TOWARDS SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION IN RELATIONSHIP AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION THROUGH A VLE

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ABSTRACT

Formal sex education is a key strategy to help prevent unplanned teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse and social discrimination. However, research highlights human sexuality is a difficult issue for educators to communicate with young people in traditional class settings. The growing tendency for young adolescents to communicate in online social settings presents opportunities to explore whether technology may be employed in this area. This paper presents a study investigating the use of a virtual learning environment to support communication between teachers and students in a Relationship and Sexuality Education class setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools has become an internationally important issue given the prevalent global rise of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies among the 15-24 age group (WHO, 2006). Barriers to providing comprehensive sexuality education such as high level of discomfort among teachers and students in discussing sensitive sexual issues (Mayock et al; 2007) and lack of communication associated with inhibition experienced by both cohorts (Hyde & Howlett, 2004) persist (Selwyn & Powell, 2007). Lester & Allan (2006) argue that the discomfort some teachers experience delivering sex education results in textbook teaching and reluctance to answer questions or enter into discussions with students. This is compounded by the fact that the language and terminology used by teachers in the classroom is often not the same as the language of adolescents, and this in itself can create a communicative barrier in the teaching of RSE (Mannix McNamara & Geary, 2003). Given that 24% of girls and 30% of boys have had sexual intercourse by 15 years of age (WHO: 2008), it is essential that we ensure all adolescents get informed sex education.

Kanuga & Rosenfeld estimated that 75% of youth had used the Internet to look up health information and 44% to search sexual health information (2004). Although computer based sexual health websites are widely available, the ease of finding sexual health information on the web has raised several issues of concern such as: inaccurate or irrelevant information; lack of interactivity; and potential harm due to the ease of adolescents to stumble across sites with nefarious intention (Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004). This work presents a study on the development and adoption of a school-based virtual learning environment (VLE), moderated by qualified counselors, to tackle the difficulties of communication between students and teachers of RSE, and evaluate its effectiveness in overcoming barriers of communication presented by traditional classroom teaching.

1.1 Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

CMC is communication mediated by interconnected computers, between individuals or groups separated in space or time (Luppicini, 2007). Its primary advantage is its potential to enhance communication by bypassing limitations of temporal and spatial constraints. The mechanism through which CMC brings about enhanced communication includes asynchronous and synchronous communication capacity, high interactivity and multi-way communication (Lee, 2010). While face-to-face (f2f) discussions may be dominated by one or two participants, CMC can be inherently democratic allowing participants to participate equally in conversations (Herring & Stoerger, 2013). Furthermore, the Internet enables anonymity it

provides a forum where it is possible to be less inhibited and intimidated (Christopherson, 2007). Joinson (2001) defines this as the on-line disinhibition effect because without having to deal with f2f encounters, people can express themselves more openly. Thus, the socially anxious consider CMC more appropriate than f2f communication in potentially embarrassing situations because it may also reduce anxieties around negative evaluation from others (Yen et al; 2012).

Critics of CMC argue the absence of non-verbal cues hinders communication and makes CMC a less rich form of communication (Dreyfus, 2008). However, the absence of non-verbal cues is an emancipatory factor allowing clearer communication by encouraging participants to be their true selves when on-line (Georgakopoulou, 2011). Also due to the lack of social cues, such as age and physical appearance, in CMC the level of self-disclosure is higher than in f2f communication (Saunders & Chester, 2008). It would be imprudent to claim that communication in real life situations is the same as CMC but it could be plausibly argued that CMC may well fulfil the needs of those teachers and students who feel anxious about discussing sensitive topics in a traditional f2f classroom setting.

The objective of this case study was to explore whether the integration of aVLE into an RSE class would support communication between teachers and students. VLEs have been defined as "a *software system that combines a number of tools that are used to systematically deliver content on-line and facilitate the learning experience around that content* "(Weller, 2007, p.5). They have acquired a significant relevance as support tools for learning (Melton, 2006) by enabling collaboration, and the inclusion of constructivist strategies of collaborative learning into the instructional environment (Escobar-Rodriguez & Monge-Lozano, 2012) and are among the most widely adopted technologies in education (Risquez et al; 2015).

2. METHOD AND RESULTS

A four week study with 3 teachers and 28students (16 male, 12 females; average age 16 years) participating in an RSE class was conducted. A Moodle VLE was used for the study and the participants used the site from home to cover topics in the RSE curriculum including friendship qualities, self-esteem and sexual behaviour with educational activities (quizzes, videos, podcasts and fact sheets) designed to prompt discussions To encourage communication the users could engage in dialogue through email, a chat and a discussion board and could communicate anonymously using computer generated names. Anonymity is particularly beneficial for users discussing sensitive personal topics because it allows them to freely express their opinions and feelings in a confidential setting. Participants were encouraged to communicate on the site to discuss any issues relating to RSE that they felt was relevant to them. The 3 RSE teachers also used the VLE to respond to questions posed by the students and offer support where needed. In addition, the study presented the students with several tasks relating to RSE issues. Each week during the study the teacher posted a topic relating to the following week's class. To support them, the students had access to suggested readings. These were provided in the form of short articles, typically consisting of one or two brief paragraphs relating to the topic. Quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research question were used to provide rich material for examination while supporting the trustworthiness of the findings through triangulation (Yin, 2003).

Most students 75% (f=11, m=10) reported they communicated more in the on-line RSE class compared to a traditional class. This finding was confirmed by teacher 3 who stated that "*only about 5 or 6 of the class leaders would talk in class. Rarely would you get a whole class talking.*" In addition, when comparing this result with statistical analysis from the on-line discussion forum (1857 posts in total and an overall average of 22 posts), results suggest that a high level of interaction took place. Almost all the sample 86 % (f=9 m=15) reported they felt more comfortable discussing topics of a personal nature on-line than in the classroom. With respect to less feelings of embarrassment in the on-line environment, the overall result was 82 % (n=23) with 36% (n=10) of females and 46% (n=13) of males reporting this. Several explanations may be surmised for this high score. Anonymity was perceived as the key factor by the majority of participants 82% (n= 23) for communicating more in the on-line environment, "*It was easier to talk about stuff cos you're not embarrassed and knowing that nobody could find out who you was great.*" "*Sometimes it is embarrassing to ask things face to face. If I had to put my own name up there I don't think I would have been so open.*"

79% (n=22) of the participants (f=12 m=10) reported that they felt able to talk about topics on-line that they would not normally talk about in class. A comparison with the teacher's perception of the students'

interactions elicited this comment from Teacher 1 "*Its funny how you think you know people and yet on the site there are so different than they are in class. The people you think are shy in class have behaved differently on the site and able to use words that they wouldn't use in the classroom*." A comment from one of the students confirms this: "*I just wouldn't ask those questions in class and you don't really know if the teacher would answer the question or if the teacher would want to talk about those kinds of topics*." There was a difference among the teachers' perceptions of the f2f interactions versus on-line interactions. Teacher 1 noted, "*I like the fact that you didn't have to answer a question there and then. Sometimes you just don't know how to answer or if you do, you know that whatever you say will cause messing in the classroom, so I really liked that as it saved me a lot of embarrassment.*" Teacher 3 found it easier to talk about topics on-line that she felt would cause embarrassment to both her and the students. "*I think the biggest fear as a teacher in a situation like that is being asked a question that you just don't know how to answer*" For teacher 2, this was at odds with his usual pedagogy approach and questioned whether this may potentially damage his existing f2f rapport with pupils. He stated, "*I think I would miss the cut and thrust of conversation that goes on in a normal class*". However, it should be noted that this is at variance with the students' perception of a traditional class. They reported that teachers did not welcome dialogue or debates in class. The narratives of the young people in this study imply that the common didactic style of teaching does not engage them or encourage them to ask questions. Comparisons with comments from two of the student interviews illustrate this difference: "*Ye, in class, they just tell us about things...........but we can't really ask them any questions*". "*In a normal class the teacher does most of the talking with little time for us to ask questions or discuss things that are important.*"

3. DISCUSSION

First, an important finding of this study is that development was driven by the needs and concerns of the students. Based on the students' own accounts of their reasons for communicating they perceived the VLE as a space to express their concerns about topics that they wanted to know about but felt too inhibited to discuss in a traditional classroom. This supports Campbell & Aggleton's, (2000) primary argument that to be effective sexuality education must meet the needs and interests of young people as conceptualized by them. Most students (82%) reported on the absolute significance of anonymity for communicating in a less inhibited way on-line. The reason for this becomes apparent when taking into account the research literature on the effects of anonymity (Joinson, 2001). Such a high reportage of less embarrassment (82%) may be attributed to what Suler (2004) refers to as the online disinhibition effect when people don't have to worry how others respond to what they say with gestures such as a frown, a sigh or other signs of disapproval. This can be especially beneficial in an RSE class where individuals who find it difficult to communicate about sensitive topics can express their thoughts and concerns without fear of negative consequences. This may have important implications for RSE education as students are more likely to communicate more under these conditions. For many students the on-line class was a preferred method of communicating RSE to the traditional class. 75% (n=21) indicated that the on-line class should replace the traditional class. However, it is notable that more males (46%) than females (29%) preferred the on-line class. This may be due to gender differences for sources of information to learn and communicate in various domains (Turnbull et al; 2010). According to Rautopuro (2005) adolescent boys prefer to use computers to learn about sexual matters. Furthermore, while clearly the overall outcome is a positive response there are also two other possible explanations for this result. First, there is the possibility that the students' appreciation was based on the novelty factor and therefore gave it increased attention and the second; students may simply view technology as commonplace and a natural tool to use. However, it may also be plausible that the positive reaction to the site was due to its similarity to the type of social networking sites that have become an integral component of their lives. Regarding the teacher' experience, while the VLE was understood as a valuable communication tool, they tended to view the VLE as external to their regular educational workload. This was reflected in the difficulty they had in fitting the on-line activity into their already busy lives. On reflection, it may be inappropriate to look for a complete shift in the teachers' fundamental approach to teaching and highlights the challenge of creating a truly innovative educational alternative within the context of a conventional school structure. Importantly, it also highlights that a balance is required between advantages for students and gains for the teaching staff in order for this method of teaching to be fully adopted.

There are several limitations to this study worth noting. The first is the use of a single institution for the data collected. This limitation may reduce the external validity of the results and somewhat limit the generalization of the findings. Second, it was only one relatively small study. Further work needs to be undertaken with a larger sample to provide additional evidence.

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