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Virtual Interaction: A Real Alternative

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Abstract

Social care students on block placement have reported a feeling of disconnection from both the broader student group and the natural supports available in the college environment. Students experience a variety of challenges and opportunities on placement, and when combined with practical and geographical limitations on support this can provide a key obstacle for successful progression through placement. Appropriate navigation of practice placement challenges offer the opportunity for key personal and professional development. This article is intended to outline the implementation and use of a specific moderated online interactive support space designed for social care students on final practice placements. Prior to the adoption of this particular approach there was an absence of scope for informal group based, student led reflection on the competencies and knowledge developed whilst on placement and the overall impact of the experience.

Keywords: Social Care Practice, On-line Support, Moodle, Community of Practice.

Introduction

The project was designed to respond to identified difficulties that students encountered while on placement in social care settings. These students are in their final year of a three year BA in Applied Social Studies, and as such are reaching a stage in their learning that requires them to be innovative and take personal responsibility for professional development, whilst simultaneously receiving direction and support from college tutors and practice supervisors.

This offers a unique opportunity and challenge for academics (in terms of supporting independent learning skills whilst exposing the student to an appropriate level of risk in the learning environment), and it is argued that an online support strategy may be a key for providing this type of support. The student engagement requirement for this project involved students posting a minimum of three posts and replying to a minimum of three posts on a range of practice related topics. This requirement was integrated into the continuous assessment component of a core professional skills module. The researchers acted as the moderators of the forum and also provided some initial topics/threads for discussions. The project ran for 16 weeks and yielded 485 discussions across a total of six forums with postings by 107 contributors (including the moderators). The project was evaluated by exploring the topics discussed and the processes of discussing these and through focus groups and surveys completed at the mid-way and end of the project.

Building the community

The process of building the community of social care students was facilitated through the use of a virtual leaning environment, a blackboard type setting, entitled "Moodle". "*Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) is a Course Management System (CMS), or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is a free web application that educators can use to create effective online learning sites*" (www.Moodle.org). The virtual setting can be an effective tool in providing key opportunities for responsibility and active learning for students as they initiate and contribute to online discussions (Hopperton, 1998). Students were required to engage with this process as part of a module, marks were allocated to students on the basis of their active participation in polls, debates, scenarios and various

discussion forums. Table one provides an example of some of the material focussed on by participants in the student directed section of the site. Four primary themes were evident across student postings;

i)   adapting to the realities of the professional environment
ii) dealing with stress and pressure
iii) understanding and connecting with service users and
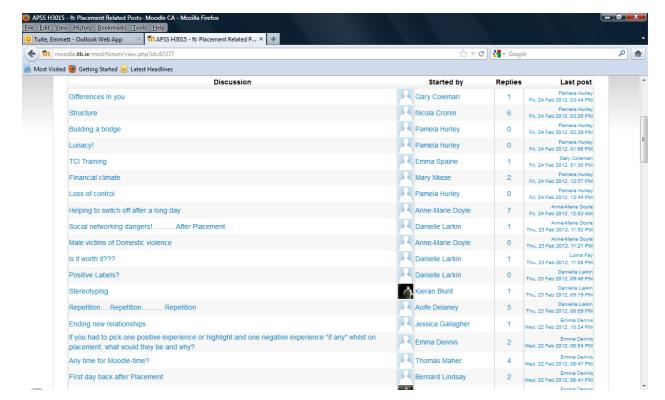iv) meeting academic requirements in terms of college work.

Table 1: Initiating Discussion

In terms of the content of the discussion board there were 271 threads posted (this figure excludes the debates section), with each thread averaging 5 posts. A key component of this particular approach was that it was student led, with a relatively small amount of input from forum moderators. This space also offers a continuous opportunity to interact with peers in a safe, moderated, practice-oriented environment.

There was clear progression in the development of the content over the course of the placement as students posted and responded to more complex issues. In terms of the variety of topics, there were very few topics that appeared to be off-limits for discussions with topics ranging from those related to service users, to the self, to critical discussions of services. The topics progressed in a range of different directions organically, with less input required from the two key moderators as the placement progressed. Initially students stayed within the relatively safe realms of introducing their placement settings and outlining the basics of environment and service user group, over time students progressed to looking at more complex issues related to boundary maintenance, self reflection and challenges to their competence and practice. In the early stages of engagement students were predominantly focussed on looking at how effectively the setting would meet their learning needs as a student before moving on to looking at how effectively they could meet the care needs of the

service user group. This is evident A number of other discussion threads (generally chosen by students) which received reasonably high response levels are detailed below.

Table 2: Progression and development in student driven content.

Topic/Thread	Number of Responses
First day/week- Any thoughts?	46
Where do you see yourself (post-training)?	19
First Impressions & Judgements based on limited information	17
Is social care for you?	16
Cooking (Role and relevance to social care and relationship building)	15
Wilderness Therapy (Using and understanding it)	14
Boundaries (Establishing and clarifying them)	12

Surveys and a focus group were completed with student's midway through the placement, and at the end of the placement experience to assess their feelings and experience regarding the use of Moodle as a support and a learning tool while on placement. The feedback from students was very positive, with key comments on the merits of this approach as a placement support. Students emphasised the connections they were able to make with others whilst in different services and placement settings. This suggests that the online support addressed some of the isolation that students have felt while on placement in the past. The students also found that the interactive discussions illustrated the fact that many students are experiencing similar challenges and this can be a source of comfort for students, as the experiences are normalised within the group. Students also reported satisfaction with the ease of access of the discussions online and highlighted the use of the forums as an information bank of knowledge that they could use while on placement. Thematic analysis indicates key personal and professional development for students who engaged effectively with this space.

Evaluation

i) The Process: The development of a specific student directed supportive on-line space to encourage the growth of key social care practice skills was influenced by the theoretical models put forward by Wenger (1998) which focus on the concept of community of practice, as a key way for students to extend their learning.

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) proposes three core components of a community of practice:
 • Domain - "a defined identity, membership implies a commitment to the domain, and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people".
 • Community – "In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other".
 • Practice – "Members of a community of practice are practitioners, developing a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems".

On these three measures the current project clearly met key conditions in order to be considered a community of practice. There was a significant level of 'buy-in' to the community as overall student engagement exceeded the academic requirements as set out in the continuous assessment brief. This particular community of practice

focussed on student related issues as participants disclosed early challenges in practice placement, emphasised the application of theoretical material to the practice environment and used this space primarily to attend to their own needs (as students) rather than those of the service or service users. Relationship building and support was very evident from the early stages of development in the community. Students posting emotionally loaded discussion material received high levels of engagement in response; there was significant indication that the students developed empathy and indicated an understanding towards each other. There was however limited evidence of moving beyond supportive messages and basic problem-solving into 'true community' (Peck, 1987) where there is a willingness to provide critical appraisal and engage in conflict resolution. This may be partly explained by the relatively short-time frame over which the current project ran (primarily four months). Sharing of resources and knowledge developed quite quickly in the community as participants directed each other towards material of use and detailed how they themselves had attained and used practice knowledge.

ii) Thematic Analysis of Content: According to Wenger (2002) there are 8 core activities of a community of practice, reusing of assets, mapping knowledge, problem solving, development of synergy, seeking experiences, discussing developments and documenting of projects. Exploration of the discussions that students made on Moodle has indicated key themes that can be linked to five of the key elements of a community of practice as argued by Wenger (2002).

iii) Reusing of assets. This is believed to be evident when people are sharing assets which they have developed. *"Here's a good book I found on Icebreakers, might be handy for peoples interventions". (Student 1).* This was clear in student's postings as they developed their skills on placement, with students discussing training that was available and other key assets they had encountered within their placement setting. *"I have found these approaches to be effective, hope this is of some help" (Student 2).*

iv) Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps. Students are expected to develop their knowledge of theories and extend their learning from academic modules, whilst on placement. *"Last year we studied the topic of aggression and disinhibition; can we say that every single person becomes dehumanised and angry?"(Student 3).* It can be argued that by sharing this knowledge and discussing the learning online with their peers, the students were able to develop a deeper learning and to identify gaps in practice and in theoretical perspectives**. "***Today I took part in training in the low arousal approach, we were looking at different things that can trigger challenging behaviour.... did you know 80% of challenging behaviour is caused by staff????" (Student 4).*

v) Problem solving. Student's discussions were seen to peak during the second half of placements as students involved themselves in a more active way in their placement setting. *"I was just wondering is anyone else having trouble with their service users wanting to help with their intervention? Any ideas on how I can motivate them"? (Student 4).* As students were involving themselves in key pieces of work they appeared to use the discussion forum as a venue for asking for direction and support from other students. *"Unfortunately I am not receiving any enthusiasm from the students (service users) what so ever, even getting them to participate it so hard and some just point blank refuse to have anything got to do with it (Student 5).*

vi) Seeking Experience. Students spent a large amount of time sharing their experiences and discussing the differences in services, as they discussed common findings and observations. *"What will you do if you encounter this type of choiceless practice in your placement as well?" (Student 7).* As the students were on placement in different organisations and often with different service user groups this was felt to be a key way for students to learn about a variety of different agencies and to share their experiences and practice observations within the field. *"As we all know, Christmas in Ireland is mostly about the family. While this is a good thing for most people it can be a horrendous time for those, in our care, who haven't had such a good or positive experience with their own family. Has anyone else noticed anything like this in their own placement?" (Student 6).*

vii) Discussing developments. As third year students in Applied Social Studies, the students are developing professional practice skills that will allow them to work effectively in the field of social care *"The problem of funding is seriously affecting this sector and as a result young dependant people are paying the price" (Student 9).* . The students are expected to extend their knowledge and skills whilst on placement and to build on learning from three years of academic modules, and to extend the skills they developed whilst on a Year 2 placement the previous year. In this sense, it is the last scheduled placement that students will complete as part of BA in Applied Social Studies. Students are expected to recognise and analyse key developments in the field of social care. There were elements of this apparent in the online discussions that students had with on the Moodle website. *"However, if there are no male staff in a house aren't they going to be lacking male influence in their development"? (Student 8)*

Extending the Community

This specific project focussed on students in their specific role as student practitioners (in the latter stages of social care education), engagement and participation levels suggest significant potential to extend and develop the community. The most natural direction for expansion of this particular community is to other sections of the student body initially. Expansion of the focus to include a significant component of pre-practice placement preparation and post placement reflection would facilitate the inclusion of students across all four years of the honours degree training programme. Collaboration and alliances also present a potential area for expansion as the Moodle forum allows for cross institutional links. The potential for cross institutional partnership is currently being assessed in a follow-up project which will run in 2012-13 and involves student groups across two institutions collaborating in relation to practice learning. In relation to development of the community Brannigan (2009) highlights a movement of participants to the centre of the community as being reflective of maturity within the community.

In the current project there was little evidence of any substantial move to the centre (or a move to attempt to control/influence) of the community by individual participants and/or groups of participants. The current project worked with all community members in an equal fashion and academic requirements and support for participants were both equally distributed, the creation of sub-groups/pilot groups with a specific focus may have brought about a more dynamic community and triggered a more central position for particular participants. Although the overall community required little in the way of moderation (beyond

observation) and processes were primarily student directed rather than lecturer directed, the introduction of a rotating student moderator role could again assist in locating the power of the community in the hands of participants. There was some evidence of an appetite for this role among the student group,

> *"I would also like to say that be super careful about confidentiality in this topic (I know you guys already know that but just as a reminder because things can happen but I know you know)"* Student 9.

There may also be further potential for development through the addition of community members with specific roles – experts in domains as community visitors, the inclusion of a service user and /or service user views as part of the community and further integration of practitioners/student supervisors in order to present a broader range of perspectives on the issues discussed within the community.

Conclusion

The value of the social care practice placement in allowing students to transfer theoretical knowledge from the classroom setting to direct work with service users is clearly established in research (Lawlor & Doyle, 2005). Traditional approaches to practice placement support have focussed on effectively preparing the student within the college environment and offering on-site visits which are intended to fulfil both support and assessment functions. The current project offers the opportunity to continue to develop the supportive engagement which starts in the classroom and allows students to address and explore issues as they arise rather than 'holding' these experiences until post placement for reflection as has traditionally been the case where block placements are utilised. Morrison (2005) identifies a range of opportunities related to reflection which occur in practice learning, the current project allows the student to engage in reflection with the support of their peer group and academic staff on an on-going basis throughout the course of the practice placement.

One of the overall objectives of this project was to create what Wenger (2000) refers to as a '*living curriculum*' dictated by students, identifying and responding to issues as they arose. Although there was some further scope for development of the community, and by extension the curriculum, the *live* element was strongly evident through high levels of in-depth participation, swift responses to issues raised, the creation of a practice knowledge bank and student utilisation of the space generally.

Community democracy was clearly evident as participants changed the direction and focus of material by choosing to engage in certain discussions/forums whilst disregarding others. Topics which appeared to present with significant potential for engagement were sometimes ignored in favour of other discussion threads. One example of this dynamic was engagement in the debates forum, which was consistently at a relatively low level even though students were simply required to hit an agree or disagree button in response to a specific practice related question/statement - "Legalisation of cannabis use would be a logical step forward by Irish policy makers". It appears participants wanted to engage in a debate, contextualise their position and establish the reasons others had for putting the particular perspective forward rather than being required to simply agree or disagree with a particular statement. A number of topics which, at a surface level appeared to be very 'safe' developed into effective, challenging discussions of the nature of social care practice. In this context a discussion thread which initially focussed on the need to have basic cooking skills in particular care settings quickly identified a range of related opportunities for relationship building, education

and on-the-floor counselling which presented whilst involving service users in the basic task of preparing a meal.

Northover (2002) argues that with larger amounts of mature students engaged in full time education, the need to offer flexible and accessible means of learning and communicating in the form of online discussion forums should be at the forefront of educator's minds. This is of particular relevance to the current group of students as the numbers of mature students participating in social care education increases in Ireland, and the need to engage with these students offers an opportunity for academics to build on previous resources of both the academic and the student. In this sense the present research can be seen as a challenge and an opportunity for professional social care education. Online engagement also offers the opportunity for individual students who may not be central to the group dynamic in a classroom setting to be influential in this virtual space as they create a new professional online persona. The current project illustrated a pattern of engagement amongst the student group which did not always reflect the pattern of engagement amongst this group during their experience of traditional teaching methodologies (lectures and tutorials or workshops).

Wenger (2002) argues "the term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice". In this sense the use of Moodle's interactive environment should continue to grow within the student community as it addresses a number of practical and academic challenges in relation to the delivery of academic and practical material to large student groups. Prior research (Watson, 2010) identified the potential of on-line forums in the development of communities of practice. It is envisaged that the adoption of this approach by students will have further long-term benefits in terms of their willingness to engage with and contribute to social care communities of practice post qualification. This will result in ancillary benefits for the social care profession as a whole.

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