

Chapter 10

Learning from Each Other?

Using Technology to Develop Collaborative Learning in Clinical Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses and evaluates the introduction of collaborative e-learning activities into an interprofessional teacher education programme, a Master of Education in Clinical Education (MEd CE). The activity involved designing an educational research methodology module. The authors chose educational research methods as the task focus because, although the students had some familiarity with research methods, researching clinical education was new to them all. This task enabled participants to learn about educational research methods, course design and e-learning tools, resources and pedagogy. The process enhanced collaborative and interprofessional learning.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a case study in interprofessional education that promoted collaborative learning through e-learning. It discusses and evaluates the introduction of collaborative e-learning activities into an interprofessional teacher education programme, a Master of Education in Clinical Education (MEd CE). Now in its 5th year, the MEd developed from, and continues to run alongside, a

successful Post-Graduate Certificate. The activity involved designing an educational research methodology module and enabled participants to learn about educational research methods, course design and e-learning tools, resources and pedagogy. We chose educational research methods as the task focus because, although the students had some familiarity with research methods, researching clinical education was new to them all.

Evidence of interprofessional learning is notoriously hard to capture (Barr 2007) and our experience was no different. It has been easier

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to identify and evaluate the engagement with e-learning than to identify interprofessional learning. Nevertheless, collaborative learning both within and across professional groupings clearly takes place, especially in relation to learning how to use the technology to complete the online task. This learning scaffolds the process of learning about educational research methods and course design for the participants. Learning about technology and educational research methods creates trust across the group which makes it possible for them to challenge and debate their individual research studies on an equal but different professional standing.

We explore the introduction of this activity from the standpoint of the students and the course team, taking Salmon's Five Stage model of e-moderation (Salmon, 2000) as a guide. We draw on two sources of information for this chapter. First, a content analysis of material generated by the students on the programme, which is explored in relation to the experience of e-learning and interprofessional collaborative learning. These materials, used with permission from the health care professionals involved, include individual reflective accounts (which formed part of the module assessment) and records of the on-line interactions from the collaborative task. Second, we used appreciative inquiry methodology (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) to chart the experience of the course director as she worked with Gilly Salmon's principles (Salmon, 2000, 2002) to introduce, review and refine elements of e-learning into what has now become a 'blended learning' programme (Littlejohn, 2007).

The chapter begins by outlining the educational and professional contexts within which the course is situated. We briefly describe the course and the online activity which forms the basis of this chapter before discussing the main themes and issues which emerge from our evaluation. Finally, we reflect on the implications of our experience for others.

Educational and Professional Context

Integrating technology into practice requires a considered, reflective approach to course and curriculum design to ensure learning needs and teaching aims are met. Blended learning means more than having some face-to-face and some online elements. It describes the extent to which these elements work together to give a cohesive learner experience and the choice of the best tools for the task. Littlejohn (2007) suggests that the design and subsequent success of a blend is subject to three contexts: the learner's context, the teacher's context and the technology context. Each of these also exists in relation to interprofessional learning, which is itself a far from straightforward practice.

There is a small body of work exploring the practice of introducing e-learning in clinical education. The majority of this work (Connor, 2003; Morgan, 2006) is concerned with the experience of under-graduates, as are studies of interprofessional education, which tend to centre on clinical practice rather than clinical practitioners as clinical educators (Barr, 2007; Peacock & Hooper, 2006). We explore the extent to which findings from this work are replicated or challenged in the specific context of our case study, which focuses on the introduction of collaborative e-learning to an interprofessional group of experienced clinical practitioners undertaking a clinical education programme.

The themes and issues we address include: the experience and preconceptions of participants with regard to their knowledge of e-learning; the need for clinical educators to develop a critical stance towards the dominant forms of e-learning available in their professional clinical practice; the need to design an authentic online activity which promotes critical thinking; and the development of collaborative learning across interprofessional groups. In their study of a postgraduate course delivered entirely online, Nicol and Sinclair (2003)

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