The Virtual Individual Education Plan (IEP) Team: Using Online Collaboration to Develop a Behavior Intervention Plan

Robyn M. Catagnus, Arcadia University, USA
Donald A. Hantula, Temple University, USA

ABSTRACT

A team of professional educators in a private school for children with disabilities (a Virtual IEP Team) used an online platform to collaborate and produce a behavior intervention plan for a student. The collaboration was effective and efficient; the plan was produced in 9 days, rather than the customary 3-6 weeks. Qualitative data yielded four major themes: beneficial augmentation, reflective practice, barriers to change, and improved interactions. Quantitative results showed that although end user satisfaction was moderate, educators produced a successful behavior intervention plan that showed positive changes in both the teacher and student behavior. An increase of in-person staff discussion as a result of online dialogue was a unique finding in this study warranting further investigation. Now that federal (U.S.) education law has changed to allow technologically mediated IEP meetings, the Virtual IEP Team may serve as a model for more efficient use of education professionals’ time.

Keywords: Behavior Intervention Plan, E-Collaboration, Online Platform, Virtual Collaboration, Virtual IEP Team

INTRODUCTION

Investigations of e-collaboration often use measures of member attitudes or intentions as their dependent variables. However, measures such as perceived ease of use or usage intent are not necessarily synonymous with actual technology usage behavior (Sauter, 2008). As DeRosa, Hantula, Kock, and D’Arcy (2004) observe, although attitudinal and process measures may be important in their own right, they should not be explicitly or implicitly equated with actual work products or outcomes of e-collaboration. Indeed, from a media compensation theory perspective, they should be expected to diverge (DeLuca, Gasson, & Kock, 2006; Hantula, Kock, D’Arcy & DeRosa, in press). Fortunately, studies employing behavioral usage measures are increasing. The next step in e-collaboration research is incorporating and measuring organizationally important outcomes of e-collaboration. For example, Nikas and Poulmenakou (2008) studied the institution-
alization (or lack thereof) of e-collaboration in a construction company, and Kock, Verville, Danesh-Pajou, and DeLuca, (2009) studied the effects of e-collaboration on the success of business process redesign. Other organizationally important outcomes of e-collaboration include work/decision quality and time use. These outcomes are especially important in the case of collaborative work that demands a high degree of knowledge and expertise.

The current study is an action research project designed to establish and evaluate an e-collaboration in a special education organization. The study was based on an action research cycle of thoughtfully planned activities to gather, interpret, and explore data about online group collaboration in order to facilitate an innovative solution. As an intensive study of a single e-collaboration (the “virtual IEP team”), it includes measures of attitude, process, usage and outcome. However, the outcome data extend beyond an evaluation of the work product to include measures of changes in teacher behavior and student behavior as a result of the behavior intervention plan developed in the e-collaboration.

**The IEP Process**

Special education services for more than 6 million students between the ages of 3 and 21 are provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997 (IDEA) (US Department of Education, Office of Special Education, 2004). Each student identified as eligible for and receiving special education services is required by federal (USA) law to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a written plan detailing a student’s special education goals, current educational performance, methods of assessment, and related services required to individualize instruction. A team of professionals including parents, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, local education agency specialists (LEA), and related services personnel (speech therapists, psychologists, and occupational therapists) must meet, develop, and plan for the education and any related or necessary services required for the student to benefit from a public school education (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). USA education law mandates interdisciplinary collaboration (U.S. Department of Education, 2004: Pub. L. 108–446, Dec. 3, 2004, 118 Stat. 2662 § 609(b)(4)). Additionally, when there is a behavior problem that affects learning, a functional behavioral assessment and a plan for behavior change (behavior intervention plan) are required products of this collaborative process.

**The Virtual IEP Team**

Collaboration for interdisciplinary teams in special education is especially challenging due to a historical mandate of face-to-face collaboration, scheduling, and time constraints (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Harfitt & Tavares, 2004; Odom & Bailey, 2001; Romiszowski & Mason, 2003; Smith, 1990). Overall, it is difficult to arrange for groups of people to be in the same place at the same time. Typically, collaborative teams have met in person to complete tasks and plan for the education of students with disabilities. Changes in federal rules and regulations now allow utilization of alternatives to meeting in person, such as conferences calls, videoconferences, and online collaboration; until 2005, federal (USA) law prohibited virtual collaboration in this context. Further, changes in educational mores and the increased cultural use of computers have served to increase the perceived value of online collaboration among educators (Haythornthwaite, 2005). These new legal and cultural trends have set the stage for e-collaboration to facilitate IEP collaboration among educators.

In this study, an online platform served as a tool to foster collaborative interactions among professional education staff to overcome the common major obstacles of time and scheduling. While e-collaboration may serve to save resources, and mitigate the inconvenience of traditional face-to-face meetings (Campbell & Halbert, 2002; DeWert, Babinski & Jones, 2003; Fjermestad, 2004; Ocker & Yaverbaum, 1999), it also yields other benefits. During
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