Chapter 6
Professional Midwifery Education: Blended Teaching and Learning Approaches

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ABSTRACT
Blended teaching and learning approaches are used in the postgraduate course of Graduate Diploma of Midwifery for students who are predominately women with family responsibilities residing in metropolitan, regional, or rural Victoria, a major state in Australia. The Virtual Maternity Clinic (VMC), a virtual learning experience (VLE) research project, was implemented during trimester 2, 2009. The purpose of the project was to expand the blend of teaching and learning activities to support students in their preparation for professional practice. The VMC includes four characters in early pregnancy and care provided by their midwife. All students enrolled in midwifery courses (postgraduate and undergraduate) at Deakin University were recruited to participate in a two-phase, pre- and post-use evaluation process related to the VMC. Findings from the pre-evaluation included that students’ had high expectations of the VMC in supporting their learning. The results from the post-evaluation of the VMC indicated that students’ were very satisfied that the VMC supported their learning. Future research directions include further development of the VMC.

INTRODUCTION
Students (undergraduate and postgraduate), who successfully complete midwifery courses at Deakin University, are eligible to apply for registration as a “midwife” in Australia. Graduates of these courses are therefore required to develop discipline-based attributes in academic performance and competence in practice. The undergraduate combined course of Bachelor of Nursing and Bachelor of Midwifery is offered as on-campus courses at three campuses of Deakin University in metropolitan, regional, and rural locations, and the postgraduate course, the Graduate Diploma of
Midwifery is only offered at Melbourne Campus at Burwood. Melbourne is the capital city of the state of Victoria. To qualify for entry in the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery, students must already have a nurse qualification, current registration, and recent experience as a nurse.

This chapter is about blended teaching and learning approaches applied within the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery and the development and implementation of a virtual learning environment (VLE) project during 2009, called the Virtual Maternity Clinic (VMC). The findings of this project are presented in a two-phase evaluation process (pre and post VMC evaluation) including its potential in this blend and for professional education.

Blended teaching and learning approaches used for the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery are comprised of a range of course delivery strategies to support student engagement. Face-to-face contact for nominated days/dates and times at the Burwood Campus at Melbourne promotes socialisation of students with academics and their peers, so that they become familiar with the on-campus facilities, services, and resources of the University. Video-conference arrangements from Melbourne Campus at Burwood to the other campuses of Deakin University, reduces travel time for students who live in regional and rural areas of Victoria. Since 2006 Elluminate Live (a synchronous and asynchronous computer-based application) has been used to deliver short lectures, promote discussions, and share storytelling. A benefit of this modality is that all sessions can be recorded, thereby being available to students whenever it is convenient for them. In addition, students have reported the benefit of using Elluminate Live from their own personal computers at home. Online learning activities are placed on existing modalities such as the learning management system that is part of Deakin Studies Online (DSO) to promote independent learning and when it is suitable for students.

The use of a blend of teaching and learning approaches commenced with the implementation of the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery in 2001 and was driven by the characteristics of the student population. At that time and today, students are predominately women with family responsibilities, residing in various areas of the metropolitan area of Melbourne as well as regional and rural Victoria. Students have reported their satisfaction with all of the abovementioned modalities that support them in meeting course requirements around their own needs. Some of the modalities are also used in the undergraduate combined course of the Bachelor of Nursing and Bachelor of Midwifery.

Despite these applications, postgraduate students did not develop a deep understanding of health assessments required for the care of women during early pregnancy and where midwives have an important role as primary health practitioners. A key issue was related to the demand of placements in maternity services within the metropolitan, regional, and rural areas of Victoria from a number of universities, including Deakin University. The challenge for midwifery academics was to re-think how student placements in practice settings could be managed more creatively around course content delivery. The concept of virtual learning in a maternity environment, the VMC, was conceived as a mechanism to complement practice learning and enhance student learning during their placements in practice settings. The VMC was developed as an important component of blended teaching and learning approaches in the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery.

BACKGROUND

The task of ensuring that students enrolled in the Graduate Diploma of Midwifery have clinical learning opportunities in pregnancy care is a challenging one for academics. This challenge is related to the shortage of available places in practice settings as a consequence of demand