# Leadership Online: Student Facilitated Interprofessional Learning

Clouder, D.L. , Krumins, M. and Davies, B.

# Interprofessional E-Learning and Collaborative Work:
## Practices and Technologies

Adrian Bromage
*University of Birmingham, UK*

Lynn Clouder
*Coventry University, UK*

Jill Thistlethwaite
*University of Warwick, UK*

Frances Gordon
*Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), UK*

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# Chapter 9
# Leadership Online:
## Student Facilitated Interprofessional Learning

**Lynn Clouder**
*Coventry University, UK*

**Marie Krumins**
*Coventry University, UK*

**Bernie Davies**
*Coventry University, UK*

## ABSTRACT

*A study investigating the effectiveness of a curriculum innovation involving students as online facilitators of interprofessional learning (IPL) provides a focus for this chapter. The research aim was to investigate whether Year 3 health and social care students were effective in facilitating online discussion forums contributing to the IPL of their counterparts in Years 1 and 2. Findings suggest that they were equally as effective as academic staff while offering some additional benefits. The account provides evidence of a successful online interprofessional initiative involving students promoting IPL.*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the potential of students to provide leadership in promoting interprofessional learning (IPL) amongst their student peers. We draw on our findings from a study carried out at Coventry University in the United Kingdom (UK). Debate about the most appropriate models of IPL is ongoing and approaches are both diverse and numerous. However, the possibility of students being prime movers in inculcating interprofessional beliefs, values and attitudes in their peers has been largely unexploited. Our focus in this chapter is on the benefits that less well advanced students gain from online facilitation provided by a more advanced student. The chapter will be of interest to institutions developing either a blended or online approach to promoting IPL, which requires online facilitation and to those willing to consider that students can play a part in others' learning and are a valuable resource for advancing IPL as online facilitators.

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## STUDENT MENTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Throughout the chapter we use the term 'student leadership', which invokes a sense of advocacy, guidance and direction. The general literature refers to 'peer leaders', 'peer tutors', 'peer facilitators' and 'peer mentors'. However, the term 'student proctor' has also been used in American contexts to describe students helping other students to learn (Saunders, 1992). Notwithstanding subtle differences and connotations to these concepts we adopt the terms 'leadership' and 'mentorship' and use them interchangeably throughout discussions. The model of student leadership adopted involves peer mentoring by senior students of less advanced students (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). Leadership capability seems to be an increasingly important attribute sought by employers (Wagner, 2008) therefore evidence of having engaged in a formal programme of peer leadership might prove beneficial to students when composing their curricula vitae in preparation for employment.

The sound body of research evidence on peer-led learning highlights its academic benefits for all concerned (see for example, Gosser et al., 2001). Research by Goodlad and Hirst (1989) suggests that students benefit from peer mentors in that achievement is improved and is less variable. Students are generally positive about input from peer mentors, possibly because the learning feels less formal and the learning environment is less threatening without the presence of academic staff (Hayler, 1999). Indeed, Jamieson and Thomas (1974) had some time ago highlighted issues of power and conflict in the student-teacher relationship that has a profound effect on student satisfaction and learning. Micari, Streitwieser and Light (2006) suggest that students may be well placed to help other students understand material that they have recently learned which provides them with an innate ability to help students in a manner best suited to their developmental level. This point is supported by Saunders (1992, p. 216) who suggests that 'the value of peer tutoring is that recent student experiences are passed on to others, and that relatively more advanced students have valuable insights, which academic staff do not'. The criticism of academic staff suggests that students might be more up-to-date with current thinking and practice but may also relate to other issues such as staff being ill prepared or struggling to find time to offer support and guidance (McCall, 2007). Gallew's (2005) research findings on the benefits gained from senior occupational therapy students developing a lecture for first year students suggest that they perceived that the senior students were enthusiastic, confident, professional and possessed positive leadership skills.

Saunders (1992) raises several other important points in his critique of a peer tutoring initiative in engineering at what was Nottingham Polytechnic in the early 1990s, which still have contemporary relevance. He stresses the importance of thorough briefing about the organisation, aims and expected outcomes and need to attend to training requirements. Highlighting major decisions that must be made by course teams when setting up peer mentoring projects, Saunders encourages debate around issues such as whether schemes should be compulsory or voluntary, whether students should work on their own or with other tutors and whether tutoring should be assessed.

Despite recognised potential benefits of peer mentorship, its use in IPL has not been widely adopted. In fact, Micari et al. (2006, p. 285) point out that students 'rarely enjoy a formal opportunity to help other students advance in their intellectual development'. They attribute this to 'academia's reluctance to endow un-credentialed students with the authority to teach, or ...simply the absence of an infrastructure to support such an endeavour' (Micari et al., 2006, p. 285). Reflecting on the fact that students are generally positioned as learners and not as sources of learning, they suggest that this influences how they are viewed by Faculty and how they understand their own capabilities and purpose.

## STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN IPL

The literature on peer led IPL is scant. Gill et al. (2006) report on a peer assisted learning (PAL) initiative within a medical school in the UK that was expanded to include an interprofessional dimension. Medical students, who had completed an optional teaching module, engaged in small group teaching with post registration or graduate nursing students. The initiative was evaluated positively with feedback that the medical students were enthusiastic, showed interest and commitment and most importantly there was indication that interprofessional understanding and working had been improved. Gill et al. (2006) stress that the success of this type of initiative is dependent on preparation and ongoing support for peer facilitators and close working with academic staff.

A Canadian interprofessional initiative involving students in promoting IPL in selected Canadian health programmes provides insight into the benefits, challenges and implications of student leadership in IPL (Hoffman et al., 2008). Drawing on diverse evidence the authors stress the importance of student leadership in helping to enhance students' willingness to collaborate and in the long term vitality and sustainability of interprofessional efforts.

In discussing models for promoting student leadership, Hoffman et al. (2008) consider involvement in curriculum design and implementation through participation in working groups and steering committees, as well as student-initiated IPE. Students leading the design and delivery of IPL for their peers appears to be confined to relatively low risk discrete projects, such as running conferences or time-limited and stand-alone courses. The challenges identified in student initiated IPL include lack of funding, lack of institutional and/or administrative support, lack of faculty mentorship and/or guidance, lack of leadership opportunities and indeed interest in leading IPL activities as well as a lack of student interest in participating in IPL.

These factors are interesting in that they lead us to question whether in fact staff facilitated initiatives face similar challenges. Many of the structural issues are not insurmountable although, promoting interest in IPL might be a significant sticking point. Research suggests that passion and enthusiasm are essential qualities for teachers in general (Gibbs, 2003; Gibson, 2009), therefore one might assume that if this is lacking it may be even more of a challenge for IPL initiatives.

## LEADING LEARNING ONLINE: AN ADDED COMPLICATION?

To this long list of potential challenges a further complication can be added; that is the delivery of IPL in an online format, which characterises the programme at Coventry University. Online delivery of IPL has potential benefits in terms of overcoming some of the difficulties associated with face-to- face IPL. For instance, Scammell et al. (2008), reporting on a study of experiences of IPL using online discussion based on a virtual community, suggest the approach overcomes the difficulties of geographical distance and creates equity of experience for large numbers of students. Their findings suggest that students themselves particularly value the opportunity to explore contentious issues in what they perceive to be a safe environment. Findings from another study of the use of online modules for collaborative learning amongst health professionals, reinforces the suggestion that online delivery overcomes location barriers (Walsh, 2007). This study also illustrates the potential benefit of an online approach in helping to overcome the barriers of different methods of learning adopted by different professional groups (Walsh 2007).

The benefits offered by computer technology include 'new opportunities for learning collaborations and partnerships, strengthening and extending learning communities, promoting new ways of communicating and investigating, and providing

better access to an increasingly wide range of discipline-specific educational and research-based pedagogical resources (Ellis et al., 2007, p. 83). Online discussion, in particular, is recognised for its 'reflective, collaborative and evaluative affordances' (ibid, 95). These benefits can be attractive to those wishing to promote an IPL strategy, which is scalable, manageable in terms of logistics and effective with respect to facilitating contact and exchange between students from the various professions, as well as across institutions. However, Ellis et al.'s (2007) research confirms that good discussions (whether they occur face-to-face or online) cannot be taken for granted; students need to understand how they should approach discussions and why they are discussing. This clearly requires careful attention to how resources are designed and discussions structured in order to optimize dialogue. It also has implications for how discussions are facilitated.

Online IPL clearly has some benefits although there are also challenges. The most obvious challenge is getting to grips with using technology. Scammell et al. (2008) found that both staff and students found familiarising themselves with the technology time consuming, although this was later valued as a transferable skill useful in other areas of learning. A major difference in online communication and a factor which characterises contemporary communication to an increasing degree is the lack of face-to-face contact that robs interaction of the subtleties of non-verbal communication, facial expression and intonation of voice. While this may be freeing for some students it is also experienced as limiting by others and possibly leads to the development of increased sensitivity about how words are used and can be interpreted by others. Certainly these factors point to a different sort of challenge for online facilitators attempting to create an atmosphere of trust and openness online.

The skills of the interprofessional facilitator have been identified as crucial to the success of face-to-face IPL initiatives (Oandasan & Reeves, 2005). Rees and Johnson's (2007, p. 550) research findings suggest that facilitation of IPL is 'anything but easy'; staff felt that they needed more support and found working outside their area of expertise challenging. Being able to 'think on your feet' was highlighted as vital for successful facilitation, which was perceived as an advanced skill. Online facilitation adds another layer of complexity to using facilitation skills effectively, not least in simply getting students to engage in posting basic messages. Due to its asynchronous nature it is arguably less demanding with respect to some challenges, such as having to think on one's feet, because it allows time for reflection. Nevertheless, Miers et al. (2007) highlight the importance of staff development in e-facilitation, especially if apparent poor analytical debate online is to be addressed.

Salmon (2004) uses the term 'e-moderation' to refer to the role of the online teacher or trainer and identifies a range of qualities and characteristics of successful e- moderators. She highlights a requirement to understand the online process, based on personal experience as an online learner, the need for reasonable technical skills, good online communication skills, knowledge, experience, motivation and determination to become a good online facilitator. Salmon suggests in recruiting e-moderators, it is important to find credible members of the learning community but not necessarily subject experts and quotes Knight's (2002) suggestion that ability to empathize and show consideration for learners are important factors for success. She is a firm advocate of staff development, suggesting:

*any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods or the introduction of technology into teaching and learning should include effective e-moderator training and support, otherwise its outcomes are likely to be meagre and unsuccessful (Salmon, 2004, 80).*

Much of the research in online facilitation of student discussion forums has involved academic staff rather than peer facilitators, which serves as a point of departure for this chapter, given that the initiative described presently involved student leadership in an online setting.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND APPROACH

The interprofessional learning pathway (IPLP) at Coventry University is underpinned by a social constructionist pedagogy, which focuses on 'acculturating students to the communities they wish to enter' (Thralls & Blyler, 1993, p. 251). The aim is to provide opportunity for collaborative discussion so that students come to understand how an interprofessional community uses discourse; in other words 'to come to consensus about knowledge affecting that community and adopt communal norms governing discourse practices' (Thralls & Blyler, 1993, p. 251). Within the IPLP, discussion focuses on a scenario and learning is facilitated through virtual interaction between students using asynchronous online discussion forums in the institution's virtual learning environment (Blackboard). With the exception of one introductory face-to-face meeting with their facilitator, students do not routinely meet one another during the four to five week period of interaction. Discussion forums have traditionally been facilitated by academic staff all of whom complete the in-house training course. By addressing both facilitation and IPL skills, this course discourages facilitators from acting in a uniprofessional manner, something that Scammell et al. (2008) identified as a challenge. The student facilitator project provided opportunity for students to be trained for and to take on the facilitator role; the asynchronous online nature of the IPLP discussion forums provided flexibility of time commitment, which meant that students could work around other demands, such as coursework deadlines.

The research aimed to explore the effectiveness of a small number of Year 3 students in facilitating online discussion forums contributing to IPL of their peers in Years 1 and 2. Ethical approval was sought and gained from the Coventry University Ethics Committees and the project was given full backing from Senior Management in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences.

An open invitation for involvement was posted on the IPL site on the Blackboard VLE as well as being advertised on posters on student notice boards and through Course Directors. Student facilitators were then recruited in summer 2008 with a view to commencing facilitation of forums in October 2008 and March 2009. Student volunteers attended a face-to-face meeting at which they were briefed about the project, including details about payment on a pre-set hourly rate. Students were given a participant information sheet and completed a consent form for involvement in the research aspect of the project. Course Directors were asked to provide a short reference for each student as a means of ensuring that they were not experiencing any difficulties with their programmes that might interfere with the role, and students' own contributions to their discussions forums in previous years were checked to ensure that they had been active contributors with a commitment to IPL. In addition, students needed to feel able to commit the time to the project in the context of their own studies, to exhibit good interpersonal skills, to have access to a personal computer at home as well as at university and to be willing to complete a facilitator training course. Twelve Year 3 students were recruited to the project. Figure 1 shows their professional background.

*Figure 1. Student facilitators by profession*

| Course | Number of student facilitators |
|---|---|
| Adult Nursing | 5 |
| Medicine | 1 |
| Physiotherapy | 4 |
| Social Work | 2 |

Facilitator training commenced 3 weeks immediately prior to the first facilitation period, the final fourth week running into the facilitation period. The programme, which was a hybrid version of the staff training course that was running concurrently, was delivered totally online and supported by experienced academic staff IPL facilitators. Students had their own online forum within the training programme so they could share ideas and concerns with one another. The course was assessed through a written reflective account and all students received a certificate in online facilitation on completion. As a means of recognition of the students' input, agreement was gained to offset the Year 3 IPLP assessment with the training course assessment.

During the training and the facilitation period, a learning technologist provided face-to-face, telephone and email support for any technical issues as well as other queries raised by the student facilitators. Although additional academic staff were also on hand to provide support they did not routinely visit the online forums facilitated by students on the basis that we wished to convey a sense of trust in the students' commitment to their task. A total of 24 Year 1 forums and 22 Year 2 forums were facilitated by students over two four-week periods. Each forum contained approximately 15 students from a range of professions including: adult nurses, mental health nurses, learning disability nurses, children's and young people's nurses, midwives, medics, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, paramedics, operating department practitioners, youth workers and social workers.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Several data collection methods were utilised to gain multifaceted insight into the project. In-depth interviews were conducted with student facilitators. On completion of each of the four-week IPLP periods the same online questionnaire was completed by all Year 1 and Year 2 students enabling comparisons across groups facilitated by both staff and by students. In Year 1, 163 from a possible 360 students (45%) from student facilitated groups responded to the questionnaire. In Year 2, 233 from a possible 308 students (71%) in student facilitated groups responded to the online questionnaire. Data from open questions in the Year 1 questionnaire were subject to qualitative data analysis and it is these data that form the basis of the findings presented. At the time of writing Year 2 data had not been fully analyzed, although some qualitative comments from Year 2 evaluations are used to support insights.

## Research Findings

A number of themes arose from the qualitative data that when combined seem to indicate the overall effectiveness of the student facilitators in enhancing the student learning experience as well as IPL. It appeared that student facilitators were equally capable as academic staff in promoting discussion that helped students understand their role in empowerment, (a key focus of the IPL module); helping students understand how their profession can collaborate to improve care; and recognising the value of interprofessional working. In fact they proved themselves able to cope with conversations about what are frequently sensitive and challenging topics with respect to both content and interprofessional context. In terms of skills, Year 1 students reported having developed ability to listen to others' points of view and confidence to discuss sensitive issues. There was some indication from student comments that student facilitators promoted greater insight into the role of other professions than academic staff facilitators and were better at encouraging students to reflect on their beliefs and values in relation to inequality and empowerment. For instance, one student suggested:

*I think it is good because they were able to tell us what to expect from IPL and how it helps in many ways in terms of learning about different professions and their jobs at the same time as keeping in mind the scenario and dealing with it.*

In a series of open questions, students were asked what they thought about having had a student facilitate their group. Notwithstanding the point made by several Year 1 students that they could not say whether student facilitators were a good, bad or indifferent idea, as they had no comparisons, the majority of student responses indicated a perceived benefit of having a student facilitator over an academic staff facilitator. Responses were limited with respect to why having a student facilitator might prove to be disadvantageous. However, several students did raise the issue of lack of substantial practice experience in comparison to academic staff as a potential drawback. In fact, this suggestion was in all cases speculative as none of the students appeared to have found it to be problematic and possibly reflects a lack of awareness of the facilitation role. This finding appears to support Salmon's (2004) suggestion that good facilitators do not necessarily need to be subject experts. It seems salutary that one student stated that s/he "didn't realise we were being facilitated by a student".

Year 2 students were in a position to be able to judge their student facilitators against their earlier experience of staff facilitators. The majority appeared satisfied; students appeared to have done at least as good a job as academic staff. However, there were comments that suggest that in some cases student facilitation had been better:

*Yes the facilitator did a very good job this year. Was very helpful and gave good sound help.*

*I think the facilitator was better than previously, as [s/he] spent more time on IPLP and emailed reminders.*

The overall impression from Year 1 students was that there had been several areas of added value from the student facilitator input.

## Empathy

The first benefit reaped from the student facilitators' was their ability to empathize with their peers. The students felt that the student facilitators acknowledged the external pressures that they were under, which they felt staff did not seem to appreciate. Whether or not this is an accurate point of view is uncertain, although it does possibly reflect McCall's (2007) observation that staff struggle to find time to fully appreciate non-academic concerns of students or are ill-prepared to do so. Alternatively staff may simply lack the degree of understanding that might exist between peers of a similar generation. Perhaps most significantly students perceived that the student facilitators had been through the same process and were aware of time pressures, workload and other sources of stress. For instance, one student stated:

*She knows exactly what we are going through regarding this and our other workloads having only done this last year.*

Student facilitators appeared to be well positioned to be able to empathise and connect with students as advocated by Knight (2002). The sense of shared experience provides a commonality that promoted improved understanding and a level of trust that that might not be so readily nurtured in student/academic relationships.

## Trust Based on Credibility

Another student expressed a strong sense of trust in her/his student facilitator and the task in hand:

*They have experienced IPLP for themselves and do know what it is like. Because of this they want us to pass and therefore help us as much as pos-*

*sible so we could be in the same position as them in the future.*

This confidence in being helped through the process was attributed by the students themselves to the fact that the student facilitators had been through the IPLP before, which gave them demonstrable insight and experience to enable them to successfully lead their peers. In other words, they were credible members of a learning community (Salmon, 2004). Comments such as, "they have recent experience in the IPLP and can guide us in the right direction" and "they understand the system" and are "able to give advice from their own experience" suggest that the facilitators were very much accepted in their role in leading learning. These findings support previous research (Micari et al., 2006; Saunders, 1999) that suggests students may bring innate abilities to help other students learn because they possess teaching skills as a result of having recently learned similar material. In addition, the students felt that as a consequence of their direct experience, the facilitators knew what practical tactics to adopt to engage them in discussions:

*They have experiences participating in IPLP and can share this experience with you and know best how to engage you with the subject.*

*It is reassuring to have someone who is in charge so to speak, to keep things flowing and in order.*

The data suggest that the Year 1 students recognised the skills exhibited by the student facilitators, developed through their online facilitator training, which contribute to them being seen as credible allies in the learning process. They also recognised the influence of the make-up of their groups and the extent to which attitudes, beliefs, levels of participation and commitment affected learning, highlighting the importance of good facilitation as a means of managing some of these issues. These findings lend support to the importance of the prerequisites for an online facilitator identified by Salmon (2004) such as the ability to understand the online process based on personal experience as an online learner, the need for reasonable technical skills, good online communication skills, knowledge and experience to share, as well as the motivation and determination to become a good online facilitator. This final point was illustrated by the level of enthusiasm with which the student facilitators embraced their role.

## Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm was highlighted as a quality needed to lead discussions. If the facilitator felt passionate about it, it was likely the students would too. One student reflected:

*[S/he] made me consider topics I wouldn't have before and will make me a better healthcare professional.*

Another student suggested that his/her facilitator's enthusiasm was infectious, stating "it gives you more motivation". These findings reflect Gallew's (2005) suggestion that, amongst other qualities, teachers need to possess enthusiasm and passion (Gibbs, 2003; Gibson, 2009). Research by Kunter et al. (2008) suggests that it is important to distinguish between enthusiasm for teaching and enthusiasm for the subject matter. The data did not distinguish whether students were enthused by facilitators who were perceived to be good facilitators, or by those who gave the impression of having a passion for interprofessional learning. The first student comment suggests that the enthusiasm might have been for IPL although clearly the two are intertwined (Gill et al., 2006). Notwithstanding our inability to discriminate between these two foci, perhaps most importantly our findings stress the significance of self selection for the role of the online facilitator based on motivation and genuine interest in teaching and/or IPL.

In-depth interviews conducted with the student facilitators confirmed that intrinsic motivation was more influential than the extrinsic motivation of payment, which was not substantial and as such was considered to be a 'perk'.

## Diffusion of Status

Several students' comments suggested that the student facilitated forums were less hierarchical than in the staff facilitated groups, simply because students were more approachable and used similar language. For instance, one student reflected that "they are on the same level as you" and another suggested:

*We were able to communicate effectively with them better on a similar level. I feel there wasn't any pressure to the work being assessed, and were able to give personal answers to activities.*

A further student commented:

*It helps that [the student facilitators] are from a similar generation as yourself so have a sound understanding about thought processes in that generation.*

These findings possibly resonate with Haylers (1999) suggestion that peer mentors can be beneficial because the learning feels less formal and the learning environment is less threatening without the presence of academic staff. In this context student facilitators were perceived to be similar 'beings' even though interestingly the age range amongst students meant that some were probably not of the same generation. The comment regarding assessment suggests that students are constantly aware of being judged by academic staff even in less formal settings. Acknowledging the deference with which a student facilitator operated, in stating, "he was respectful towards us and encouraged us to participate without being condescending", another student adds weight to the suggestion that diffusing power differentials by addressing the power imbalance between teachers and students (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974), was in this situation, beneficial for learning.

## Support and Challenge

Respect from the student facilitators was clearly influential in nurturing engagement and making students feel that their comments were worthwhile and of value. However, being able to help students explore further and develop the discussion at a higher level is a definite skill that some student facilitators clearly possessed. Comments such as:

*our facilitator tried to draw discussions out as some people were just posting the same things" and "she praised good points and asked additional questions we maybe hadn't thought about*

illustrate that student facilitators recognised their responsibility to enhance discussion. They also highlight the challenge that facilitators face in the light of evidence that analytical debate online can be lacking (Miers et al., 2007).

Effective facilitation involved achieving a balance between support, challenge, recognition of the need for praise and encouragement. However, perhaps most importantly, the Year 1 students appeared to greatly appreciate having some reassurance that they were doing things in the right way:

*She was able to reassure us that accessing and taking part in IPLP was straightforward and not something to worry about. This was believable as she herself had taken part.*

This comment illustrates how for some students simply getting onto the forums and finding courage to post even basic messages was a new and potentially anxiety-promoting experience made significantly easier by facilitators with whom they felt they could identify. A final comment, "IPLP

is a very clever tool and has brought me out of my online shell" seemed to capture one student's sense of achievement in this respect.

## Promoting IPL

The student facilitators themselves identified that the experience had enhanced their own IPL, encouraging them to explore interprofessional aspects of the scenarios and related discussions. It appears that the students they facilitated also recognised the benefits of this. For example;

*[the student facilitator] had a good understanding of students' concerns and fears about becoming a professional.*

*[the student facilitator] opens students eyes to opportunities that arise from doing well in IPLP.*

Many students acknowledged that their facilitator kept discussions "on track" and encouraged them to explore "other perspectives" reflecting attention to the interprofessional nature of the discussion triggers within the learning materials. Indeed, during the facilitation process, students could be seen to be modelling several interprofessional capabilities identified within the Interprofessional Capability Framework (Combined Universities Interprofessional Learning Unit, 2004).

# DISCUSSION

The findings from the research explored within this chapter clearly demonstrate that student facilitators were not only as effective as academics in their abilities to promote IPL in an online learning environment, but may have also offered added value to student learning. The benefit of student facilitators was felt through a diffusion of status; they were enthusiastic and able to empathise; they created an atmosphere of trust and support, and challenged thinking. However, the preparation for such initiatives should not be undervalued and lead us to some practical recommendations. The following points that are grounded in the research findings may not only relate to student-led initiatives but could also be beneficial for academic staff facilitation.

## Self Selection

Self selection for the role of online facilitator appears to be an important factor influencing commitment and enthusiasm for facilitating well. For student facilitators, being given the responsibility of leading an online group to develop their ideas about IPL may enhance their own experiences, skills and understanding of interprofessional working to take into practice. The process of being a facilitator should be of mutual benefit to the student group being led, and the facilitator in their own personal and professional development.

## Train Them

Salmon (2004) identifies the characteristics of a good online facilitator and the need for relevant training. Our experience suggests that providing training for online facilitators is crucial, not least because of the differences between online and face to face, teaching and facilitation. It is essential that facilitators are familiar with the technology adopted, the structure of the learning environment, materials, content and crucially, the interprofessional nature of the learning. Timeliness of the training is also an important factor, and wherever possible should take place immediately before the period of facilitation to ensure that the learning is fresh in the facilitators' minds.

## Technical, Academic and Community Support

It is vital that facilitators can access appropriate support mechanisms both prior to and during the

period of facilitation as their needs change. In any online platform, technical support provided by a technologist or equivalent is imperative to running a module or course in an online environment. Timely responses to facilitators about any technical challenges are likely to result in a less disruptive and more efficient experience from the student's viewpoint.

In the study featured in this chapter, student facilitators benefited from sharing experiences, tips and guidance in a central, online community area where they could talk to one another. Academic support for student facilitators was also important. This type of support could take the form of allocating 'buddy' academics, although in this study we used a central point of contact where questions could be asked or concerns raised to avoid students feeling like students; checked up on and closely monitored.

## Trust Them

Perhaps one of the most important messages in this chapter is the importance of trusting the student facilitators in the programme. Giving students' responsibility for their forums without close monitoring might seem to be a high risk strategy, however, in this instance it resulted in a high degree of commitment; certainly the trust was not abused and there was evidence that being trusted to do the job made students feel more responsible. One student facilitator admitted to having enjoyed being given a level of responsibility above what was usually given to students, while another reported feeling that she had undertaken an obligation and to ensure she could fulfil this, accessed the internet via her mobile phone as well as computer so that she could always respond tostudents needing support.

A key attribute of leadership and autonomy is the ability to take responsibility for a task, and to be trusted by senior colleagues to do a good job. Should peer review mechanisms be used in the online environment for staff, student facilitators could be included; we do not advocate that such a system should be implemented solely for student facilitators.

## Offset Assessments Where Possible

As recommended above, students that put themselves forward for leading online discussion forums should be trained to prepare them for the role. In this pilot study the training programme was assessed through a one-thousand word reflection on the IPL facilitator role, which was counted for students' Year 3 IPL assignment. It was attractive to the students to offset this training against the other assessment they were required to complete. Arranging offsetting assessment can be complex or straightforward depending on the content of modules and overlap of learning outcomes, which in this case was high. If feasible, it provides an alternative means of recognition of student effort.

## Give Recognition

It is important to provide recognition for student efforts in these types of initiatives to avoid accusation of exploitation. Recognition could be given in the form of certificates for their employment portfolio, or the opportunity to present at conferences and write for publication with academic colleagues. All of these approaches have been adopted in this project and taken up with enthusiasm by the students who recognize the importance of developing their curriculum vitae. Difficulties in the lack of student interest in IPL could potentially be overcome by ensuring that students are recognised for their commitment to leading online discussion forums to promote IPL. This is likely to have a snowball effect. If students are led in online discussions by fellow students who are motivated and excited about interprofessional working issues and debates, this could lead other students to realize its importance in other circumstances such as on placement.

## Gain Institutional Support

Hoffman et al. (2008) identify lack of support as a major challenge to this type of initiative. We were fortunate enough to have full support from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences as well as some funding to carry out this project. Without full support and commitment this type of initiative would be very difficult.

## CONCLUSION

Implementation of a student led IPL initiative in this context provides evidence of clear benefits to student learning. For student facilitators, the ability to lead student groups is a fundamental achievement and one that could enhance employability. Having been given a status that students are not usually given, their commitment and enthusiasm for the role may promote interest not only in IPL, but also in leadership and accountability skills, which are arguably valuable interprofessional attributes in themselves. We hope that their counterparts may see them as role models and put themselves forward for similar opportunities later in their programmes, because we believe that both students and their facilitators learned more about IPL because students were involved in implementing the programme.

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