

## **Implementing a Diversity-Orientated Online Graduate-Level Health Professions Education Program**

**Soutenir la mise en place d'un programme de maîtrise en pédagogie universitaire des sciences de la santé offert à distance par et pour la diversité**

*Isabelle Savard*

### **Abstract**

This case describes the strategies implemented in the development of an online Master's degree program in Health Professions Education (HPE) and an online short, Master's level diploma program. The strategies presented pertain to three of the main challenges identified: program cohesiveness, a multidisciplinary approach, and information technology literacy. The case describes meetings between the senior instructional designer, the program director, and the members of the development committee, which occurred over a period of approximately one year.

**Keywords:** online training, program approach, inter-professional collaboration, instructional strategies.

### **Institutional Context**

This case took place at Valley University (UV), an institution with over 40,000 students, 400 programs, and 2,500 professors and lecturers. UV had just elaborated a distance education policy (DEP) that promoted and oversaw the design and development of online courses. Florence worked at UV's Faculty of Medicine, which was fully engaged in improving the quality of its training at all levels. To accomplish this, the Faculty had set up a Professional Training and Instructional Support Service. A dozen instructional

designers and as many professors with training in pedagogy, worked together to continually improve the training offered. Three of the IDs specialized in educational technology.

Having worked for this service for a number of years, Florence was quite familiar with the procedure. She knew that, for each large-scale project (for instance, the revision of an existing program or the development of a new training program), a senior designer was designated to provide assistance to the directors and their faculty team. A senior ID has a comprehensive overview of the program and of the current and future requests for instructional development.

Florence, who was the Faculty's DEP (distance education policy) advisor, had just been designated as a senior ID by her supervisor and assigned to provide instructional support for the development of the Master's degree program and the short Diploma program in HPE. She knew that she would also be the senior ID for the development of courses in both programs.

### **The Contributors**

- **Florence Latour**, Instructional Designer and Policy Advisor
- **Dr. Leclair**, Development Committee Director and Program Director
- **Dr. Lamontagne**, Director of the Center for Pedagogical Development (CPD) and Florence's immediate superior
- **Program Development Committee**, a team comprised of eight members in charge of program development.

- **Implementation Committee**, a team comprised of four members in charge of implementing the program that was designed by the development committee (some members sit on both committees)
- **Faculty Program Team**, a team comprised of 14 faculty members who are also course coordinators or co-coordinators, each course coming under the responsibility of two faculty members (one whose approach is more theoretical and the other, more practical)

Florence, an instructional designer, specializes in educational technology and online training. She has been working in the field for over 15 years and has developed numerous online courses. Since January 2010, she has been a member of the Health Sciences pedagogical support team.

Dr. Leclair, the Director of the Development Committee, is a physician who holds a Master's degree in Health Professions Education (HPE). She is a professor with extensive experience in the development of instructional systems in practical (clinical) training and professional medical training programs. Over the last 10 years, she has also acquired practical experience in inter-professional collaboration in both academic and clinical settings.

### **Case Specifics**

While reading the document prepared by Dr. Leclair, describing the development project, Florence learned that the HPE Master's program had been created in the 1980s at UV. It was truly visionary and innovative at a time when only seven such programs were in existence around the world, none of which were offered in French. The program offered

professional training using a competency-based approach. It was designed for healthcare professionals working in both clinical and academic settings and prepared them to act as resource persons in their milieus, equipping them to fulfill leadership, consultation, teaching, research, and development duties in the field of HPE.

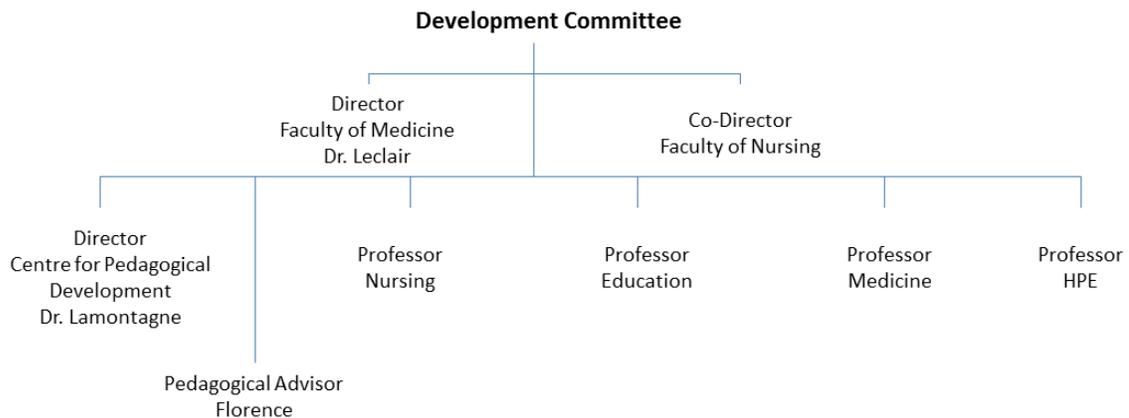
Dr. Leclair pointed out that, over the past 20 years, the field of HPE had developed very rapidly at the international level. New issues had emerged, including the development of researcher competencies in the field, the teaching of inter-professional practices, and the emphasis on scholarship. She added that there had also been an increase in the number of requests from clinicians to establish a Master's degree program and a short Master's-level diploma program in HPE, as well as to provide online training. These were the reasons the interfaculty program was reinstated and a short program created.

Florence was thrilled with the challenges that awaited her. She found the innovative nature of the project particularly motivating, in addition to the fact that the program content was directly related to her area of expertise.

### **The Program Development Committee**

The Faculty of Medicine had formed a Program Development Committee several months earlier in collaboration with the Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Education. The Committee's mandate was *to reinstate and update* the Master's program in HPE.

The Committee's work was already well underway when Dr. Leclair presented the Committee's structure to Florence at the first general meeting. The Committee was comprised of eight members, with representatives from both faculties/schools and from the professions involved in developing the program and its courses.



**Figure 1. Composition of the Development Committee**

### **Project Characteristics**

During the first general meeting, it was decided that the short diploma program would be developed so that all of its courses would be recognized as contributing to the Master’s degree program, thereby facilitating movement from one to the other. *“Now that will be a real challenge for competency development,”* Florence thought to herself.

Dr. Leclair specified that the short program would be offered in hybrid mode, primarily through asynchronous online training, for two main reasons: first, the desire to reach a distant student population throughout French-speaking Canada and eventually worldwide, and second, the need to respect the scheduling limits of the target clientele (working professionals who often did shift work and who enrolled in the training on a part-time basis). Florence pointed out that it would be preferable to offer the program entirely online, given that the goal was to offer a very flexible program where learners could, to the extent possible, advance at their own speed and even take courses at variable

speeds and times. The committee members considered the varying levels of familiarity with technology for each faculty member, as well as for their learners, and decided that this would be a major obstacle to offering the program entirely online. Florence immediately realized that workable solutions would need to be found to help faculty update their technological skills and decrease their anxiety when using technology.

### **Florence's Mandate**

Given the parameters of the mandate given to her by Dr. Lamontagne, Florence had to limit her involvement in supporting the Development Committee members in their choice of learning and instructional media and methods, as well as in overall educational technology support. However, in order to get a thorough feel for the program and to understand the goals the development committee wished to pursue, Florence quickly realized that it would be to her benefit to attend the working sessions focused on program competencies development. She asked Drs. Leclair and Lamontagne for permission to do so, and they agreed.

As she started working with the Development Committee (DC), Florence learned that a needs analysis has been conducted and that the effort to identify competencies was well underway. Initially an observer, she quickly obtained the status of an active member on the DC. This level of involvement for an ID was somewhat unusual, but Florence accepted it given the fact that, by virtue of her training, she was also an expert in pedagogy. She therefore collaborated on identifying competencies, planning the structure of the two programs, and revising course titles and descriptions. She was now working on developing strategies that would make it possible to meet the program challenges presented.

Florence considered that the size of this project presented three main challenges. The first pertained to program cohesiveness, the second, to the inter-professional collaboration required, and the third, to faculty members' levels of familiarity with technology.

### **Program Cohesiveness**

The concern for program cohesiveness was raised early in the discussions between Florence and Dr. Leclair.

Florence: *We have to establish program cohesiveness and ensure, at all costs, that the courses are not developed in silos. I suggest that we develop the courses according to the program approach defined by Prigent and his colleagues in 2009, which is based on two main characteristics: 1) the existence of a training project as a blueprint for the program of study, and 2) the synergy created in the pursuit of this training project.*

Dr. Leclair: *Your last comment on synergy is very interesting. I've been thinking about that and I agree that there would be at least four advantages to creating a high level of synergy: 1) the Faculty Program Team, comprised of members from different faculties, schools, and departments, would develop a strong collaborative relationship; 2) the desire to develop an exemplary quality program would remain front and center, despite time constraints; 3) the collaboration and complementarity of skills and knowledge among members would make it possible to develop and evaluate the five program competencies; and 4) the simultaneous development of several courses would be enhanced.*

*What is your opinion, Florence?*

Florence: *Yes, I agree! But it'll be a very interesting challenge! Program cohesiveness is always a recognized challenge whenever a program revision is implemented because it calls for changes in practice and attitude. In our case, the challenge will be all the more important since this inter-faculty program involves course coordinators from different professions who work with learners who also come from different professions. The course coordinators and learners work in different areas and therefore don't have the opportunity to meet on a daily basis.*

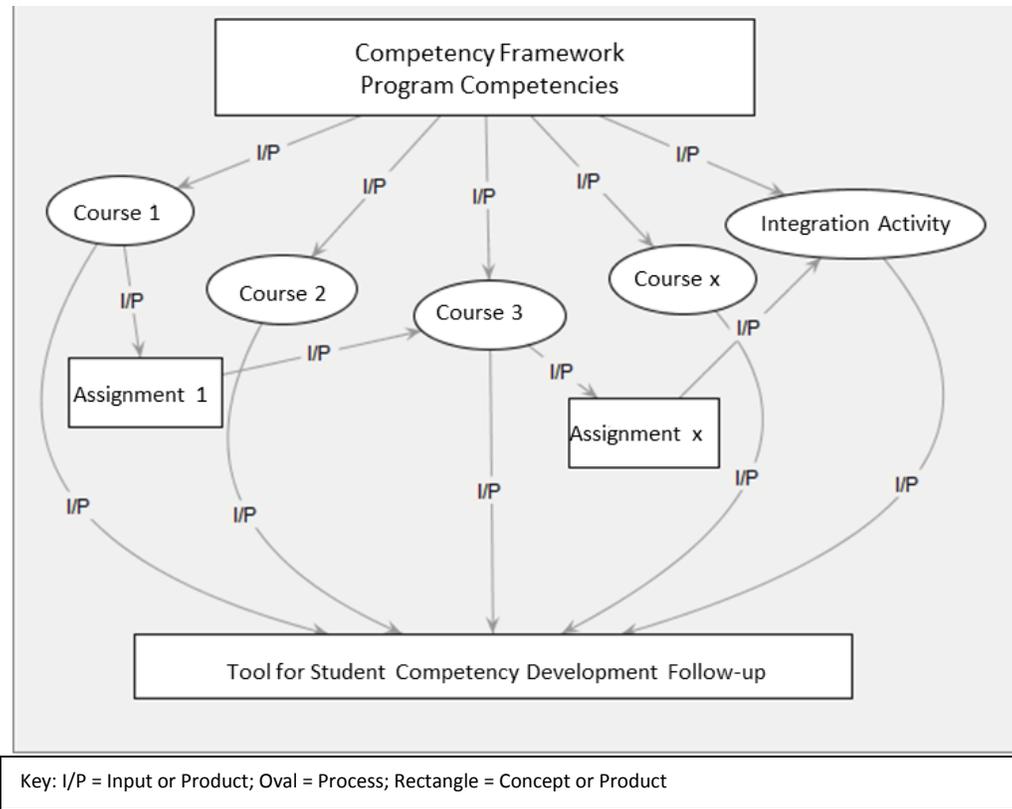
Florence and Dr. Leclair also recognized that a variety of actions had already been taken to meet these challenges.

Florence: *The first version of the program competency framework, designed by the Development Committee, may serve as a foundation. The Implementation Committee may wish to use this version, which it can then perfect and adapt in consultation with faculty members. Once it has been completed, this competency framework will become the benchmark document for each of the program contributors, as well as for the students. In addition, the matrix that illustrates the contribution of each of the courses to the development of program competencies, which was also designed by the Development Committee, may provide each course coordinator with the mandate to work on and evaluate the different competencies and their components and subcomponents.*

*To put this approach into practice, I suggest developing, as was done in other programs, guidelines which, in fact, constitute the “program” order for the development of each of the courses. I also suggest developing a course syllabus template, which could be used by each of the course coordinators. This template could be developed based on other syllabi from the Faculty. After discussing this with the program directors, the syllabus could include sections determined to be either optional or obligatory. Each of the sections could have a paragraph explaining what is expected from faculty of the program. So it could act as a guide to faculty in the development of their course syllabi.*

Dr. Leclair: *Excellent. This would allow us to be consistent in how the courses in the program are presented. These guidelines should probably be developed by the Implementation Committee and presented to the Faculty Program Team for their comments. Florence, all of the course syllabi and websites should also be available to all of the course coordinators, as was the case in the other health sciences program. This really helped us implement the program approach.”*

In Florence’s mind, this *modus operandi* encouraged complementarity among all of the courses, thereby avoiding unintentional redundancies and increasing opportunities to use work completed in one course as a basis for ongoing reflection in other courses (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 Cohesiveness and complementarity among the program courses**

Shortly after this discussion, Florence asked all of the course coordinators to meet with her to develop their course syllabi and to plan teaching, learning, and evaluation activities. She made it clear, of course, that these meetings could take place online. Since Florence was asked to sit in on the Program and Implementation Committee meetings and was aware of the development of and modifications to all of the courses, she was able to ensure cohesiveness and complementarity among the program courses. Finally, Florence maximized the use of an adapted computer-based tool for student competency development follow-up, which had been developed at the Faculty of Medicine. This tool would also make it possible for the entire teaching team to ensure program cohesiveness and course complementarity.

To ensure program cohesiveness, Florence and Dr. Leclair planned for the professors and lecturers to have access to one another's course materials. Furthermore, in addition to the meetings with Florence, two program retreats<sup>1</sup> were planned each year during the two-year implementation phase, then one every year after that. The goals of the retreats were established on the basis of the needs of the program, whether predetermined or emerging. In particular, these retreats provided the program contributors with an opportunity to examine the career profiles of the professionals to be trained, so as to ensure that all the program competencies were effectively developed and evaluated and to forge a program-specific culture of learning that respected the viewpoints of the various professions involved. In brief, the retreats made it possible for the participants to go beyond the differences among their professions and to bring, instead, their commonalities into focus.

### **By and for diversity: dealing with Inter-professionalism**

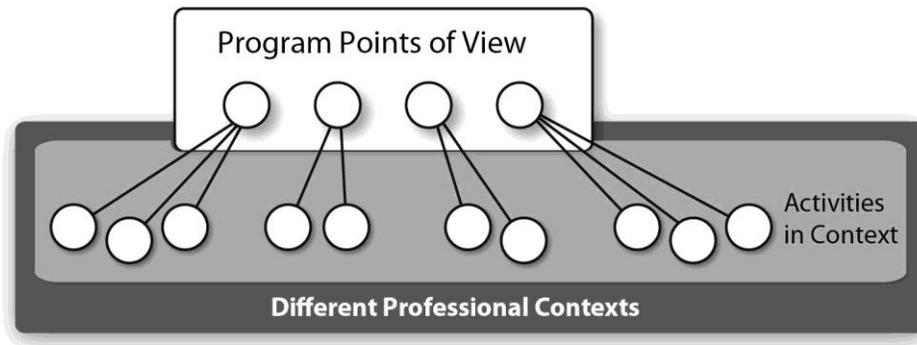
For Florence, the challenge of inter-professionalism was perhaps the most obvious, yet it was by far the most difficult to meet. The notion of inter-professionalism was omnipresent and remained an ongoing concern at every meeting. How could a common language be developed? How could the practical application and relevance of the course contents, irrespective of the profession, be demonstrated? How could one draw on the learners' prior knowledge when the learners' referents were so different? How could an educator whose referents are in physiotherapy effectively train and supervise a learner working in nursing? These were but some of the numerous questions guiding Florence and Dr. Leclair's reflections and actions.

---

<sup>1</sup> The retreats were working days during which all of the program contributors came together, generally at an isolated location, in order to reflect and work on predetermined goals.

Indeed, the students, like the educators working in the program, came from all of the healthcare professions: medicine, rehabilitation (physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy), nursing, pharmacy, nutrition, and so on. What they had in common, in particular, was their involvement at various levels in the training of future healthcare professionals and their desire to take their teaching skills to a higher level.

Such a heterogeneous audience provided Florence with interesting challenges regarding course design. During discussions held at meetings with faculty, she pressed hard for the need to develop a common understanding of the concepts routinely used in each profession, the context specifics, and the educational practices among professions. Despite promising signs of trans-disciplinary communication, Florence nonetheless remained concerned, since faculty would have to be consistent in maintaining an inclusive dialogue within each training cohort. She mapped it all out on paper (see Figure 3). A common vocabulary had to be established within the program while, at the same time, profession-centered viewpoints had to be linked to context-specific activities. Ideally, the teaching team would capitalize on this diversity for the benefit of student competency development and students would, in turn, benefit from a multiplicity of viewpoints offered by different professional contexts.



**Figure 3 The program viewpoint based on different professional viewpoints**

Florence hoped that the lexical and conceptual harmony of the program point of view would develop as synergy developed within the program. She knew that close collaboration among the various members of the teaching team was essential to the success of the program.

### **Strategies to Increase the Level of Familiarity with Educational Technology**

After a series of meetings, Florence and Dr. Leclair noted that the members of the Development Committee didn't seem to possess the same competency level in educational technology and online training. So, in order to bring everyone up to speed, Dr. Leclair asked Florence to head one part of the committee's retreat, which would take place in a few days. Florence got to work creating her training session, which she decided to call, "Online Training 101." During the session, she would present the basics of online training, demonstrate the available tools, and outline the steps to take to set up an online course. After the retreat was over, Dr. Leclair suggested that Florence adapt the training for use with program course coordinators. Indeed, this was how Florence presented her training to the course coordinators over the next few weeks.

During these training sessions, Florence noted that, even though all of the course coordinators wanted to use technology and were convinced of its relevance, as well as of the added value of offering an online program, a certain degree of anxiety was palpable. This anxiety was likely due, in part, to the novelty of the technology but also to the changes in practice it demanded. Florence often repeated to the course coordinators that they should just take it one step at a time and do their planning in phases if necessary: *“You can leave some of the challenges for later, for example, during phases two and three of this course!”*

### **Program Website**

Florence suggested to Dr. Leclair that they create a program website to assist the course coordinators in developing proficiency with technology and to facilitate discussions and exchanges, which could contribute to the development of the program culture.

*Florence: A program website would allow the various contributors to come together (since they work in different contexts), share, reflect, and interact by using the platform tools that they themselves will use with their own students. We could kill two birds with one stone, since they’ll become proficient in using the platform tools at the same time.*

*Dr. Leclair: Yes, I agree, I think your idea is a good one. The site would also help us develop a common working language, even a program culture, and it would also allow for different viewpoints to be expressed and for each of the professions to be represented and involved.*

Figure 4 illustrates one part of the program website on a specific theme: Supervision

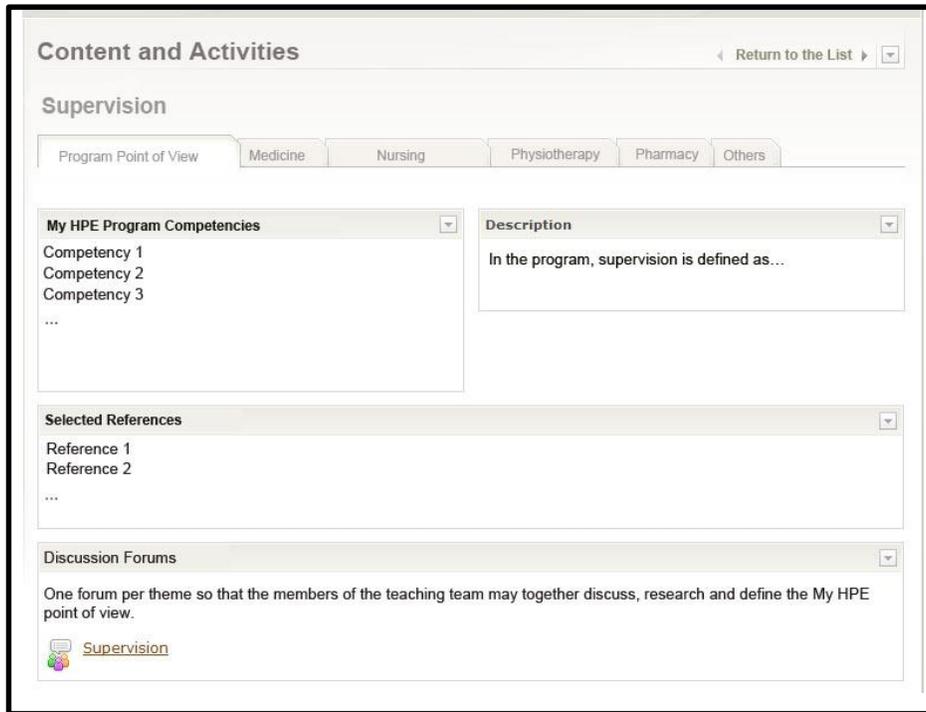


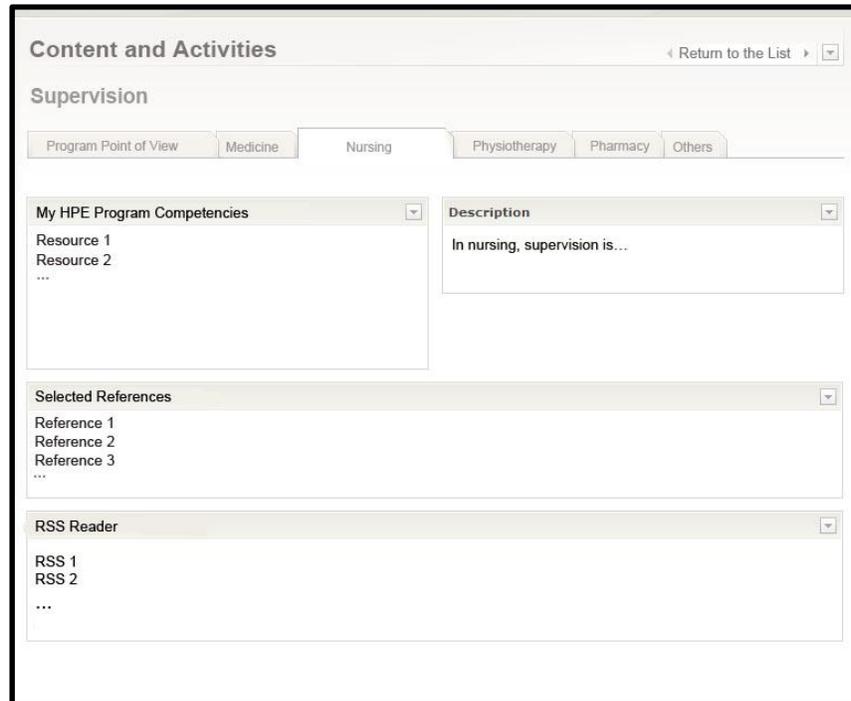
Figure 4 A screen capture of a section of the program website on a specific theme: supervision.

Florence linked each theme to a program competency and completed the “description” section, which described the program. She also added a reading list agreed upon by the teaching team. Once the basic site was in place, Florence gave designer access to all the course coordinators so they could modify or add to the contents.

*Florence: I suggest we use the discussion forum tool to discuss the viewpoints from all of the professions so as to adopt an overall program description and relevant references. This would make it possible for contributors to become familiar with using the site and to have a say in its development.*

*Dr. Leclair: I agree completely. I think we have to increase the number of opportunities for the course coordinators to become proficient in using the different tools available.*

Florence continued building the website. She created one thumbnail per profession in order to compile all of the information pertaining to each viewpoint on a given concept, as illustrated in Figure 5.



**Figure 5** A screen capture illustrating a part of the program website that provides the viewpoint of the nursing profession on the concept of supervision.

By making the different viewpoints accessible in one section of the site, the course coordinators quickly had access to viewpoints other than those of their own professions. This information would likely prove to be very useful, for example, when the time came for a coordinator to evaluate the work of a student in a profession other than his or her own.

Florence believed that the website was one means, among others, of ensuring the type of program cohesiveness they hoped to gain by implementing a program approach. In short,

the site was not only a working model but also a testing ground for the courses under development. Florence hoped the website would become a place where the course coordinators could go to get constructive feedback from their peers, feedback that would likely contribute to the creation of synergy so needed in the program approach.

The website therefore had a dual role for Florence: it would help the course coordinators become more familiar with technology and it would also ensure program cohesiveness.

### **Training**

Florence had also planned various training sessions for the full teaching team to become familiar with the different tools and the most important issues pertaining to online training. Some of the sessions had been outsourced but others had been developed internally to meet the specific needs of the health sciences sector. Some of the titles included, *“Creating my course website,” “Using discussion forums for instructional purposes,” “Blogs in online training,” “Using the synchronous virtual classroom,”* and so on.

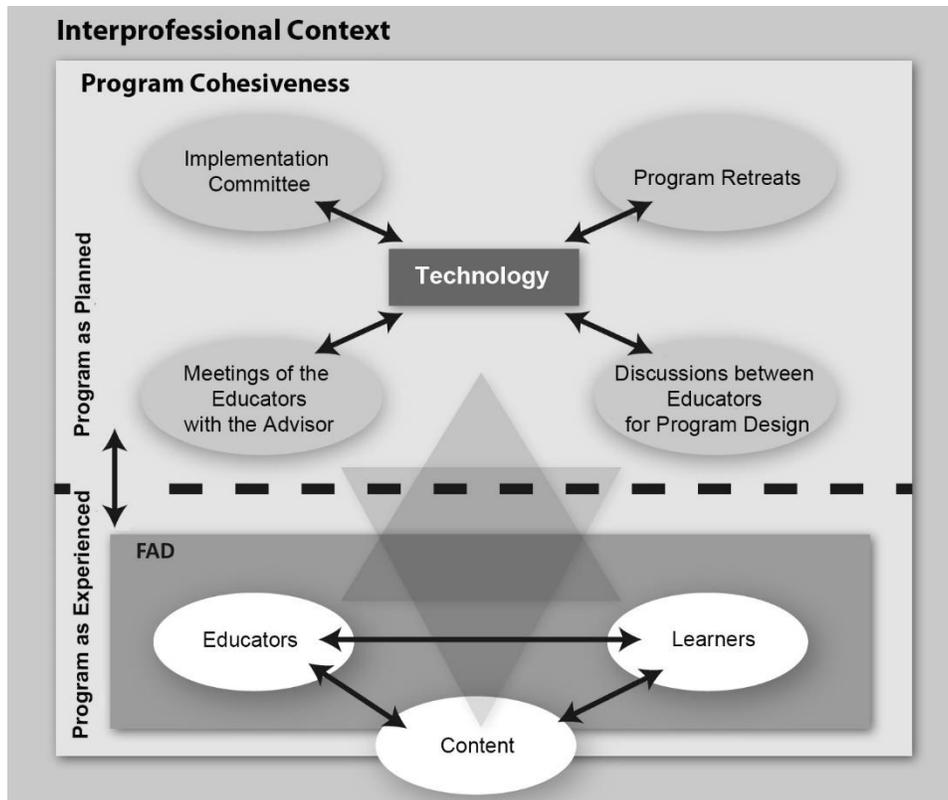
### **Transfer Activities**

Each tool (discussion forum, blog, etc.) introduced by Florence and Dr. Leclair provided an additional opportunity to encourage further developments in the program and to enhance the reflective process. After presenting each new tool, Florence planned an exercise for the course coordinators. These activities had four specific goals: 1) to allow coordinators to experiment and become proficient with a tool they would use in their own courses; 2) to allow coordinators to first position themselves as learners in order to understand what the learner sees, feels, and is seeking; 3) to promote team work and

discussion among coordinators for the development of a program culture, and thus 4) to create program synergy.

### **Technology for Learning and Program Cohesiveness**

Florence maximized the use of technology in this project, but not only for training offered to learners (online courses). In order to get a better idea of how technology was impacting the program, she mapped it all out (Figure 6) and then talked it over with Dr. Leclair. She showed Dr. Leclair that the use of technology was central to ensuring program cohesiveness because it linked the Implementation Committee activities, the program retreats, teaching team meetings, and discussions among all involved. It provided a permanent meeting place and a multitude of opportunities for the program team to meet without time and space constraints (like travel time), which were significant for professionals in the health sciences sector.



**Figure 6** Technology in the service of online training and program cohesiveness in an interprofessional context.

Technology also ensured a certain vitality within the program by making it possible to go back and forth between the program as it was planned and the program as it was experienced in the field. Indeed, at this stage of program development, Florence and Dr. Leclair believed that it was essential to regularly review the program on the basis of what was actually being experienced by both the developers and the learners.

Overall, Florence was quite satisfied with her involvement in the program. She hoped to have implemented sustainable strategies that would prove to be effective over the long term. She was fully aware of the fact that the initial enthusiasm felt by the various stakeholders might eventually peter out. However, for the time being, the program

website was considered by all to be a tool of choice in meeting three challenges: 1) it was the ideal forum for developing program cohesiveness, since it brought together all of the information required by the program and it allowed for the explicit development of a program culture; 2) it promoted and allowed for the evolution of a common instructional culture based on comparisons of different professions, their contexts, and their respective visions; and 3) it was an ideal training ground for all involved who wished to develop their online teaching skills.

### **References**

Prégent, R., Bernard, H., & Kozanitis, A. (2009). *Enseigner à l'université dans une approche-programme : guide à l'attention des nouveaux professeurs et chargés de cours*. Montréal, Qc: Presses internationales Polytechnique.