

Professional Identity; Transitions from Probation to Practice.

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Abstract

Social care students completing work placement have previously reported a feeling of disconnection from college and a reduction in engagement with academic material while on placement. While there is a need for students to fully engage with their placement the disengagement from academic learning can be a key obstacle for students making this key transition between professional and student identities. Appropriate navigation of these challenges offers the opportunity for key personal and professional development for the student.

The current research is focussed on outlining the implementation and use of a specific moderated online interactive space designed for social care students on final practice placements. Thematic analysis indicates key personal and professional development for students who engaged effectively with this space, and increased engagement on a range of levels. Study results also indicate the benefits of this approach in bridging the gap between academic and professional skills, and in helping students to take academic knowledge into a practice environment.

This research highlights the implications of these developments for individual students and for their growth as future social care professionals. Potential for further development of this approach is discussed, including the building of professional communities of practice within the field of social care, and for collaboration across a range of social care training providers.

Keywords

Placement, Online support, Professional Development, Theory to Practice.

Rationale:

The placement element of an academic course constitutes a core component of all applied courses. Within this there exist inherent difficulties for academics in supporting student learning while off campus, and to direct their learning in a remote way. For students the placement is a key learning and motivating experience, but can result in difficulties in both transferring the learning and continuing to engage in academic learning. This paper will describe the process of working with students to address these difficulties and maximise students learning.

Introduction.

The project was designed for students who were in the final year of a three year BA in Applied social studies, and as such are reaching a stage in their learning that required them to be innovative, whilst supported simultaneously. This therefore offers a unique opportunity and challenge for academics, and it is argued that online supports may be a key strategy for providing this type of support.

This online moderated support required students as part of a professional skills module, to engage online and make a minimum of three posts and reply to a minimum of three posts. The researchers acted as the moderators of the forum and also provided initial topics for discussions. Students were also given access to a personal reflective space where they logged entries in a diary format which was only visible to the project moderators. The discussion board forum was chosen to attempt to initiate direct interaction between students as they shared experiences and evaluated their own learning and that of others. It was also thought that discussion board forum would provide some form of peer support to students who sought assurances from their peer in relation to their role and work on placement. 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 content, the group processes involved and formally through focus groups and surveys completed at the mid-way and end point of the project.

Process

The process of building the community of social care students was facilitated through the use of a virtual learning environment- Moodle. The virtual setting has been identified as an effective tool in providing key opportunities for responsibility and active learning for students, as they engage in online discussions (Hopperton, 1998). Students were required to engage with this process as part of a professional practice module and as such marks were allocated to students on the basis of their active participation in polls, debates, scenarios and various discussion forums. Basic guidance in relation to behaviour on-line was provided to students and parallels were drawn to issues covered in professional practice modules which look at confidentiality, ethical issues, respect for service users and others. Students were also advised of the communal responsibility to moderate whilst on the forum through challenging any inappropriate behaviour and reporting it where necessary.

Four key 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.

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 moderators as the placement progressed.

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. Feedback from students was very positive, with significant comments on the merits of this approach as a placement support. Students emphasised the connections they were able to make with others while on placement. This suggests that the online support addressed some of 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.

Scaffolding provided to the students can be seen in terms of Salmon's (2002) five step model of e-learning. In this respect the initial stage of *access and motivation* involved welcoming all students and requesting them to introduce themselves online. This is an important step Salmon (2002) argues for ensuring students familiarise themselves with the technical requirements of the project. The next stage of *online socialisation* required the moderators to encourage students to start to develop discussions through the use of general discussion topics such as "what I am looking forward to on placement" and other non-threatening topics. Salmon discusses the third stage *information exchange* in the model and this can be related to students sharing experiences and seeking ideas from others involved in different placement settings. *Knowledge construction* can be seen in student's discussions around ideas for intervention with service users and new pieces of work which they were developing in their respective placement settings.

The final stage of *development* is seen as the stage where students take personal ownership of their learning experiences and assist other students while instructors encourage reflective thinking by sharing problem-based situations. The use of scenarios by the moderators and other students towards the end of the project facilitated this type of learning and reflection and allowed students to develop deeper learning in relation the wide breath of topics discussed.

Evaluation:

In order to fully analyse participant experience it is possible to explore both the content of the discussions and the process through which the content was generated.

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 a number of theoretical models which focus on the concept of community of practice.

Wenger (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 evidence of empathy and understanding. There was limited evidence of moving beyond supportive messages and basic problem-solving into ‘true community’ (Peck, 1987) where there is evidence of 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 (2006) there are a number of core activities of a community of practice;
- reusing of assets,
 - mapping knowledge,
 - problem solving,
 - development of synergy,
 - seeking experiences,
 - discussing developments
 - documenting of projects.

Exploration of the discussions on Moodle indicated key themes that can be linked to five of the central elements of a community of practice as argued by Wenger (2006).

iii) Reusing of assets.

“Here's a good book I found on icebreakers, might be handy for other peoples interventions” (Student 1). This is believed to be evident when people are sharing assets which they have developed. 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

“Last year we studied the topic of aggression and disinhibition; can we say that every single person [exposed to aggressive role models] becomes dehumanised and angry?”(Student 3). Students are expected to develop their knowledge of theories and extend their learning from academic modules, whilst on placement. 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

“I was just wondering is anyone else having trouble with their service users not wanting to help with their intervention?” Any ideas on how I can motivate them”? (Student 4). 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. 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

“What will you do if you encounter this type of choiceless practice in your placement as well?” (Student 7). Students spent a large amount of time sharing their experiences and discussing the differences in services, as they discussed common findings and observations. 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

“The problem of funding is seriously affecting this sector and as a result young dependant people are paying the price” (Student 9). 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 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)

Conclusion and Future Work

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. The use of Moodle forums therefore offers a way to meet learner's needs on a number of different levels. This methodology offered key opportunities to enhance the learning experience for students by combining traditional approaches to teaching with student off campus engagement.

Wenger (2002) refers to the concept of a '*living curriculum*' dictated by students, identifying and responding to issues as they arise. From the early stages of the project evidence emerged of the living curriculum in action. 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. As students were required to engage and participate (as part of a continuous assessment) there may be some element of creating a 'false or forced' community. Engagement levels throughout were very high and cannot simply be attributed to the allocation of marks for participation as many students engaged beyond the required level. Follow-up with students who engaged at a minimal level (or in a small number of cases, did not engage at all) indicated technical issues as a significant barrier. Students are off campus for the duration of practice placement and in some cases cited lack of regular access to broadband as an issue, a small cohort cited lack of technical competence as rendering engagement impossible. 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 e.g. engagement in the debates forum 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 which they did.

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 additional practice modules and learning 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. Across institutional partnership is currently running in a follow-up project which 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. There is significant potential therefore for educators to subdivide areas of learning and use these forums as a space for completing specific work with students.

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, and this could be further extended.

“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 additional potential for development through the inclusion 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.

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 educators will have further long-term benefits in terms of student’s willingness to engage with and contribute to communities of practice post qualification

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