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## **Understanding the ecology of the personally significant learning environment (PSLE): One year on**

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### **Background**

Personal learning environments (PLE) have been shown to be critical in how students negotiate, manage and experience their learning. Understandings of PLEs are largely restricted by narrow definitions that focus on technology alone. The idea of a PLE is often conflated with virtual learning environments. In this presentation, we draw on empirical findings from an international study. Our findings will be of interest to students, educators, researchers and institutions and will facilitate a more in depth understanding of how to support students to create appropriate PLEs for effectively managing their own learning.

### **Aims**

The study aimed to provide insights into how undergraduate students of nursing manage and experience learning through a range of formal and informal components that comprise the PLE. It is a mixed-method study that incorporates two key phases. The first phase will be the focus of this presentation.

### **Research design**

The first phase comprised a series of focus groups held at each of four institutions in Australia, England, Scotland and Hong Kong. The fifth, in Canada, was used to validate findings from the initial focus groups. Ethical approval was obtained at each individual study site. Recruitment at each site was through student emails, flyers and invitations on e-learning sites. Inclusion criteria were that students needed to be enrolled in an undergraduate degree leading to a nurse registration.

An important ethical consideration was that students understood that participation or non-participation would not impact relationships with their academic institutions or study outcomes. Nominal group techniques were used in the focus groups together with providing visual representations of their PLE in the form of a sketch or conceptual map. The themed sticky notes and visual representations were photographed and stored for subsequent analysis. Data were analyzed independently by researchers at each site. This initial analysis was at the broadest level of abstraction in order to identify main emerging categories. Investigators reached a consensus through a series of meetings through voice over IP technologies regarding commonalities and differences in the data.

### **Key findings**

Eight groups comprising a total of 46 students participated in focus groups across the initial four sites. The findings from the focus groups generated a range of different types of data that were organized into three themes: technologies, learning modalities and influencing factors.

Technologies included physical items such as devices, computers, books, journals, newspapers, and furniture and virtual technology such as software, applications, and internet resources.

Participants said that the expected modes of learning at university did not always suit their personal learning preferences. Understanding their own learning style was important to enable an effective PLE and customising learning to suit personal preferences was seen as important.

A PLE is influenced by external, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors both individually, and by the interplay between the factors. External factors included the physical, built aspects of the environment and the learner's ambient environment.

Intrapersonal factors included attitudes, beliefs, preferences and emotions. Interpersonal factors such as how, when and where participants engaged with others also played a significant role in their PLE.

Findings suggest a broader understanding of the term personal learning environment than currently exists. PLEs are relational and comprise a space with meaning and significance to the learner.

Current definitions of PLE do not capture the broader understanding identified by this study and we therefore propose a new term: personally significant learning environment (PSLE).

#### **Recommendations**

The findings that the PSLE is significantly personal to the student's learning experience drive further research in this area.

Institutional learning platforms and modes of delivery consider the PSLE.

#### **Key words:**

- personal learning environment
- student experience
- learning environment
- qualitative research
- international study.

#### **3 key points to indicate how your work contributes to knowledge development within the selected theme:**

- student constructions of their PLE are personally significant and much broader than previously reported
- PLEs are multifactorial and complex
- PLEs need to be personally significant to be effective and as such the term personally significant learning environment is more accurate.