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Online peer support for students

While many UK higher education institutions have websites offering information and advice on common student problems, interactive online support is less common. This article describes a project developing internet-based mutual support for students experiencing psychological problems at University College London

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The expansion of the internet has led to new opportunities for delivering psychological services to the general population as a whole, and to students in particular. Many UK higher education institutions have set up websites giving information and advice on common student problems (see www.student.counselling.co.uk/ for a useful guide to which institutions provide material for which problems). However, interactive online support for students seems much less common. This article describes a project in which we started an online mutual support group aimed at UCL (University College London) students experiencing psychological problems. We hoped that this online support group would be a useful complement to both the online text-based material and also to the traditional face-to-face counselling services.

Why online support groups?

The general proliferation of online support groups has been one of the most striking growth areas in the internet (eg Davison, Pennebaker and Dickerson, 2000¹; Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo and Stern, 2004²). Thousands of them can be found, covering a vast range of problems. For example, www.yahoo.com lists 25,966 support groups under its 'health and wellness' section (data from 21 June 2005). Most online support groups are targeted at specific medical or psychological problems. One typical example is the actively used *Walkers in darkness* site (www.walkers.org) for people experiencing

depression. The great majority of these sites adopt a peer support model, in which the group runs itself as an online community (although it may be moderated to ensure that members' messages do not violate certain ground rules). However, there are also some examples of therapist-led online support groups: for instance, Chang, Yeh and Krumboltz (1999)³ describe a structured group aimed at male Asian-American students.

The central idea behind mutual support groups (also known as self-help groups or peer support groups) – both online and face-to-face – is that individuals who are experiencing similar problems may have something valuable to offer each other. One leading theorist of the mutual support movement, Borkman (1999)⁴, has written about the importance of group members' 'experiential knowledge', that is, the personal knowledge that they have gained from having a problem and attempting to resolve it. This contrasts with the 'expert knowledge' possessed by professional helpers, such as counsellors and therapists, by virtue of their training and practice. The idea is that group members, drawing on their experiential knowledge, have a capacity to empathise with other members' problems and are also able to give advice informed by knowing what has worked for them and what has not.

Online support groups for psychological problems have many potential strengths:

- Like other kinds of peer support, they are good for people who, for whatever reason, are reluctant to seek professional

help. Members of online support groups usually use pseudonymous 'screen names', so no one need feel stigmatised for admitting that they have a psychological problem.

- They are an efficient means of connecting people who share similar problems, even if they are geographically separated, thus helping them feel less alone.

- Rather than being restricted to the office hours of traditional face-to-face services, online support groups are accessible at all times of day or night.

- Like other applications of peer support, they capitalise on the 'helper principle' (Riessman, 1965)⁵, ie that it may be beneficial not just to receive help oneself, but also to give help to others.

Online support groups may be particularly suited to students, with their good computer skills and ubiquitous internet access. Furthermore, their round the clock availability suits the lifestyle of many students. Finally, there is often a sense of solidarity and comradeship among the student population, laying the basis for a successful mutual support group.

The UCL project

Given this background, we decided to set up an online mutual support group at UCL. The project was initiated by Ed Freeman, who designed the site and carried out the research for his clinical psychology doctoral thesis (Freeman, 2003⁶; Freeman, Barker and Pistrang, in preparation⁷). It was jointly supervised by Chris Barker and Nancy Pistrang, UCL clinical psychologists

with a longstanding research interest in applications of peer and mutual support (see www.psychol.ucl.ac.uk/phas). The project was established on a limited budget, and it would have been impossible without a number of colleagues who offered generous technical and administrative support. Fortunately, it is now well supported by the college, allowing the moderator (Barry Keane) to devote some dedicated time to the running and development of the project. In particular, generous support has been given by UCL's Widening Participation Unit, as the project is partly aimed at preventing dropout, particularly of non-traditional students, by helping students with problems feel less alone and more connected to their fellow students.

The student support project is built around a specially designed website (www.ucl.ac.uk/support-pages) with two separate components: information pages and the online mutual support group. The information pages are not unique to this project, being partly adapted from material kindly made available by other UK universities. They consist of basic information about a range of common student problems, both academic (eg procrastination, exams) and emotional (eg anxiety, depression, homesickness). They describe the nature of the problem, make some suggestions about how to cope with it, and give links to other online sources. There is also a separate 'sources of support' page listing local services that students can turn to for help.

The second component of the site, the online support group, uses a message board format. Students can post messages themselves, or read and respond to other students' messages. This part of the site is not accessible from the outside, as it operates as a closed group. It is restricted to UCL students, who have to go through a registration procedure based on verifying the validity of their UCL email address.

The initial version of the site was fairly rudimentary, but it has now been upgraded to have a more professional look and feel. It is advertised by emails sent to all registered students once a term, but we particularly hope it will be used by those students who, for whatever reasons, may not use traditional services, and by those from non-traditional backgrounds.

Evaluation

The site was designed to have an integrated research component. Detailed results of the evaluation are given in Freeman (2003)⁶ and Freeman et al (in preparation)⁷: here we will present some illustrative data on usage and activity of the site. (This data relates to the initial phase of the site, in 2002-3, which was the most intensively researched, but had fewer members in the support group. More recent data is available on request from the authors.)

One hundred and forty two students were given access to the online support group and the information pages. Their median age was 21, ranging between 18 and 44. There were 98 (69%) women and 44 (31%) men (this preponderance of women was unexpected, and contrasts with the roughly equal gender distribution in the college). 104 (73%) were white, the next largest ethnic group being Asian. For ethical reasons, all participants were screened using the CORE-OM (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure: Evans et al, 2002)⁸, a widely used measure of psychological problems; 62 (44%) had scores above the clinical cut-off, showing a moderate or severe degree of felt distress. If the student's scores on the CORE-OM indicated severe problems, they were referred to a counsellor or family doctor.

Of the 142 students who could potentially use the online group, 58 (41%) actually accessed it. Of these, 19 (33% of users) posted messages, 37 (64%) read messages without posting, and two (3%) read message titles only. The group was accessed around the clock: 48% of accesses were between 9am and 5pm; 42% between 5pm and 1am; and 10% between 1am and 9am.

The researchers coded all postings to the support group according to the nature of the problems being discussed. (The codes were not mutually exclusive, so a single posting could be given more than one code.) The most common problems were: study difficulties (29% of postings), interpersonal problems (29%), depression/sadness (19%), eating concerns (17%) and employment worries (15%). This pattern was very similar to the usage of the information pages: the greatest number of hits were for the

pages on procrastination, work block, depression and concentration.

Finally, to give some flavour of the group interaction, here is an edited extract from some of the messages in a topic thread entitled 'the joy of final year projects'. (Spellings have been corrected but the original punctuation retained; square brackets indicate editorial changes or omissions.)

Anyone struggling like I am with final year projects? (Student 1)

I like the advice about procrastinating on the advice page. That is what I am doing now. Better to get something down on paper... so off to do that. (Student 1 again).

yeah – final year projects are such a joy hanging over you. thanks for recommending the advice page on procrastination. i like the idea about breaking things down – i always scare/paralyse myself with 'aagh i've got the WHOLE thing to write' rather than viewing it in smaller chunks: just reading one paper this morning or just writing one section this week etc. I'm going to try it now (if only to give myself a lovely reward at the end...). Hope it's going well for you (Student 2)

Ah... Final year projects. Mine seemed to be going OK, I had done the research and designed an experiment to test my hypothesis [...] by early November. But then came data collection. Which, to be frank, has been quite spectacularly unsuccessful whilst being juggled with lectures, presentations, essays and socialising (obviously!). Ah well, the deadline for the whole thing is still a good 7 weeks away... 7 WEEKS AWAY!?! Shit! Better get a move on! (Student 3)

Well if [Student 3] thinks he can do it in 7 weeks there is hope for the rest of us! Good luck (Student 1)

does anyone else find they vacillate between thinking 'this is impossible, i don't have enough time, i can't do this' (and then giving up trying and doing something else instead – TV, socialising)

and 'shit, maybe i can do this and why did i waste all that time earlier feeling hopeless and wasting time ...'. Or is it just me?

And good luck [Student 3], it's amazing how much can get done in the few weeks before submission (at least i'm hoping that's the case) ... (Student 2)

LOL [Student 2] So true. I am very much focused on the 'how' does one do this. it just seems impossible. but like every other piece of work this one will hopefully get done – even if it is finished 10 minutes before the deadline. By the way if your project relies on old unavailable material – try the stores. i'm in my final year and i have just discovered that section of the library. (Student 1)

[several posts omitted]

Thanks to this page I only realised that I'm not alone and that my predicament is actually defined as procrastination [...] (Student 4)

Conclusions and current developments

The site has now been running since the 2002/3 academic year, and it has developed from an initial, stand-alone project, to an integral part of UCL's web presence and student support system. It is now managed by the UCL student counselling service, and is viewed as complementary to the service's existing offerings. Students can access their preferred form of service – face-to-face or online – and many use both types. Indeed there is some evidence from student feedback that the online service acts as an advertisement for the face-to-face service. Some interesting professional issues arise when the site moderator sees students for counselling who are also users of the online group (see Humphreys, Winzelberg and Klaw, 2000, for a more general discussion of professional ethics in this situation)⁹; we now offer all new counselling service clients the choice to not see a counsellor who is involved with moderating the online group. Although the group is constantly monitored, we have tried to remain

faithful to its original peer support ideology. The moderator posts messages only rarely, and the group seems to have retained its peer support flavour.

A recent development is that we have set up a special support site for LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) students, on the grounds that they are subject to discrimination and potential harassment, so a sub-group dedicated to their needs seems valuable. Other developments in the pipeline include a sub-group for students with disabilities.

We hope to be able to conduct further research on the process and outcome of the online group. We are aware that we do not, at present, have any data to bear on one of the central aims of the project: that it will contribute to increased student retention by helping some students at risk of dropping out feel more connected to the university community. We would like to collect data to address this issue. However, there are clearly multiple factors contributing to student alienation and drop-out, and it is hard to isolate the contribution of any single one.

In conclusion, we believe that online mutual support is a promising development that can be usefully adapted to meet the needs of students in higher education. We plan to expand and develop our own project over the next few years, hoping to make it a valuable complementary resource for students facing the inevitable stresses and strains of university life, especially those, who, for whatever reason, are reluctant to avail themselves of traditional counselling services. ■

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