Wikis for Women's Health: Social Constructivist Analysis of the Effectiveness of Online Collaborative Spaces for Reflective Learning

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Abstract

Public Health undergraduate students studying the unit Women’s Health undertook a teaching and learning exercise which required them to learn to create and use a wiki website for reflective learning purposes. The Women’s Health wiki provided an online shared, collaborative, and creative space wherein the students’ perceptions of women's health issues could be discussed, reflected upon, and debated. We analysed the content developed on the Women’s Health wiki using a social constructivist theoretical framework and provided a theoretical model for how the wiki worked to aid reflective and critical thinking, as well as developing technological and communicative skills amongst students.

Background and Rationale

The use of online pedagogy within higher education institutions is increasing (Sarkar, 2012), with Information Communication Technology (ICT) mediums used to promote interactive environments and new approaches to learning, including a broad engagement of Web 2.0 platforms (Alexander & Levine, 2008, Carroll 2014). Web 2.0 technologies provide greater independence, collaboration and autonomy among students, promote self-learning, stimulate students to delve deeper into issues presented to them and keep students interested in the learning process (Alexander & Levine, 2008; Gokcearslan & Ozcan, 2011; Virkus & Bamigbola 2011). Web 2.0 programs are also seen as playing a significant role in empowerment of young adult women to make more informed decisions on issues that affect them (Carroll & McCarthy, 2010; Umrani & Ghadially, 2003).

In light of the evidence showing firstly, that while women are active users of existing technologies – including using ICTs (mobile apps, social media, government websites), they are less confident in producing and creating it, and secondly, that technological skills are important for academic and career enhancement and professional opportunity, public health students studying the in the final year of the Public Health degree, and who had selected the unit Women’s Health, undertook a teaching and learning exercise which required them to learn to create and use a wiki website for reflective learning purposes. A wiki, an example of Web 2.0 tool, is a group of web pages that allows users to add content, similar to a discussion forum or blog, whilst permitting others to edit and provide feedback (Caverly & Ward, 2008; Gokcearslan & Ozcan, 2011; Carroll et al, 2014). Each student created their own wiki page on a shared wiki set up for Women’s Health. The wiki provided an online shared, collaborative, and creative space wherein the students’ perceptions of women's health issues could be discussed, reflected upon, and debated.

The Wiki Assessment

The aim of the wiki assessment was to encourage students to use their critical and reflective thinking skills for the theoretical analysis of women’s health issues using feminist theory.
The Assessment Task

Students were invited to join the Women’s Health Wiki in Wikispaces for the unit. They followed the steps outlined during the lecture to generate their own wiki page at this website and enter their reflections weekly.

Reflection of Women’s Health Issues on the Wiki

Students were required to write around 250 words in their wiki every week on the lecture content. Students were free to make notes in class during the lecture directly onto these Wikis or can make entries after the class in their own time. Students were encouraged to question the content of the lecture being presented. The weekly wiki entries were written informally. The entries were designed to encourage student to engage with the work being presented in a reflective manner as the semester progresses. Students were encouraged to question and critique the content of weekly women’s health lectures. Students can also add references, weblinks, online resources or images/songs/films that they think will augment the content studies that week. The idea is to help students to learn together, to share ideas and to ask the hard questions about the complex women’s health topics covered in the unit while developing technological skills. Students were also required to comment on the reflective notes of at least one other student.

Data Collection

The students’ weekly wiki entries were observed closely by the unit’s teaching staff throughout the duration of the assessment. Comments by teaching staff sought to encourage and foster new ideas along with greater depths of understanding and critical thinking. Students were therefore assessed on their use of lecture content, tutorial material, observations from media and empirical evidence as the basis for their reflections.

Analysis: Social Constructivist Framework

The social constructivist approach initiated by Vygotsky (1978) and further developed by Jonasson (1994). Vygotsky (1978) developed these ideas into a theoretical platform for learning that transformed the notion of the teacher/lecturer as a ‘transmitter of knowledge’ to a role that provided spaces for interactions that allowed learning to occur; between teacher and student, and between student and student. Jonasson further developed this theoretical basis of interactive learning into the following four stages of critical thinking development.

1) Complexities in representations across contexts.
2) Critical evaluation in real world scenarios.
3) Reflective practice based on experience.
4) Collaborative co-construction of knowledge.

Findings from the Women’s Health Reflective Learning Wiki Diaries

All (about 360) diary entries were analysed using Jonasson’s (1994) four conceptual categories described in the theoretical section of this paper. The following sections itemise and highlight the most pertinent examples of where these learning processes occurred. All of these are direct quotes from the students’ learning reflective diary entries on the Women’s Health Wiki.
• **Complexities in Representations across Contexts**

This describes the process wherein students start to recognise complexity and contradiction in how concepts and people are represented in different settings. In this case, the students focused on how this applies to the portrayal of gender in the media. The following quotes on the wiki most strongly exemplify where this learning process occurred:

An untitled drawing by Fons Van Woerkom. In this picture, a foetus and umbilical cord are a ball and chain, imprisoning and immobilizing a desperate woman. In my opinion, this symbolises the urgent plight for equal treatment of women as working mothers in our culture.

• **Critical Evaluation in Real World Scenarios**

This theoretical category highlights the process wherein the students apply theory to evidence; they bring together new theoretical concepts and find examples of where these can be found in everyday real world practice. The following quotes on the wiki most strongly exemplify where this learning process occurred:

A study showed that delaying the first and second birth later in life among working and non-working women in most of European countries is positively linked with the decline in total fertility rate (Bratti & Tatsiramos, 2008). Lack of family friendly organisations, cultural influences and socioeconomic status are the potential socio-cultural factor producing a delay of motherhood in the most of European countries (Bratti & Tatsiramos, 2011). In Australia, a report showed that the percentage of first birth to women aged 35 and over is increased %10.2 in 2000 compared to 1990.

• **Reflective Practice Based on Experience**

Students combine new theory and evidence and bring it back to their own experiences. This is a crucial part of constructivist reflective learning as the students seek and locate stories from one another and insights from themselves to apply their learning and ground it in a sustained new level of knowledge. The following quotes on the wiki most strongly exemplify where this learning process occurred:

Even more interesting is that I too seem to care about my appearance. What are people saying about my body? Do I pass the test of being adequate? If there is such a thing as the ‘perfect female body’, how do I match up?

• **Collaborative Co-Construction of Knowledge**

This is where an interactive and continuous dialogue occurs wherein the learning processes are situated and developed for all those involved in the interactions. The following quotes on the wiki most strongly exemplify where this learning process occurred:

Wow, great entry. I really agree with your point, how much of what has happened to us as women has happened because we have let it? I see so many young girls totally degrade themselves to try and impress the opposite sex.
Discussion

We found that students’ learning was enhanced in four key areas as a result of the reflective diaries exercise. Firstly, they developed a complex understanding of how gender is presented in the media. This complexity meant that they understood that agreements as well as contradictions between gender portrayals all contribute to the social construction of gender in any given social context. Secondly, they applied theoretical paradigms and new concepts to evidence from the literature, government sources, and their own observations in ‘real world scenarios’. This gave them the opportunity to ground their critical thinking in concrete, scientific examples of the new concepts. Thirdly, they were given time, space, and creative licence to apply both theory and evidence to reflect on how they had experienced this personally, or seen it happen anecdotally throughout their lifecourse. Finally, they were encouraged to discuss diary entries with one another to ‘compare notes’ and provide feedback on differences and similarities in the learning processes. This final set of interactions is crucial in aiding a truly constructivist and sustained approach to learning that allows students to continue to travel with their ‘learning tools’ into new contexts wherein they can apply the same processes of critical thought to more obtain a more sophisticated insight to new phenomenon in future.

Questions

1. Can shared ‘cyber spaces’ be occupied by undergraduate students to improve students’ critical thinking skills and what are the processes via which this occurs?

2. Does the interactive process of sharing and comparing assessment items generate collaboration and competition amongst undergraduate students wherein more critically informed arguments are made about public/popular media sources?

3. What are the implications of this assessment trial for future teaching practices in undergraduate courses, especially those utilising reflective learning assessment pieces?

References


