceive the forum as a valued process. If they do they will be more likely to adopt it (Rogers 1995) as a platform for supplementing continuing professional development. Specifically if innovations such as on-line forums have certain perceived attributes the probability of adoption will be greater (Rogers 1995). The perceived attributes include the perception by potential adopters that the innovation has relative advantage is not overly complex is compatible with existing values and customs can be tried on a limited basis and has observable results. Given this rationale the purpose of this study was to assess the potential for adoption of on-line discussion forums for supplementing continuing professional education as it relates to the perceived value to the participants with an authentic on-line discussion forum trial.

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) being a multi-campus institution poses a challenge to face-to-face academic staff development. When workshops have to be conducted lecturers have to be collected into one central place and such bears financial expenses like transport and accommodation. Furthermore, lecturers have to be away from their classes for the duration of the workshop. The question is: How can the staff development unit achieve its goal of professionalising academics with least disruption of the academic programme? With the introduction of Blackboard called WiSeUp at WSU as virtual learning environment (VLE) an option

was seen to initiate online discussion forums. This raises other questions: is it practical to use discussion forums on WiSeUp for staff development? What will be the lecturers' attitudes? This article is trying to respond to these questions.

Professional Staff Development

Evaluating on-line discussion forums as a vehicle to supplement professional development depends upon a definition and purpose of continuing professional education. Staff development is an umbrella term for developing the capacity of higher education staff to fulfil their professional roles effectively; this includes training, educating, capacity-building and individual consultation (HEQC 2005).

Globally, changes in the environment in which institutions of higher education operate have led to pressures to change approaches to teaching and learning and ways in which it is managed. Technology has also revolutionized learning and teaching. Academic staff members are now compelled to acquaint themselves with effective ways of engaging technology for learning. The provision of staff development for teaching is now critical if lecturers are to become knowledgeable about new educational theories and methods and apply them effectively to their changing contexts. Higher education lecturers now require knowledge and skills in curriculum planning and design multi- method delivery, for example, blended learning, teamwork learning theories, assessment etc.

Staff development is primarily an institutional responsibility and is operationalised within an institutional context; however it is increasingly influenced by national policies and global trends. Institutions respond to these demands and take up national policies in different ways depending on their missions, contexts, institutional culture, resources etc. It should be an integral part of an institution's human resource development strategy and practice rather than an isolated optional activity. It should provide opportunities for training education or capacity-building in teaching practice (which includes curriculum design and development and assessment) in higher education studies research academic management as well as information technology integration. However, given that institutional performance is ultimately dependent on staff effectiveness all South African Higher Education institutions should provide resources and incentives for their staff to meet their own professional goals and to contribute to the realization of institutional missions.

The WSU context is that the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) has been mandated with academic staff development. CLTD mission is to "promote excellence in learning and teaching by providing integrated and specialized professional expertise and services for all faculties towards the improvement of the institutional learning and teaching culture". Goal 4 of WSU Learning and Teaching Strategy also mandates the centre's staff development unit, that is, Continuous Professional Development unit to "organise and guide faculties towards professional development".

According to Cervero (1988), facilitators of professional development activities have a responsibility not only to provide information but also to assist professionals in developing a critical and analytical way of considering knowledge to provide opportunities for professionals to practice using their judgment skills and to assist professionals in developing new knowledge based on practice. To achieve these goals, professionals seek to identify and solve work-related problems through the use of new and better systems of action. The purpose of professional development activities then is to provide an opportunity for professionals to improve the way they increase their unique body of knowledge through a critical and analytical process of acquiring practicing and adopting new knowledge. How best to achieve this purpose according to Cervero (1988) is through the rich resources of practical knowledge acquired by other professionals. When professionals search for similarities from across the profession it can "yield a fresh exchange of ideas, practices and solutions to common problems" (Cervero 1988: 15). The best way to facilitate this kind of learning is through small discussion groups, staff meetings, conferences and workshops using such instructional methods as brainstorming, analogies, case studies, simulations, role playing and reflection (Cervero 1988; Nowlen 1988; Levine 2007).

However, there are professional development activities that are at the very least non-cost effective and may also be inappropriate and per-

haps even discriminatory. For example, face-to-face discussion groups would be ineffective and inappropriate for the professional who is hearing impaired. Physical disabilities are just one example of barriers to participating in professional development activities. Other examples include lack of access financial constraints (Anderson 1996) and the two most frequently expressed barriers to participating in adult education: time and place. A possible solution to overcoming these major barriers is the increased use of distributed and asynchronous learning technologies such as on-line discussion forums.

Online Discussion Forums

The research literature on online discussion in learning has proliferated recently with many authors documenting the advantages of online discussion in teaching and learning. One of the widely cited advantages of online discussion is its increased flexibility due to removing time and space restrictions of the typical classroom setting (Harasim et al. 1995; Caracelli and Greene 1993) cited by Warschauer (1997). The asynchronous capabilities of online discussion allow learners to have more time to think "deeply" before giving their opinions (Moore 2002). The interactive nature of online discussion helps promote discussion among learners creating a forum for the creation of knowledge (Gay et al. 1999). Asynchronous discussion boards provide an opportunity for participants in online courses to engage with course content and extend their learning through the process of discussion (Blumfield et al. 1996). In an online discussion board, participants can reflect on previous postings and develop a thoughtful response or analysis of course content in an environment that can be less intimidating than face-to-face classroom discussions (Alvarez-Torres 2001). Through online discussion education and learning can be transformed from a one way instructional approach to a highly interactive approach to learning (Warschauer 1997). Online discussion can facilitate collaborative learning when learners are actively engaged in sharing information and perspectives through interaction with other learners (Harasim 1989). According to Warschauer (1997: 472)" online discussions provide a perfect forum for an academic discourse which promotes increased student engagement critical analysis and

reflection and the social construction of knowledge."

On-line forums are an example of a method that could satisfy these needs in a cost-effective manner. Specifically, on-line forums provide (1) freedom from time constraints (participants can participate when and if they choose); (2) time for reflection (participants decide when and if they choose to participate); (3) opportunities to research and back up assertions; and (4) support for cost effective global communication (Anderson 1996). Well-developed virtual conferences can "create a stimulating and supportive learning environment without forcing participants to congregate at a particular location or time" (Anderson 1996: 2).

According to Levine (2007: 68) the discussion forum plays a key role in enhancing the educational experience. They promote "constructivist learning" promoting active learning where learners construct knowledge instead of acquiring it passively. Specifically, they provide freedom from time constraints (participants can participate when and if they choose); time for reflection (participants decide when and if they choose to participate); opportunities to research and back up assertions; and support for cost effective global communication. Online discussions allow greater student control and contribution unlike discussions in a face-to-face environment where the instructor's contribution dominates. Finally, learning activities that introduce participants to potentially useful learning and communications technologies provide a valuable training and exposure function.

METHODOLOGY

Sequential mixed research design was used where the researcher used triangulation to obtain different perspectives of the lecturers on using online discussion forums. The researcher conducted a five day workshop on "qualities in e-assessment' for three days and all PowerPoint presentations were posted on WiSeUp. The other two day material was covered over the online discussion forum. Thirty (30) lecturers were registered as students on the course "qualities in e-assessment". A discussion forum was created and made available to all. Questions were then posted for discussion. They exchanged ideas and views whilst the researcher monitored the activity and guided when necessary.

Data was collected after five weeks. The researcher recorded group participation, that is, who participated how often. Then a survey tool questionnaire was developed using the theory of perceived attributes (adoption, compatibility, complexity, observability and trialability) and distributed to them via e mail. The questionnaire included both quantitative measures (a Likert scale) and qualitative measures (written statements of the participants' perspectives). The questionnaire clearly indicated that participants were free to respond or not and more over their responses were treated with secrecy and anonymity. Data was analysed statically using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS).

RESULTS

In the 1st week of observations only 5 lecturers logged in on WiSeUp. Of the 5 participants, two had questions, 3 had comments. During the 2nd week after the researcher posted a few questions and had sent an e mail, activity increased to 25 lecturers logging on. In the 3rd week 10 lecturers shared their classroom experience. In the 4th week much activity took place. 25 lecturers shared their experiences and responded to their colleagues' comments and questions. In the last week most lecturers were consistent in logging in and sharing classroom activity. Only 5 lecturers never participated in the online discussion forum. The questionnaire was designed using the Likert scale and written responses.

Some of the questions asked and their responses are shown in Table 1.

During the semi- structured interviews with some lecturers, it transpired that they do support these discussion forums but with some reservations. Comments like "WiSeUp was user friendly". "Online discussion forums gave them an opportunity to engage colleagues more on areas covered in the workshop". Some lecturers even appreciated this innovation as less time was wasted away from class as they could discuss some classroom practices in the comfort of their offices and also integrate theory into classroom practice with the guidance and sharing with colleagues on the job not theoretically.

There were some challenges also like some had no computers in their offices while others complained that Internet access was interfering with WiSeUp use as it was slow or disrupted. Some lecturers felt with the workload they have they have no time to work on WiSeUp. Another big challenge was the computer skills level that they had to browse around WiSeUp especially in locating such icons like the discussion forum.

DISCUSSION

As noted in the results section most participants felt that the information exchanged during the on-line forum was not as good as information that would have been exchanged in a face-to-face forum and felt more limited in their

Table 1: Lecturers' responses

	SA	A	NS	D	SD
The information exchanged during the on-line forum was better than what would have occurred in a face-to-face forum.		5	5	15	5
Getting to know and talking with other participants was easier with on-line forums than with face-to-face forums.		5	5	20	
I was more limited in my ability to communicate (discuss. ask questions) with other participants than I would have been in a face-to-face forum.		20	5	5	
Can discussion forums be used to supplement face-to-face workshops.	10	10	5	5	
Using emerging learning technologies such as this on-line forum. is important to me personally.	15	10		5	
The technical skills needed to participate in this forum are skills I use in my job.	10	13	2	5	
On-line forums are becoming a valued platform by my colleagues for continuing professional education.	15	10		5	
The overall feeling of my colleagues is that on-line forums are of little value.	5	3	2		20
I liked the way the on-line forum was structured.	15	5		5	5
I had no trouble navigating in the on-line forum.	10	10	5	5	
I had no technical problems getting on-line to the forum.	10	10	5	5	
The opportunity to try this on-line forum was beneficial.	15	5	5	5	
This on-line forum was a waste of my time.		5		5	20
As a result of participating in the on-line forum. I no longer have any uncertainties about the technical skills required to participate in this type of activity.	15	5	5	5	

ability to communicate (discuss, ask questions) with other participants than in a face-to-face forum. Based on this data, it needs to be determined if some improvements can facilitate the movement of on-line communication from reactive to fully interactive.

Based on the data from the on-line survey the online forum appears to hold little or no relative advantage compared to face-to-face forums with regard to socialization and ability to communicate. This might be caused by the fact that discussion forums are new to lecturers; most of them are used to the traditional face-to-face interaction. However, the participants are not the only ones to whom relative advantage of the innovation must be assessed. Employers for example of the participants would likely experience relative advantage as their employees would have minimal work time loss and no travel time loss. Another example of a group that might experience relative advantage of on-line forums would be the sponsors of the forum i.e. facilitators of the workshops who also have no travel or accommodation expenses.

This is considerably less than the combined travel and session time that would be required for a three day face-to-face gathering in a central location. It must be kept in mind that participants were spread across Walter Sisulu University a geographic distance that necessitates two to three hour drive time for most participants to attend any face-to-face workshops. Thus, there may be relative advantage in terms of time committed by the participants. The researcher was also impressed with the extent of expert opinion provided by the participants. The researcher observed participants building upon the knowledge of others indicating additional relative advantage over individual consultation. A final area of relative advantage was the value of having participants brings not only their thoughts but those of colleagues, spouses and others with whom the participants interacted during the five weeks of the forum.

The results of the survey indicated that most participants felt the on-line discussion forum was compatible with their working conditions and preferences, the structure was straightforward and made it easy to post comments and the opportunity to experiment resulted in less uncertainty (trialability). If in fact those who organize, support and require forum participation perceive relative advantage widespread adoption of on-line forums will likely occur in the near future. However, significant numbers of participants may continue to find the experience less than satisfactory at least when compared to face-to-face forums.

CONCLUSION

The survey and active participation data used in this study led the researcher to the following conclusions.

Firstly, the forum's goals of enhancing the participants' knowledge of both the process of on-line discussions and understanding of issues (related to increasing social access to learning technologies) were achieved. Ninety- five percent of the participants who responded to the survey indicated that the forum was beneficial; 93% recommend continued use of online discussion forums.

Secondly, the framing of the research question around adoption of innovation research indicates that on-line forums have a very good chance of being adopted as an effective and functional means of consultation and collaborative work with professionals. Based on the results of the research this type of consultative and group activity is perceived by the participants and the forum's organizers as adding value to policy development enhancing networking opportunities and contributing to continuing education for professionals. The question that needs further research then is how can higher education institutions adopt the online discussion as a means of communicating moving away from face-to-face workshops? Specifically, is there an art to the facilitator's role whereby facilitation skills can move on-line communication from the transmission of information to social reality?

Academics support use of WiseUp but are still skeptical. The positive responses from the academics concur with what literature supports as good online forum practices like: - freedom from time constraints (participants can participate when and if they choose); time for reflection (participants decide when and if they choose to participate. Challenges like ability to exchange ideas and communication should be expected as the online discussion forums are new to lecturers they are used to the face-to-face interactions, that is, being next to warm bodies. As technology is used more often, lecturers will also be familiar with it and they will find simpler and faster mechanisms to communicate through online discussion even outside the workshops,

for example, subject matter sharing. Challenges indicated are not eternal they will be overcome in time.

The findings of this study suggest that Wise Up has a potential to become a widespread medium for continuing professional staff development at WSU. The online discussion forum was found to be observable, trialable and relatively easy to use compared to face-to-face workshops but it was perceived as less satisfying.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Just like in the face-to-face workshops discussions, online discussions also have advantages and disadvantages. For future use of online discussion forums, the researcher recommends that:

- HEIs should adopt online discussion forums to supplement face-to-face workshops but in piece-meal as they are cost effective.
- Lecturers should be trained on basic computer literacy skills so that they only concentrate on discussion not computer techniques
- Professional development should address the expectations regarding questions. participant engagement and facilitator behaviour on the discussion forum
- Facilitators' knowledge of course content or familiarity with the course could influence level of questions. Therefore facilitators must be trained and provided support during the time that they are facilitating a course to ensure that they have the capacity to support participants' engagement in the discussion forums.

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