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PORTABLE TUTOR: WHATSAPP IN NURSING STUDENTS’
INTERNSHIP AND FINAL DEGREE PROJECT PROCESSES

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Abstract

Introduction: Many university students use mobile applications such as WhatsApp, and nursing students are no exception. But there is little research related to the use of this application and its possibilities in various academic fields, including university tutoring. **Objective:** The objective of this study was to try to fill this research void and learn the opinions of nursing students regarding the use of this application during their studies, in two crucial stages where tutoring plays an important role: their final project and their internship. **Methodology:** The sample population of the study was 38 nursing students of the Nursing College of Melilla. To gather data, a written questionnaire was used, which could be filled out through Google Docs or WhatsApp, and which was qualitatively analysed by means of content analysis. **Results:** The results show that users have several concerns when using this type of tool, especially regarding their privacy, but that on the other hand, they highlight the user-friendliness and usefulness of this platform in the educational field. **Conclusion:** The use of this tool in the process of virtual tutoring is essential for students, but the importance of face-to-face tutoring should not be overlooked.

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1. Introduction

In a traditional teaching system, teachers are no more than transmitters of information (Stes, Coertjens, & Van Petegem, 2010), exposing knowledge for students to internalise. But currently, thanks to new technologies, students are part of a knowledge network in which, collectively, they carry out activities which enable them to acquire knowledge, both individually and as a group, making teachers the mediators and guides of this process. Educators are active agents whose mission is to ensure that subjects are both able to access these networks without getting lost among the many threads of information that form them and can also contribute their own knowledge to them.

If we take into account all these factors, we see that the situation faced by educators within this current knowledge society is not simple. Such things as the introduction of new technologies in the teaching and learning processes and the acquisition of digital skills are creating a new kind of educator.

1.1. The need to transform tutoring

In modern society, more and more devices and platforms are being introduced—in the general educational field and in universities in particular—for all kinds of tasks (managing qualifications, producing documents, exam corrections, congresses, etc.). Yet these constant advances are not happening at the same rate in the field of tutoring (Ezeiza, 2007) or in education in general, which is troubling. Although some teachers do try to transpose technologies into their fields, the reality is that these efforts are not constant in their processes (as, for instance, is the use of platforms such as MOODLE, which in many cases is mandatory for both teachers and students).

In 2005, Buján and Ezeiza highlighted three main problems in university tutoring, and these still have not been rectified.

- Instructional schedules coincide with the tutorials.
- In many cases, tutoring programmes are not complied with, and teachers are not available.
- Students are not sure what kinds of questions they can ask in tutoring sessions. (Some see such questions as a way of “bothering the teacher”.)

Therefore, introducing new mobile technologies into classrooms can be an effective way to alleviate or completely eliminate these difficulties, especially if use of these technologies is conducted in a habitual and natural way and not as a time-restricted and mandatory practice for students. In short, the use of technology in the mentoring process provides an optimal way to transform it.

Teachers are not the only important part of planning tutorials; other factors must also be taken into account. For Alexander (2001) and Beldarrain (2006), three main elements are required for an experience with new technologies to be successful in the classroom; the first is the development of communication and support with the student’s tutor and classmates, the second is the student’s available time and the third is her/her previous tutoring experience.

1.2. Students’ evaluation of the digital tutoring process

Student evaluation of university teaching is becoming increasingly frequent (Patrón Cortés & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2012). In the early 1960s, this type of evaluation was almost entirely voluntary and

was considered a matter between teachers; students were only as important as their teacher deemed them to be.

With technological advances and the increasing expectations of individuals regarding their own education, the evaluation of technology in the teaching and learning processes has become a critical issue. Technology in general is continuously advancing and is having a great impact on teaching and learning (Shelly, 2013) as well as on teachers' attitudes towards the use of new tools and instruments in their classrooms, which improves year after year. Therefore, knowing what the students participating in this kind of experience think provides valuable feedback, enabling teachers to fine-tune the use of any type of tool both inside and outside the classroom.

2. Problem Statement

This study seeks to understand how the use of mobile technologies applied to tutoring affects students during an internship process.

3. Research Questions

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using mobile applications in the process of tutoring nursing students?

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study was to try to fill the research void and determine the opinions of nursing students regarding the use of the WhatsApp application during their studies, in two crucial stages where tutoring plays an important role: their final project and their internship.

5. Research Methods

A descriptive analysis of the results was conducted, as well as a content analysis. For Krippendorff (1990), content analysis is “a research technique—drawing from certain data—designed to formulate reproducible and valid inferences that can be applied to its context” (p. 28). For this qualitative analysis, two main categories were established from which the different issues raised in the questionnaire were extracted; the first category is what might be considered technical- and user-friendliness-related, in which we frame everything involving simplicity of use, free provision, privacy, etc., while the second category concerns all the contributions related to the educational function which spring up with the use of such a system.

5.1. Participants

Thirty-eight students participated in the present study while working on both their internships and the preparation of their final degree projects (FDP) in the last two years of their degree. Participants included 15 men and 23 women, ranging between 20 and 23 years of age. All the nursing students were studying for their degree in the Nursing College of Melilla, which belongs to the University of Granada.

5.2. Instruments

For the present study, an instrument was created consisting of two different parts. The first was a written questionnaire which participants could fill in by two different methods, through a form generated on the Google Docs platform or through WhatsApp itself. The second part was a series of issues for which participants had to state their degree of agreement or disagreement.

To select the questions that made up the instrument, we relied on the available literature and also on consultation with experts regarding the usual practices in the educational field.

5.3. Procedure

Participants were asked to take part in the study during their internship and the tutoring for their final project. All who agreed had their telephone numbers registered and also had the application available on their mobile phones. In a previous meeting, conducted in order to meet everyone personally and break the barrier of anonymity, a series of simple rules was established which all participants had to follow strictly.

- No capital letters were used in the group.
- Sending spam or anything unrelated to the purpose of the group was not allowed.
- No harassment was allowed through private or public messages (through messages, audios, spam, etc.) to other members of the group.

6. Findings

The results are shown according to the previously established categories as well as the codes generated for each of them.

6.1. Technique

In this part, the participants' contributions relating to the technical part of the application were gathered. Several technical issues were highlighted in the interviews.

For 70% of the participants, the most important thing was that they already had a basic knowledge of the application's use. Prior learning was not necessary—nor was the establishment of strict norms for the application's use and for respectful behaviour towards the rest of the group. As one participant said:

We are all young, we use this type of applications and others on a daily basis. I do not believe that specific training is necessary for its use (P4).

With respect to prior learning, 32% of participants emphasised how simple it was to learn to manage the application. They stated that it was not necessary to have any prior knowledge; although they acknowledged having used this application for years and that their skills were attained during that period, they felt the application should not be difficult for anyone to use, even if they had never done so before. People could use it both quickly and intuitively, that is, without any specific training.

Even if you do not have much knowledge, the application is so simple to use that anyone can do it. (P1)

Of the participants, 30% also highlighted some privacy and public exposure issues regarding their personal data, showing reluctance when it came to sharing their privacy (pictures and texts) with other

classmates. This reluctance was magnified when dealing with strangers, which was common among internship or FDP tutoring groups assigned to teachers:

We all use them, but if the teacher had encouraged us to use them with classmates at first, I would not have liked my profile picture and my status to be seen by everybody (P17).

Hiding my status and my pictures from the rest of my contacts—just because I do not want my classmates to know or see them—would bother me considerably (P25).

Now [on my fourth-year internship] I know all my classmates, I already have them on my phone, but if I did not know them, I would not have liked anything to be imposed on me by any teacher (P38).

I do not want my personal information to be seen by everyone (P30).

To a lesser extent, some participants (15%) made an assessment of the previously established norms, stating that these were necessary for the correct development of this type of experience:

Although I do not need anyone lecturing me about rules of behaviour in a group, I know how to differentiate contexts. It has not been a bad idea to establish them beforehand (P12).

6.2. Educational

If the technical side allows us to see the importance of knowledge and training in any system which we want to introduce into a classroom—regardless of the level towards which it is directed—it is the educational side which really enables us to determine whether the introduction of this type of technology into the tutoring process has been beneficial.

For all the participants, the use of WhatsApp during their internship and final degree project tutoring processes entailed the elimination of an important handicap, the traditional face-to-face requirement to which they were subjected in similar processes during their university training.

The best thing is to know that I do not have to pay attention all the time to the tutorials established in the guide (P11).

Another aspect highlighted by 70% of the participants was the availability of tutors when taking part in this experience; this was noted as a key issue in making this type of tool truly useful. Without this element, it was considered impossible to understand the correct operation and generation of feedback within this experience:

My tutor was always available when I had a question or problem. He/she was always very fast to reply (P14).

I was surprised, I was able to solve simple doubts in less than 1 hour because the tutor was available, and I did not have to wait for a specific day or for the reply to a specific email (P31).

Availability was key; I was surprised. In many cases, I even got replies at weekends, which was always appreciated (P19).

For 56% of the participants, another important educational advantage was the accessibility of the information generated at any time. They always had the solution to their doubts available in writing, by being able to access it at any time and place through their mobile phones.

Another good thing is that I was able to repeatedly check the answers given to my question by the tutor (P3).

I never forgot anything that was said, it had always been in writing, and I was even able to send our conversation thread to my email (P34).

All the links and resources that we shared were always available on the main chat, so I could check them from my couch (P6).

Another fundamental contribution which stood out for 55% of the participants was the sense of belonging to the generated group, because people who did not know each other became part of a group. Among them, the collaboration was evident in the form of messages, in some cases relegating the tutor-guide to a second plane.

On many occasions, my own classmates were those who solved—or at least contributed to solving—the doubts raised (P9).

The tutor was not the only one to help me; my classmates also helped me when I needed it. (P22)

I always felt supported by my classmates (and teacher), as I could count on them whenever I needed it (P33).

Finally, only two participants had negative remarks regarding the educational experience:

I do not know if there is any point in saying this: it made my life easier, but I do not conceive tutoring that is 100% online. It would only cause me problems if my telephone ran out of battery or got lost (P9).

7. Conclusion

Very interesting conclusions can be drawn from the opinions expressed by the participants. These opinions are so important, in fact, that they may make us reassess the possible use of this messaging application for other university matters, such as the transformation of traditional tutoring or improvement in the management of the learning process through digital work groups.

From a technical perspective, we must evaluate the importance of prior knowledge in terms of the use of such applications and their management as a fundamental factor within the experience. That is, the participants must know about the functioning of WhatsApp at an intermediate level and must also have complementary knowledge, for example the average use of their smartphones.

Participants highlighted privacy as one of the most important problems. They were faced with a situation in which they had to share information (status, telephone numbers, profile pictures, etc.) with people unknown to them at first. They emphasised privacy issues to which they were subjected and the exposure of their information to people whom they did not fully trust or who were not members of their social circles. This concern for privacy is similar to data found in other studies using similar tools

(Djiwandono, 2016; Wang, Woo, & Quek, 2012). However, this concern, as happens with various other social technologies applied to teaching, can be alleviated, first, by giving students some preliminary guidelines which help to protect their privacy and then by demonstrating early security measures which need to be taken into account (Viñarás & Solano, 2013).

Ultimately, it has been demonstrated that the use of new experiences involving everyday technologies increases students' chances of success in the educational field, since considerable prior learning effort is spared, meaning that a possible cause for the technology's initial rejection among participants is eliminated.

Regarding the educational part, it has highlighted one of the most important characteristics of the applications that make use of the network for its operation, the asynchronism of communications (Furio and Alonso, 2012). The use of this type of technology improves the effectiveness of communication, eliminating one of the handicaps that raise more complaints about the students, the inflexibility in the tutorials. Thus, many have even come to consider the WhatsApp tool or similar technologies as essential in the academic field (Fuentes, García-Domingo, and Aranda, 2017).

Therefore, the availability of tutors in university processes such as internships and final degree projects is critical to allowing students to feel comfortable and see their specific educational needs covered. Having classmates and tutors available at "any time" promoted a sense of serenity, peace of mind and well-being which cannot be achieved in traditional tutoring. This was highlighted and reaffirmed by one of the most repeated comments about the feeling of belonging in a work group where, despite their different personal objectives, they felt part of a specific team whose general objectives were the same (finishing their internship, degree, etc.). This is in line with the potential benefits of peer learning, which were first recognised some time ago and which are especially relevant today (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson, 2001).

Price, Handley, & Millar (2011) noted that students who used online tutoring reported more negative experiences than those who had face-to-face sessions, especially within the context of long-distance learning. This is possibly one of the reasons why the results obtained in the present investigation do not coincide with those of other authors. It may be that the ideal is to use both types of tutoring in combination and not merely one of them exclusively.

We can conclude, therefore, that the idea of transforming traditional tutoring into fully virtual tutoring 3.0 is not farfetched. The record of the applications used, and not the mere presence of teachers in their offices, demonstrates the proper undertaking of communications and, in addition, the quality of the process and its effectiveness (Ezeiza, 2007). Further research should involve continuing to analyse university students' use of this tool, since such usage has also exhibited a direct, positive relationship with their grades during their studies (Rodríguez-Martínez, Valerio-Ureña, Cárdenas-Anaya, and Herrera-Murillo, 2016).

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