Mobile Applications for Health Policy Leadership—There IS an App for That

The health policy course in the graduate nursing program at the author's university was designed to support the acquisition of policy analysis skills and advocacy approaches, which are valuable to health policy leadership in the scope of advanced practice nursing. Advanced practice nurses influence policy transformations in the health care and political systems by specifying evidence-based practice changes, raising researchable questions, and illustrating policy with patient care stories (Milstead, 2013). To support leadership formation, a toolkit of policy-related mobile applications, or apps, was trialed as a recommended learning activity for achieving the desired objective of integration and use of change management, equity, and social justice.

Guided by the theory of active learning in teaching with technology, the curriculum emphasized health policy analysis of a current legislative issue and culminated in a position letter to the policymaker (Matthews-DeNatale, 2011). A learning management system housed all course modules and provided portal access to the emerging mobile apps technology (Matthews-DeNatale, 2011). The modules packaged mini-lectures, readings, video clips, and learning activities on the following topics: (a) government history and evolution, (b) health care delivery systems, (c) policy and politics, (d) health care financing and economics, and (e) nursing innovations. Located in module three, which focuses on policy and politics, the policy mobile apps toolkit learning activity was introduced to learners through posted announcements about its usefulness. In addition, two online course orientation meetings reiterated the toolkit's presence. The insertion of a learning activity about mobile apps into the course was timely, given the greater capabilities to run apps on smartphones, iPads®, tablets, and other devices and the ease of downloading apps from the Google™ Play Store and the Apple® App Store to a device.

Building the toolkit involved reviewing free apps, preparing simple instructions for self-directed learning about how to download apps, and adding the policy mobile apps toolkit into the module. The policy apps toolkit includes apps for news, bill tracking, and policy blogs. The apps were selected with consideration of cost, ease of use, utility, and relevance. Two exemplars of free apps developed by others and featured in the toolkit are Congress (http://congress.sunlightfoundation.com) and Politico (http://www.politico.com/about/advertising/platforms/mobile). The Congress app provides an information directory about congressional members, which includes (a) contact information, which expedites engagement by e-mail; (b) committee membership; (c) voting record; (d) bill tracking through committees; (e) and a record of floor actions. The Politico app offers a nearly-advertisement-free, easy-to-navigate newsfeed about political trends and blog access. It also provides the opportunity to select and follow a subcategory of health care.

A formative survey of 31 enrolled graduate nursing students was conducted after the semester midpoint. The survey included a single item to query whether the Congress and Politico apps were useful for tracking legislation and health policy. Of the students who responded ($N = 15$; 48.4% response rate), 73.3% ($n = 11$) agreed or strongly agreed, whereas 20% ($n = 3$) neither agreed nor disagreed and 6.7% ($n = 1$) disagreed. In response to a course announcement introducing the policy apps learning activity, two students commented via e-mail that they did not have a device that supported app use. Three students in a forum noted lack of confidence in searching for and downloading apps. Other barriers may include (a) the high cost of an app-ready device, (b) feeling overwhelmed with many app choices, (c) difficulty in mastering the app functions, and (d) lack of wireless or cell network access (EDUCAUSE, 2010).

The policy apps toolkit was used by some learners, suggesting the acceptability of its utility. For greater understanding about useful Congress app features and leadership behaviors, the survey was expanded to add items about actions taken, such as contacting the congressional office, tracking committee actions, and providing a position letter to a congress member. Other apps, as they become available from technological designers, will be reviewed and added to the toolkit. To address barriers to app use, the activity directions were revised to specify that students should contact the technology help desk for app download assistance and to include guidance with *How to Download Apps* Web links for devices.

The nature of the health policy course welcomes the inclusion of mobile apps as an innovative learning activity for activating health policy leadership. The policy apps toolkit supports the observation of policy trends and shifting political stances, and it facilitates a timely response. Although not all course members used the featured policy apps, this learning activity appears promising.

References

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