

Running Head: Research Proposal

Research Proposal:
Fostering an Holistic Approach to Online Learning within Higher Education

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Relevance of Topic for Higher Institutions	4,5
Statement of Problem: Questions	5
Literature Review	5-6
Methodology	8-10
Significance of Proposed Research	11
Implications of Findings	12
Annex A: Timeline	12,13
Annex B: Ethical Considerations	14
References	15,16

Research Proposal:**Fostering A Holistic Approach to Online Learning Within Higher Education**

Through my eight years of online studies, I witnessed many changes to learning environments, from ones that were cold and isolated, while others offered a better balance between affective and rational ways of learning. Following this, I began to investigate how a holistic approach to learning supports a learner's experience. (Based on previous unpublished undergraduate essays and journaling, Brock University, 2008, 2009) Further research revealed that many educators, theorists, and researchers feel there is a connection between a holistic approach and learning. (Bierema,1996; Cranton and Wright 2008; Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks and Kasl, 2006; Mannion, 2001; Merriam and Caffarella, 2006; Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003; Wang and Sarbo, 2004) These researchers also expressed the need to provide the learner with a space where consciousness is raised, creativity and imagination encouraged, and awareness stimulated in order for the learner to interconnect with himself and the outer world.

Relevance of Topic for Higher Institutions

Furthermore, many universities have recognized that fostering spirituality is beneficial, because it enhances self-awareness in learners, and leads to a better understanding of the world they live in. (Duerr, Zajonc and Dana, 2003) Likewise, Zinn (1997), reminds us that spirituality is at the root of adult education already within many liberal, progressive, learner-centered theories and programs in many universities. This research proposal will address questions that arise from such statements, in the hope of convincing Academia that a study on how to foster a holistic approach to learning within an online environment is a worthwhile endeavour.

Statement of Problem: Questions

This research proposal will explore the connection between a holistic approach and online learning environments; its purpose is twofold: firstly, to question what constitutes a holistic approach to learning by asking how students perceive online learning environments; secondly, based on these findings, conduct a study to answer how online environments can better support learner needs based on a holistic approach.

In order to demonstrate my preparedness to undertake this study, I will identify gaps in existing literature that could be filled by this study. The review of related literature will support assumptions and theories that underlie my initial research questions and proposed study. In order to guide this process, the literature review will first define what the term “holistic” means in a learning context; secondly it will consider how research supports the hypothesis of fostering a holistic approach to learning online.

Literature Review

Surprisingly, I was not able to find literature specifically related to fostering a holistic approach to online programs within higher education forums. This denotes the need for further research in this domain, and reinforces the need for the proposed study. Nonetheless, it is important for now to rely on existing research based on face-to-face learning environments, in order to conduct future research that focuses on what a holistic approach means within an online forum.

The term ‘holistic’ learning can be defined as transformative, reflexive, and experiential learning; linked to spirituality in the sense of ‘wholeness’. (Duerr et al., 2003) In order to clarify the term ‘spirituality’, it is important to define it as ecumenical - above all religions; rather it is described as a sense of wholeness and interconnectedness

to all things. As such, spirituality is a relevant approach to pedagogy within a holistic environment, where the exploration of the cognitive, affective or relational, as well as the symbolic and spiritual domains is encouraged. (Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003)

It is also necessary to define the term ‘transformational’ learning, which is best defined by the way learners relate to and conceptually frame their experiences using a good balance between affective and rational ways of knowing. (Baumgartner, 2001; Davis-Manigaulte et al., 2006) This preliminary literature research provides the definitions and philosophies on which a holistic approach is grounded, providing the basis for assumptions and theories that underlie this research.

Fostering A Holistic Approach Within a Learning Space

The following assumptions and theories support the hypothesis that fostering a holistic approach within a learning space can provide a transformational learning experience. Thus, a holistic approach can be perceived as a method of constructing knowledge through symbolic process and reflection; (Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003) which is created through the exploration of experiential contexts. (Davis-Manigaulte et al., 2006) This part of the literature review supports the second survey within the research proposal, addressing how to foster a holistic approach online.

A holistic environment can be described as one where adults are given adequate space and support to learn. (Merriam and Caffarella, 2006) Further questions arise, such as: How could one evaluate what provides a sense of: safety, possibility, trust, discovery of the self, and acknowledging the whole person? (Cranton and Wright, 2008) Thus, the survey questions need to help students define how they view their ‘learning space’ in terms of being adequate and supportive to learning. Current theorists of transformative

learning generally agree that a catalyst presenting ideas from more than one point of view is essential in bringing about transformational learning. (Baumgartner, 2001; Davis-Manigaulte et al., 2006; Merriam and Caffarella, 2006; Wang and Sarbo, 2004) Following this assumption, questions on the survey could investigate if the learner has been given the chance to base learning on experience, and if critical thinking was developed in the process.

According to Tisdell and Tolliver, (2003) affective and relational aspects of learning are viewed as connecting with peers and linking ideas to experience through the exploration of the cognitive; meaning the reading, sharing and discussion of ideas. Creating a learning environment conducive to whole-person learning and working with learners by creating an emphatic field (posts, forums live chats etc.) appears essential. This type of environment facilitates a transition into a more holistic learning context where identifying with others through experiential learning provides a way of being heard. (Davis-Manigaulte et al. 2006) In order to evaluate if critical thinking has been experienced through learning, the survey should allow for written responses – multiple-choice questions would not be adequate in this instance. Survey questions also need to probe what kind of activities could offer an environment that is open to learning, and creative in sharing. Furthermore, students need to be asked if they feel they are ‘heard’ by using communication methods offered to them via online forums.

Since little research has been done in the domain, ideas on how to foster a holistic approach to online learning remain speculative. Being this is a qualitative research, there will likely be further questions that arise concerning how holistic elements could be applied to an online environment. Although the methodology will establish how the study

is conducted, this research is based on interpretive rather than statistical data analysis, thus, as suggested by Gay, Mills and Airisian (2009) other emergent themes are likely to surface as the research proceeds.

Methodology

Description of Overall Approach

This research proposal presents a study that will firstly evaluate how students perceive online learning environments. Based on the findings a second study would be conducted to determine how online environments can be constructed to better support learner needs.

I believe the best methodology to adopt for this type of study is a qualitative survey research. Students from three universities will be solicited for participation to two surveys via e-mail. Random sampling will be observed, as students willingly agree to participate in these surveys. Both surveys will be cross-sectional; the first with the purpose to collect initial data to evaluate current behaviours, attitudes and beliefs concerning the participant's online learning experience. Questions will include only items that relate to the objectives of the study, focussing on a single concept.

The second survey will be composed of questions that test the hypotheses that fostering a holistic approach to online learning can benefit learners. Both surveys will focus on the importance of nurturing the whole person, including the spiritual and emotional dimensions. Depending on results of the first two surveys. further research could be conducted through triangulation, including interviews and possibly case studies.

Site and Sample Selection

Three universities offering online studies will be approached to take part in these two surveys. Once permission has been granted to conduct said surveys, Third-year online students will be solicited to freely take part in both surveys. Since the participants will be randomly selected from a fairly wide bank of online learners, the study will likely provide a good sampling, thus contributing to validating results and generalizing findings. The three universities, the specific study program, and the participating students will be kept anonymous to respect ethical research standards. Informed consent will be done based on determining the scope and focus of my research to the best of my ability, factoring in limitations at this stage of the research proposal.

Timeline

Essentially, this project would be initiated in May 2011, and the surveys carried out during the autumn 2011 term. The research would be finalized by February 2012. (Please find a proposed timeline attached as Annex A)

Data Collection Methods

The first study will be sent via e-mail along with a cover letter, thus providing the means for participants to hand-in completed studies anonymously. The anonymity of the data received will insure that data is compiled and analyzed ethically. Considering students may not participate in the second survey, Nonresponse will need to be dealt with through follow-ups; although the success of this study does not rely solely on the same students taking part in both surveys.

Preliminary Plan for Data Analysis Strategies

After the first survey, following Gay et al.'s (2009) guidelines, I will need to evaluate what ideas have emerged in this round of data collection. Starting with analyzing if data collection techniques are catching the kind of data I need. I will need to be careful not to be biased when filtering out the data I don't want. Categorizing the data will facilitate the creation of the next survey, thus I will likely create a concept map to help me identify what is important and why.

The next survey will be created based on the findings from the first survey. Following the second survey, compiled data will need to be synthesized along with the research material in order to come up with a sound hypothesis. Since I have benefited from a holistic approach to learning, I will have to be careful to recognize this possible bias as I prepare survey materials, conduct surveys, and especially when I analyze and synthesize data.

Ethical Considerations

Beyond being aware of my own biases, there are many other ethical issues that need to be considered as I actualize this research proposal. Influenced by readings from Gay et al., (2009) and Flinders (1992), as well as my own teaching and learning philosophies founded on humanistic principles, I have adopted research ethics based on a holistic approach. Thus, this proposed research will be carried out under 'holistic' principles; it will be conducted as part of a whole, making sense of reality as a reflection of imperfect understanding – not as a control on the whole. (These ethical considerations are fully outlined in Annex B)

Significance of Proposed Research

In order to support this research proposal and convince universities and participants to collaborate, I would emphasize the fact there is growing interest in fostering a holistic approach within adult education. (Duerr et al., 2003) I would add that a holistic approach to learning is a worthwhile way of knowing, (Zinn, 2004) and that seemingly, individuals who learn within a holistic environment appear to be well-informed, knowledgeable, critical-thinking adults who experience a sense of fulfillment. (Bierema,1996).

Possible Implications of Findings

Since little research has been done on fostering a holistic approach to online learning, I believe further research in this domain is needed. Such a study will fill the existing gap in this domain and serve to benefit students, practitioners and Academia alike. Consequently, it is my hope this study can encourage everyone in the educational domain to reflect on the idea that learning is central to our being, thus creating awareness about learning environments that reflect holistic practices.

Annex A

Timeline

- **May 2011:** Put together a preliminary survey questionnaire and cover letter. These will be presented and sent to prospective universities in June in order to foster interest in the project.
- **June 2011:** Present the project to three universities, ask permission to conduct two surveys within their third-year online learning program of choice this coming autumn semester. Depending on response, communicate with more universities to fulfill the goal of having three different universities participating.
- **July 2011:** Test run the first questionnaire among peers and professors, and adjust accordingly
- **August 2011:** Confirm participation from three universities for conducting the two surveys in the coming autumn term with the same group
- **September 2011:** Conduct the first study, create a two-week window for participants to fill-in survey and return. Arrange for mailing if participants wish
- **October 2011:** Analyze and compile the data. Based on the synthesis begin formulating the second survey.
- **Late October 2011:** Pilot test the survey among peers and professors and adjust accordingly
- **November 2011:** Conduct the second study and compile and analyze the data within the same two-week window frame
- **Late November 2011:** Analyze and synthesize the results

- **December 2011:** Compile and analyze the results of data from the first and the second test and provide a synthesis
- **January 2012:** Provide an article that presents results, analyzes and synthesizes findings leading to a hypothesis, suggesting further research in the domain.

Annex B

Ethical Considerations

As a researcher I need to develop the art of receptivity and full participation. I need to negotiate genuine dialogue with all those implicated in this research process. Agreements between myself and the participants and Academia need to be based on mutual benefits.

My research approach must be based on fairness, impartiality, honesty, and not on moralizing and imposing my point of view, and this will need to be reflected in the way both surveys are conducted. I will strive to develop a cultural sensitivity to differences that exist among participants and universities. I will be careful in the words, tone and style I use to construct meaning within the surveys, for I understand these carry serious responsibility when made public. Reflecting on the deeper

meaning of research, ethically speaking, I feel conducting a study or research should be like entering a discussion with an open agenda, thus leaving lots of room for adjustments along the way. I wish this research to be a way to confirm the relationship I have built with participants, and ultimately support my hypothesis rather than to gather information.

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