SOCIAL SOFTWARE FOR VIRTUAL MOBILITY: AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE-BASED LEARNERS

Author – Helen Keegan, University of Salford, UK

Introduction

International internship programmes are now embedded into the mainstream delivery of the majority of HE institutions, offering learners the opportunity to link theory and practice while developing linguistic and intercultural competences. Virtual mobility is also being recognised as a viable and practical alternative to physical mobility, with educational cultures and behaviours being transformed as new technologies and tools allow learners to share knowledge and experiences across boundaries of time and space. This paper reports on the EU funded Socrates-Minerva ESMOS project, where group blogs are being used to nurture online communities of professional practice in clinical education. A key aspect of the project has been the paradigm shift from tutor-student dialogue to tripartite online communication between tutors and learners, with tutors facilitating peer-to-peer mentoring and support between students in the UK and those based overseas. This type of virtual mobility has enabled learners to gain an international perspective on the link between theory and practice during their clinical experiences while developing a culture of reflection, critical analysis and collaborative learning. The case study presented here demonstrates the benefits of blogging as a learner-centred support tool, connecting geographically dispersed peers in an online community of practice.

Rationale for creating a community of inquiry using a group blog

While international placement students at the partner universities involved in the ESMOS project had traditionally been supported via email and discussion boards, it was felt that learners could benefit from sharing experiences and resources using newer forms of community-based social software. When communicating via email, dialogue is generally one-to-one and it was hypothesised that the structured threads of discussion boards imposes a structure on the communication between placement students and their tutors which does not correspond to the situated, authentic, and sometimes 'messy' learning experiences of the clinical practitioner.

Farmer (2004) recognises that communication is often shaped by different tools and technologies, citing Crystal (2001) and Powazek (2002) as two writers who have examined the style of interaction found in various synchronous and asynchronous technologies. He proposes that blogs offer "new opportunities in the development of social, cognitive and teacher presence online". In examining the potential for online learning environments to support social constructivism and communities of inquiry, Farmer is guided by Garrison and Anderson's framework (2003) for the creation of a successful community of inquiry composed of "teachers and students transacting with the specific purpose of facilitating, constructing and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that will lead to further learning".[1]

Farmer concludes by questioning the suitability of standard discussion boards vs. blogs, suggesting that blogs may have greater potential to facilitate the development of online communities of inquiry due to the blog being a reflective medium which enables the learner to interact more 'naturally' with his/her peers. This hypothesis resonates with Moore's framework (1973) in which structure and dialogue operate in counterbalance to one another. It could be viewed that the high structure of discussion boards results in lower level dialogue than that of blogs, where there is a lower level of structure, but increased dialogue. Wheeler et.al. (2004) state that "social and emotional support is often as vitally important as academic and practical support, and often students simply need a

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[1] The three key elements within the framework are cognitive presence, social presence and teacher presence.

"listening ear; to alleviate the social isolation of learning at a distance". It was hypothesised that if the blog was facilitated sensitively and effectively by the tutor (with a strong cognitive and social presence), social and emotional support could be also provided on a peer-to-peer basis alongside the conceptual and pedagogical support which has traditionally been offered via email and discussion forums.

The case study

This paper reports on a case study where blogging was implemented to support both peer-to-peer and student-tutor communication for an action learning group during their clinical placements, which were undertaken both in the UK and overseas as part of a reflective practice module. A group blog was trialled with students from the BSc Adult Nursing degree at the University of Salford for ten weeks from June-August 2006, with the aim of nurturing an online community of practice which would enable geographically dispersed students to discuss and reflect on their placement learning experiences, offering one another feedback and sharing key observations. Alongside the increased educational support, it was hypothesised that the peer-to-peer communication could enhance the social support of international mobility students, who have the additional challenges of homesickness and culture shock alongside increased educational demands of integrating theory and practice through their culturally diverse work-based learning activities.

Specifically the blog was set up to provide a framework for self and group reflection on personal and professional development and to allow students:
- To provide a framework for self and group reflection on personal and professional development
- To communicate personal insights into their developmental needs
- To utilise discursive skills with the facilitator and the action learning group
- To maintain a learning journal
- To participate in group discussion
- To provide peer support

By following and commenting on the blog it was hoped that the tutor could capture the student's thoughts and comments about their learning 'as it happened', thus supporting their development of analysis and deep reflection. The emphasis was very much on a reflective blog where the whole group could share key observations, feedback, learning experiences and references. Students were also encouraged to regularly search for and post links in their blogs to articles and sites they found interesting and relevant.

All students are asked to complete a piece of structured reflection during their placement as a record of events whilst abroad and submit this as a report upon their return. The blog became their 'space' for such reflection, where they kept records of events whilst on placement.

Following the placement, students are required to deliver a presentation on their clinical experiences and practice-based learning to provide feedback to school staff, their cohort peers and relevant clinical representatives. Each student was asked to upload their final seminar presentation to the blog so that other members of the group could ask questions and provide feedback, with the aim of consolidating and learning from their international placement experiences.

Evaluation

Data sources were mainly qualitative, involving individual interviews and focus group sessions with the action learning set both during and after the placement. Content was analysed from the emerging themes in the blog posts, particularly focusing on themes of academic, practical, social and psychological support from both students and the tutor.

The preliminary qualitative evaluation has indicated that the student-tutor and student-student (or peer-to-peer) communication via the blogs has been an effective way of enhancing academic, practical,

social and psychological support, particularly for those students who travelled abroad for their clinical placement. In terms of academic support, both the students and the tutor felt that blogging was an effective pedagogical technique for relating theory to practice and it also increased the student's interest and ownership of their chosen topic.

The students who were on placement overseas not only experienced culture shock on a day to day level and missed their families, but also had experienced some psychological discomfort as a result of the differences in the healthcare systems between the two countries. An interesting finding was that as these students became more psychologically stressed, their regularity of posting increased. In the case of the student who was initially the most highly resistant to the idea of using the blog, as her need for social and psychological support increased due to homesickness and culture shock so did her reliance on peer communication through the blog and her posts became very emotive.

From the evaluation the key themes identified were:
- The factors influencing student use of the blog
- The significance of psychological support
- The importance of instructional immediacy (Baker 2004)
- Increased participation in blog based discussions by quieter members of the group
- Supplemental memory support
- Efficacious and integrated learning and deeper reflection and analysis of topics compared to the group's previous clinical placements

Discussion

The online community which was nurtured through the group blog enabled the students to compare and contrast their own experiences with their peers, collectively discovering the best ways of overcoming obstacles and engaging in a collective process of learning from their clinical encounters. Students could read their peers' experiences and realize they were not alone in their problems. This crucial element of student support is vital for all students, but particularly for students who spend time abroad as part of their course. By reading and commenting on one another's blog posts the students could discover that they were not the only ones experiencing difficulties, whether adjusting to living and working in a new country with a different culture or balancing work, studies and their home-based social/family life. In this respect the group blog was found to be an excellent tool for student support.

The blog posts were often injected with warmth, sadness, humour, anger and this level of online intimacy gave the students the confidence to express their insecurities about learning to one another. However, although the level of trust meant that the students felt secure in opening up and sharing their feelings with their peers, the tutor was also constantly encouraging the learners to reflect on their learning and questioned aspects of the practice and profession, fostering their critical thinking skills. There was a real sense of online community, and the extent of immediacy between participants and the tutor generated an atmosphere that was more akin to an everyday tutorial group who tease, support, and collaboratively learn with their peers, openly sharing social and emotional information about themselves and their lives. The links between immediacy and motivation have been explored (Christophel, 1990; Christophel and Gorham, 1995) as have those between immediacy and cognitive learning. Although it is difficult to draw a direct and measurable correlation between immediacy and cognitive learning, it is widely accepted that the likelihood of a learner having a successful educational experience is enhanced by the warmth, interest and encouragement of the tutor.

When comparing the discourse on the 'blog' to the discussion board that had been used in prior years, learners did seem to be much more predisposed to express their feelings (joy, inadequacy, confusion) on a blog than on a discussion board. In the context of an overseas work placement, where the learner faces added cultural challenges and lacks the social support networks provided by the home community (family, friends, common cultural references), the blogs became a 'sounding board' and this was highly apparent in the case of the nursing students. Remarkably, one of the students who went on an overseas work placement and who had initially strongly resisted the concept of, and engagement

with the blog wrote some highly emotive posts. When her UK-based peers withdrew from the blog for 5 days, she confronted her peers (online) over their lack of blog-based support.

Over the course of the placement period there was a distinct blurring of the boundaries between tutor support and peer support; in terms of the peer support, one student in particular became an 'accidental facilitator', due to his skills in online communication and also his practice-based competencies. He had a natural tendency to encourage others to reflect and discuss, and was also very active in the blog and highly supportive of the rest of the group.

Conclusions and future work

As students were encouraged to regularly search for and post links to articles and sites they found interesting and relevant, the blog became a kind of collaborative bibliography; students would submit references and links with their own annotations, as alongside their topic-specific knowledge, they would share information and resources that would be useful to others in the group. The blog became a reflective 'space' for the group, who also uploaded their final seminar presentations so that other members of the group could ask questions and provide feedback. As a result of the collaborative bibliography, individual/group reflections and final seminar presentations the blog itself became a rich educational resource for all of the students with the added benefit of social and psychological support. Because this was the first time that a blog had been used as a support tool for clinical placement students their final placement report remained paper-based. The tutor is now exploring the potential of blog-based assessment, while throughout the School of Nursing as a whole blogging is being incorporated into all clinical placement activities.

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