Faculty Publications and Presentations   School of Education

2010

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Recommended Citation

Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw and Richard Silvey. "Facilitating collaboration: Using a wiki for group projects" Journal of Human Services 30.1 (2010): 71-75.

Using a Wiki for Collaboration and Learning In Helping Profession Education: A Pilot Study

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Introduction

Collaboration and consultation are considered essential skills for every human service (HMSV) professional (Dinkmeyer, Carlson, & Dinkmeyer, 2000). HMSV educators are, thus, challenged to identify teaching strategies and methods to assist students in developing these two crucial skills. The implementation of cooperative computer-mediated tasks, such as using the computer to produce a collaborative product and using Web-based collaborative technologies, such as wikis, blogs, and discussion forums, have been shown to promote social interaction and learning in some higher education courses (Liaw, Chen, & Huang, 2008; Underwood & Underwood, 1999). This fact suggests that computer mediated learning environments and the employment of Web-based technologies may provide HMSV educators with unique opportunities to assist students in cultivating not only their personal knowledge, but also essential professional collaboration skills (Ahern et al., 2006).

Currently, limited research exists about the use of web-based technologies for learning and collaboration in HMSV education. Researchers and practitioners indicate that helping profession education lags behind other disciplines in both its use of and research about web-based technologies (Karper, Robinson ,& Casado-Kehoe, 2005). Additional studies are needed in this area. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore the use of a web-based technology, a wiki, as a medium for learning and for collaboration in the training process of helping profession students. Since the existing literature indicates that web-based technologies will play an increasingly important role in mental health treatment (Wolf-Branigin, 2009), the present study also aims to explore students' attitudes toward using wiki technology in their future careers.

The Pilot Study

In the spring of 2010, a pilot study was conducted to investigate graduate students' perceptions of using a wiki for a course management system and as a collaborative workspace for group projects. The pilot sample for the study consisted of 22 students enrolled in one section of a hybrid course, Consultation, Coordination, and Referral. The sample consisted of 6 (27.3%) males and 16 (72.7%) females. Thirteen (59.1%) of the participants were Caucasian, 7 (31.8%) of the participants were African American, and 2 (9%) of the participants classified themselves as other. All students were completing a master's degree in human services or counseling. The hybrid course was offered in a one-week intensive format. Students participated in a five-day on-campus course for 8 hours a day; students also completed both pre- and post-intensive tasks on the internet via the course wiki. LiveText™ was used for assignment submission and grading. Only one participant had previously used a wiki.

Prior to the beginning of the course, the instructor created a wiki using wikispaces.com. A wiki is a website in which any individual can add and modify information using a "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG) editor. A well-known example of a wiki is Wikipedia. Students were invited to join the class wiki as contributors via e-mail. Upon acceptance, students were able to view and to contribute to the class wiki. When students first visited the wiki, they could view the homepage, which provided the course content (syllabus, PowerPoints, etc.), as well as tutorials on how to contribute to the wiki. A class wiki example may be found at
http://edtechexplorations.wikispaces.com/Helping+Profession+Course+Homepage.

Students used the wiki not only to access the course content but also to collaboratively complete four written learning tasks. The assigned tasks included: (a) an informed consent, (b) a crisis management plan, (c) an ethical dilemma case study, and (d) a counselor/administration contract. The purpose of the assignments were three-fold: (a) to assist learners in constructing an enhanced understanding of referral,

consultation, and collaboration; (b) to expose learners to web-based technology and develop their collaboration skills, and (c) to create a sustainable resource for learners to access after completion of their academic career at the university. Students worked in groups of 4-6 on the projects. Students used the wiki discussion forum throughout the course to discuss course content and assignments, and the students also created personal wiki pages and posted individual course assignments.

After completing the course, 22 (100%) students responded to a two-part survey. Part one of the survey consisted of the Perceived Learning Instrument (Richmond et al., 1987), used to measure students' perceived learning in regard to the wiki assignments. The instrument also contained one item designed to measure students' attitudes about the wiki. Part two of the survey consisted of six open-ended survey questions pertaining to the students' experiences with the wiki and the contribution it made to their sense of community and learning.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the quantitative survey data indicate that students benefitted from use of the wiki. On a 10-point Likert scale (0-9), on average students indicated a high level of perceived learning when using the wiki ($M = 7.91$, $SD = 1.02$). On a 4-point Likert scale, results demonstrated that students indicated a moderate level of satisfaction ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .92$).

Qualitative data provides a more in-depth understanding of students' perceptions of the wiki. The open-ended responses of the web-based survey were analyzed using a qualitative analysis based on the emerging design approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Data was coded in three stages, and triangulation was used to increase reliability of analysis. Three coders separately read the data and allowed themes to emerge. Coders met to discuss proposed themes and decided upon a list of themes. The three coders then separately coded each open-ended response using the list of themes. The coders reached a high degree of agreement. Any disagreement in the coding process that arose was discussed and negotiated until mutual agreement was reached. Final coding was adopted and verified.

One of the most prominent categories that emerged from the data analysis indicated that a majority (72.73%) of participants found the wiki was useful for peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor collaboration, as well as the establishment of a connection in the class. Students felt that the wiki enabled them to communicate readily with one another, to share knowledge, and to interact with one another in order to create new knowledge. A majority of the participants (72.73%) also indicated that the wiki contributed to their learning. Students noted that the wiki was useful for learning because it provided one easy-to-navigate, centralized location for information sharing (4.55%) and a location to interact and to share knowledge (40.91%). Some students (36.36%) noted that the use of the wiki was a new and challenging experience that deepened their understanding of web-based technologies. In addition, students noted specific ideas concerning how they could implement a wiki in their current and future careers. One student noted that he/she would see it useful for the presentation of online workshops. Responses also indicated that the instructor's ability to design and facilitate the course via the wiki influenced the students' collaboration and learning in the course. Nine percent stated that the Wiki was not helpful for collaboration or learning. Students attributed this negative opinion to a lack of familiarity with wiki technology, which put them on a learning curve. Only one student indicated that he/she was not motivated to learn the new technology and preferred more familiar technologies for learning, such as BlackBoard™.

Conclusion

Educators are concerned with identifying ways to assist students in developing collaboration and consultation skills, since these skills are essential in the human services profession. Student self-reports indicated that the use of the wiki contributed to students' learning and collaboration experience. Students also noted that the wiki could be useful in their career as helping professionals. The existing research on the use of web-based technologies for learning and collaboration in helping profession education is limited; therefore, additional studies that explore the use of specific web-based technologies in assisting

students to develop needed professional skills would be a valuable contribution to the current body of research. This pilot study serves as a basis for continued research in the use of a wiki for learning for collaboration and professional skill development. The findings imply that the use of a wiki promotes collaboration, social interaction, and learning; thus, the wiki serves as a tool that HMSV educators can use to instill collaborative skills necessary for the human service profession.

There are several limitations inherent in this study. Students may have felt safer, and therefore may have been more honest, disclosing their feelings or opinions in a web-based survey (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006); however, the potential for dishonest reporting still existed. Furthermore, only students' perceptions were evaluated. Results provide information about how students felt about the wiki; however, findings do not reflect objective outcomes. The small sample size also limits generalizability. Limitations necessitate future research. Limited generalization of results could be improved by replications of the study across other samples and universities. Research could be extended using qualitative analysis. Actual student interactions on the wiki could be analyzed to determine if community is formed among students as they work on the wiki. In addition, a pre and post observation of students collaboration skills could be examined.

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