
Developing e-learning in problem-based distance social work education

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Introduction

This paper arises out of the first five years of a planned and staged introduction of e-learning based on the Salmon 'five step' model, in a distance social work education programme. The report concentrates especially on a part-time distance professional programme for experienced social workers. A positive outcome raises important issues relating to ongoing group building, engagement and support within an asynchronous timetable. We conclude by noting the value of supported online interaction as a valuable additional learning tool to enhance reflexive distance professional learning in social work.

The Otago problem-based social work programme

Professional social work education is increasingly seen as the task of assisting participants to become 'critically reflective' self-directed learners in a distinctly professional process (Schon, 1995). Indeed, major research dedicated to the social work task sees 'the central place of reflexivity as the basis for moving forward on the issue of social work knowledge' (Sheppard, Newstead, Di Caccavo and Ryan, 2000: 468).

The University of Otago social work programme has sought to achieve such goals by using a form of problem-based (also called 'issue-based' or 'enquiry and action') learning. Briefly, issue-based learning is where traditional disciplinary-based teaching is replaced by an integrated model of adult self-directed learning (andragogy) whereby a range of disciplines are brought together around a specific topic or problem focus. (Shannon, 1995). A key principle is that the major goal is a capability – problem solving – rather than coverage of every possible 'content' issue. The cumulative, progressive approach of focusing on problem solving shifts the control markedly towards the student who responds to the problem stimulus from the teacher now acting in a support and resourcing role (Boud and Felletti, 1997).

To be faithful to both problem-based and self-directed adult perspectives we rejected conventional one-way transmission of information in favour of interactive group-based learning. We developed a range of different delivery modes (face-to face [residential workshops], print, audio, learning groups, group activities, practice-based assignments and, from the 1990s, interactive audioconferencing where small groups could discuss and interact on a larger scale across the whole learning group. Problems, however, did remain. Those in localities without a reasonable learning group or those isolated by distance had a less

valuable experience and the interaction between all students tended to be limited to the formal, scheduled sessions, so we looked to the new 'e-learning' as, at first sight, it seemed suitable for dealing with these problems.

E-learning: an opportunity and a threat?

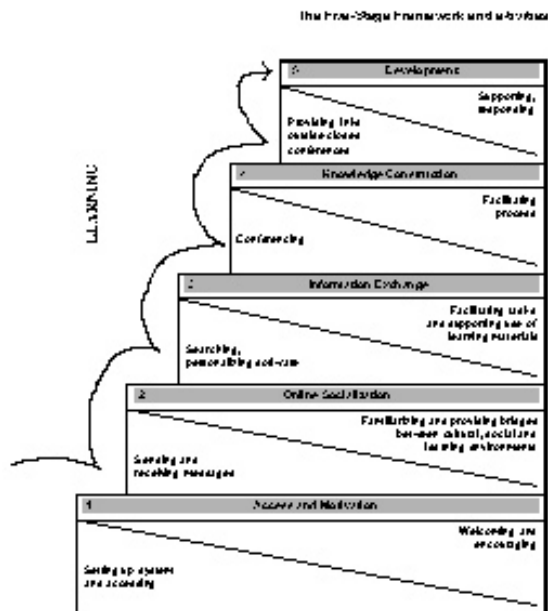
Although heralded as the brave new world, e-learning's achievements to date have been somewhat disappointing (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker, 2000; Salmon, 2002). Indeed its very capabilities may even have contributed to its undoing as it seems to have been dominated by a 'gee whizz' approach to technological gimmicks and one-way information processing – albeit with ever more sophisticated graphics! There is a polarisation of opinion between those for whom it is almost unreservedly the 'answer' and to those who see it as 'hemlock for Socrates' – in a word 'poison' – for interactive education (Brabazon, 2002). However, the polarised debate has tended to generate more heat than light. The range of issues on which 'critical' analysts tend to focus – student resistance, the digital divide, technical requirements – represent underlying problems for all areas of education and are not specific to e-learning. There is little doubt that it can be, and often is, misused, especially if we see education as more than information processing. However, most critics do not advocate a simple Luddite rejection but, somewhat lamely, 'controlled' usage as protection against such dangers (Hick, 1999; Kreuger and Stretch, 2000). But this is simply wishful thinking without attention to a theorisation of such 'control' which empowers the student (Maidment, 2005, 2006). For us the problem-based, adult learning model identified above had already shifted the power from the (expert) teacher to the student. E-learning, in such a context, was just one more resource (along with teachers and all the other course features) for use by students constructing their learning. In searching for an effective approach to the medium which would further encourage and stimulate such student direction we chose the Salmon 'five step' model of 'e-tivities' (Salmon, 2002) as a basic course design element which we could use to develop both interaction and actual achievement in e-learning (Salmon, 2002: 11).

As Figure one indicates, this sets up a structure for online learning activities which supports participants through a process of development. It works from engaging and motivating the students (often the most difficult stage), to building relationships, exchanging and sharing knowledge and information – becoming more collaborative along the way – and finally, developing personal goals outside the system. Salmon suggests each step in the process requires course members to learn technical skills (bottom left of step) and also requires specific facilitation/support skills (top right of each step). While Salmon might intend this model to be used as a stand-alone learning system, for us it was a powerful new approach to be integrated into an overall learning agenda based on problem-based andragogy.

The 2004/2005 Postgraduate Diploma in Social and Community Work

We present here a report of using online learning with a new offering of our Postgraduate Diploma in Social and Community Work part-time over two years to 20 experienced Child, Youth and Family Service (NZCYFS) social workers who already had social science degrees, along with introductory social work education and proven practice competence. We did it using the interactive e-learning software of 'Blackboard', as used and technically supported by Otago University.

Figure one. Model of teaching and learning online through online networking.



The course structure was one of four substantive papers (in some cases needing supplementation by tikanga and te reo courses) divided according to practice modalities and two field education placements. The students started the course in year 1 and worked through in a cohort to completion in year 2, with 20 starting the programme and 19 completing in the 2004/5 cohort.

The actual papers were:

Year 1

- SOWX 401 Interpersonal practice
- SOWX 402 Family practice
- SOWX 491 Fieldwork

Year 2

- SOWX 403 Organisation practice
- SOWX 404 Community practice
- SOWX 492 Fieldwork 2

The central place in the curriculum was occupied by fieldwork learning – and papers sought to work in conjunction with that. Assignments were linked as far as possible to fieldwork learning placements.

Management/operation of the journey into e-learning

E-learning was a largely new working environment for both students and staff. The Blackboard software offers a range of services we used, providing:

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- Email, discussion boards and chat rooms
 - Course documents and assignments, readings and videos

In preparing the programme we used the 'triangle' of preparation recommended in e-learning – course designer, academic staff and e-learning instructor/facilitator. The academic staff role was the reasonably conventional one of preparing the content and designing the structure of the course as well as facilitating interactive audio conference seminars (6 x 2 hours per paper) and the residential workshops (1 x 3 days per paper). However, the role of the instructor/facilitator was something new, and was to facilitate online discussion/learning and application of the student's academic learning. This occurred through discussion forums being developed around broad and specific topic/learning outcome areas for each paper.

The practice framework used in working with the students in e-learning was a supervisory framework. The role took on the functions of supervision in providing elements of:

- Development of student learning by providing discussion/reflection of learning;
- Challenges, development of student's ideas and opportunities to apply their learning to practice situations;
- Support of the student in terms of encouragement and positive feedback;
- Administration regarding the course assignments, or fielding general enquiries around requirements of the papers;
- Mediation on behalf of students around any difficulties in their learning or understanding of the academic learning with the lecturers.

The discussion board activities sought to build each module as a resource that could be used to develop and think through the use of community work:

- Module 1 was initially about access and motivation for community work, getting into the course, both technically and emotionally, as well as being motivated to overcome any problems;
- In Module 2 we attempted to move onto a positive engagement with knowledge about and understanding of communities in Aotearoa New Zealand and their characteristics;
- In Module 3 we moved from understanding and explaining to acting and intervening – trying to actually plan and make change;
- Module 4 was an introduction to Asset Based Community Development as a strengths-based approach to community development (compared to other models);
- Module 5 involved a face-to-face workshop.

The activities here were designed both to consolidate and focus the learning achieved during the course and to add (at the workshop) some extra skills which are likely to be useful in practising at community level.

Assignments were linked to practice and placements and involved completing Community Reports (on a real life community placement) and Social Change Reports (undertaking and reporting on projects actually creating social change). In all of the above students were asked to take part in and share their ideas through the problem/issue-based activities on the discussion board. These also set the agenda for the monthly two hour audio conferences.

Outcomes and results

Throughout the whole course, students used the discussions on Blackboard (BB) and live chat exceptionally well, increasing their participation with each paper as group process and positive group formation/performing occurred. The student group also took on the role of challenging/developing one another and positive feedback.

Table 1. Statistics of online interaction – entire postgraduate programme.

| | Hits in BB discussion | Entries by students in discussion forums | No of Students | No of emails and telephone calls |
|------------------------|------------------------------|--|----------------|----------------------------------|
| SOWX 401 | 9873 | 485 | 20 | E/52 |
| Interpersonal practice | Average hits per student 493 | Average = 24 discussions per student | | T/6 |
| SOWX 402 | 11721 | 637 | 20 | E/60 |
| Family practice | Average hits per student 558 | Average = 30 discussions per student | | T/10 |
| SOWX 403 | 12172 | 722 | 20 | E/83 |
| Organisation | Average hits per student 608 | Average = 36 discussions per student | | T/13 |
| SOWX 404 | 13515 | 916 | 19 | E/ 96 |
| Community development | Average hits per student 711 | Average = 48 discussions per student | | T/12 |

As Table 1 indicates for all four papers, the number of ‘hits’ was high and grew throughout the course. However, more significantly, the BB discussion forum interactions ranged up to 75-89% of the total number of ‘hits’ on the system, so it was not merely building numbers through ‘lurking’ (observing without contributing) but represented actual intervention into the discussion process. In addition, it should be noted that interaction steadily increased over the span of the course, reaching its highest levels in year 2 – when the subject matter (Organisational and Community Development Practice) was mostly outside the students’ experience. This may indicate a need for extra support as well as a growing commitment to the learning. In either eventuality, the message is a positive one for the use of e-learning.

Feedback from the students with regard to e-learning

The vast majority of the student group found e-learning helpful in facilitating their learning. Typical of the feedback from students, in their reflection on the papers, were the following remarks:

Positive comments

BB was my lifeline to study.

Would not have made it through without BB.

Loved the discussion on BB.

BB helped me understand the more difficult aspects of theory and see how it applies to my work.

I learnt so much and did not feel alone with mystudies.

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- Enjoyed the live chats and gained knowledge from others on-line.
 - Was often challenged with comments on BB and they always made me take time to think.
 - I originally was the biggest sceptic and techno-phobe to the BB system – this experience has converted me to being a fan – would not have gained the insight or knowledge I now have without it.
 - It forced me to reflect, think and work harder.
 - I like how I can go in anytime night or day, this suits my learning style and family commitments far better than set times.
 - It allows me time to think and reflect before I make comments.

Negative comments

There was less comment that could be called negative, but some recurring feedback noted:

- It is hard work and takes significant time as the discussions grow so fast.
- I need to be in the system several times a week to keep up with the discussion.
- While I know I do not need to make comments in each discussion forum, I find that I miss out on learning if I don't look at them. This takes a lot more time that I had allowed for.
- It needs to be clear before commencing the course the type of computer systems and programmes you need to get the most out of BB.

Discussion – course management

Our experience and the undoubted value of e-learning to the students on the programme indicate a positive experience but requires comment. Firstly, with respect to the technical knowledge and technical requirements, these need to be explicitly built into the learning experience alongside the learning content, as Salmon suggests. We found that students need to know the requirements of e-learning at the beginning of the course (including assessable reflection on its use) and be given clear tips for using the system. The face-to-face residential workshops at the start of the programme (helping build the social relationships required) also provided the opportunity for 'hands on' learning of how to access the system. Our experience of cumulative development over a period of time is instructive as also is the fact that the technical skills seem to need deepening and reinforcing.

However, group formation, support and cohesion, with attention to building up steam over the two year programme, is seen by us as more important than the technical elements. Since e-learning can be very individualising and perhaps even worsen isolation, we felt it important to put significant energy and work into developing the group formation in the first course. This was helped immensely by commencing the whole programme with a workshop and a focus on group-building participative techniques. As the comments above noted, this turned an individualised experience into a shared and cooperative one.

The positive developmental nature of the Salmon model was also important as it built on those relationships leading to information exchange, the creation of new knowledge for students and, ultimately, development of practice. Key to this was the role of the e-learning facilitator in a tutor/support role. A feature of e-learning has been its apparent dispensability. In many respects it is easy for academic staff to see it as an 'add-on' extra which is quite labour-intensive and thus the first element to be dropped. For this reason, as experience of

the time involved for staff in prior e-learning activities showed, it is important for an overall programme to have someone whose role it is to make sure that the e-learning takes place. Certainly a key element for us has been a stable tutor/support relationship over the whole programme, irrespective of academic content and academic staff.

The key to success in this tutor/support role seems to lie in being able to provide the learning from within a supervisory practice framework inclusive of personal follow-up from students through emails/telephone calls. A more controversial element was being available to students in evenings and weekends to meet their pattern of study. This also adds appropriate support that is important for students in distance learning, but perhaps requires some flexibility also from staff.

Finally, the pressure on the students must be noted. There are probably no social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand more under pressure than those in Child, Youth and Family Services. Any professional study in addition to those pressures is more than can appropriately be expected and the more negative comments above note the time pressures involved. Despite CYFS management formally supporting the programme and agreeing on workload relief, this was not always honoured in the field. The pressure on those students was considerable and it is an issue which must be of concern for all part-time professional education.

However, it should be noted that none of these time/resource issues are specific to e-learning alone, as exactly the same issues exist for face-to-face quality professional andragogy. What is at stake here is the gross under-funding of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand and we must acknowledge the considerable subsidy from Otago University in offering both this and all our professional programmes.

'Bigger issues'

More generally our experience has also reinforced our convictions about the positive role of e-learning for interactive and self-directed learning within a reflexive professional framework. While it provides self-paced, self-directed learning with people being able to approach it according to their individual needs, it is only really useful for reflexive professionals (Taylor and White, 2000) if there is adherence to and commitment to the group learning process and other learning mechanisms as well.

We also wish to stress the importance of support for the interactive reflexive learning required. The current explosion of online teaching and online materials – which is especially the case in the United Kingdom, notably Scotland, in the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (www.sieswe.org) with its production of a Learning Exchange of materials and 'learning objects' – has great value and we all envy those resources. However, in our view, the implications of this experiment indicate that the provision of such resources without at least the same level of provision to support their interactive, reflective use does entail risks. For example, an English scoping study of e-learning for the new social work degree notes four resource requirements (Rafferty and Waldman, 2003): formal resources, learning networks, contact learning and assessment, and information and management skills. They see the first and last of these (formal resources/information skills) as open to central provision while networks and learning/assessment have to be locally developed for each course. They concentrate, therefore, only on the central elements and make recommenda-

tions in that connection. However, there is a great danger that the local interactive network elements are forgotten about. While 'central' resources are critical, they are necessary rather than sufficient and certainly not as critical to the empowering andragogy required. As in Scotland, it is important in any large initiatives that the provision of learning 'objects', be accompanied by and utilised alongside key support for interactive application by reflective learning 'subjects'. Once again it is the importance of an overall theorised andragogy about 'power to call the tune' which is significant, rather than how extensive or how well-produced are the resources.

Conclusions

Our overall conclusions are clearly in favour of the use and value of e-learning for a distance programme. Such learning, however, is clearly developmental, with a chronological process of development for both students and the course team. A clear model for that, as provided by Salmon, was invaluable. Activities (e-tivities) that followed her example in being developmental, but open-ended, so students could take the discussion in their own direction, were also successful.

Perhaps more importantly, the learning had to be interactive and learner-directed. Even though the basis for this was engendered early on through face-to-face (kanohi-ki-te-kanohi) contact, it grew and developed over time. In our view the provision of support and developmental resources – a professionally qualified staff member solely dedicated to such a professional supervisory task – was required for significant learning to take place through e-learning. E-learning is definitely not an easy 'cost-less' option. It is most unlikely to work without ongoing staff support and encouragement. It requires explicit professional staffing and resource requirements of its own at least to the same level as other forms of learning. Within these constraints, however, we feel that it adds a significant extra dimension to our programme and has potential in professional distance education.

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