



LEAP Case Studies: Distant distributed CPD

Number 9:

Category	Description
Case study title:	Distance learning degree programme for health professionals, University of Paisley
Pedagogical Theme:	Continuing Professional Development by Online Learning
Key Words:	Online education; distance learning; continuing professional development; health professionals.
Academic subject area:	Health Studies
Key Conclusions:	Participation in asynchronous online discussions deepens knowledge, creates new insights and maximizes the learning of the whole group. It also helps to generate a sense of community. Synchronous and asynchronous discussions are complementary: asynchronous promotes a deeper level of discussion, synchronous provides a higher level of social interaction.

Description of e-learning activities:

The e-learning activities in which I involved students, with my rationale for employing them, are the following:

Induction course

This ten-day course enables the students to practice all the key functions of their virtual learning environment in advance of their discipline studies.

Rationale:

Students need to feel competent to learn within a virtual learning environment before they commence studying their degree topics.

Asynchronous online discussions and debates

Asynchronous discussions are conducted over the course of one week at two weekly intervals giving seven online discussion themes per semester.

Rationale:

Participation in asynchronous online discussions deepens knowledge, creates new insights and maximizes the learning of the whole group. It also helps to generate a sense of community. Participation is time-demanding and requires concentration. The value of students' participation in these discussions is acknowledged in the form of marks that constitute 20% of their final mark for the module.

E-learning activity: Participation in synchronous discussions

Rationale:

Synchronous discussions promote both the social and intellectual life of the learning community. They focus on a topic chosen by the students or by the teacher. That topic relates both to the study material and to the clinical situations in which the students work. Synchronous discussions are scheduled to alternate with Asynchronous discussions (see above) giving seven live discussions per semester.

E-learning activity: Accessing e-journals and evaluating them for others.

Rationale:

The module material does not contain all the information relevant to the course – nor should it. The teacher provides guidance towards online resources so that the student searches for material relevantly and efficiently, rather than always starting a search anew. Students also share online resources they have consulted and value.

Evaluation of case study:

What was your perception of the e-learning activity?

Asynchronous discussion:

This is the key cognitive activity of the programme. It is social constructivist education in action. The insights generated are unique, relevant and valuable.

Online debate:

This is one format of asynchronous discussion, in which a motion is proposed and contributions for and against the motion are counted. This adds a dynamic to the discussion. It is relevant to healthcare topics which invite controversy.

Synchronous discussion:

This is valuable for discussion on topics of moment, such as assignments. It is also full of humour and personality. It is potentially a more chaotic form of communication, particularly when there are more than eight participants. It calls for organisational and communication skills to keep the discussion on-topic and fruitful. Synchronous and asynchronous discussions are complementary: asynchronous promotes a deeper level of discussion, synchronous provides a higher level of social interaction.

Directing students to online journals

Wider reading in this course is essential. The wealth of current journal articles on health means that the student faces the problem of oversupply, not dearth. The teacher has some responsibility to limit the time the student may spend searching for material by suggesting well-informed sources. The student has responsibility for following suggested links and reading critically.

The teacher-student relationship

The power dynamics in online education are altered. The 'space' in which the student is learning is his or hers, not a classroom. The time of study is the student's own choice, not the timetable's. The major resource for generating new insights is not the teacher but the combined intellectual resources of the group. Power rests more in the student group than in the teacher.

What was your colleagues' perception of the e-learning activity?

My colleagues are co-teachers in this degree programme. We take the same educational and pedagogical approach. We have developed our online pedagogy collaboratively.

What was your students' perception of the e-learning activity?

Students are frank about the benefits and the demands of online learning activities. The benefits they specify are ease of access to continuing professional development, the richness of the discussions, the sense of community and mutual support, the ongoing accumulation of marks through their online participation, and the sense of getting to know one another socially. The demands they mention are the time demands that online discussions involve.

49 out of 56 students surveyed found that their e-learning activities assisted them in their clinical work, 53 of the 56 found the workload acceptable, and 53 stated they would recommend the course to a friend.

Activity Statistics (if applicable)

Tracking 109 students over the course of two semesters has revealed:

- Members of this student group access their virtual learning environment every hour in the 24-hour period and every day in the week,
- The most busy day of the week for accessing their virtual learning environment is Monday: weekends are the least popular period,
- Evening is the most popular time for accessing the virtual learning environment: 33% of accesses occurred in the period 7-11 pm.,
- 31% of accesses occurred in the period 1-5 pm.,
- 25% of accesses occurred in the period 9 am –12 md.
- Shift patterns at work and domestic duties at home (eg. mealtimes, children's bedtimes) are major influences on the times when students are free to access their virtual learning environments,
- Slogans such as 'Any time, any place learning' misunderstand the lifestyle of these students. They have to be very organised in both time and place.

What have you learned from your experiences (good and bad)?

In comparison with on-campus learning, the online students' experience of learning is more communication-rich (by 29%) and more effective (in relation to grades achieved).

Teaching online is more time demanding than teaching face-to-face. This is principally because its thrust is the fostering of individual and group dialogue, rather than the transmission of information.

Fostering an online community is an educational and social goal, but some students will not want to be involved to the same degree as others. Agreeing the level of participation from both students and teachers is an important introductory step.

The generation and capture in writing of new insights and knowledge by means of collaborative learning is a key (though not unique) advantage of online learning.

What were the expected outcomes?

The expected outcomes are that health professionals would:

- Develop their understanding of their discipline through engagement in online debate and discussion;
- Develop their knowledge through reading and sharing current research accessible via their virtual learning environment,
- Generate new understanding of the clinical issues they face through contributing to the knowledge pool of a learning community.

Course Details:

Name of course:	BSc Health Studies / B.Sc Nursing
Course level:	Level 3 (i.e. 3 rd year of a Scottish degree programme)
Number of students:	10-30 students per module
Case Study Running Time:	1 year
Course Compulsory:	No
Software used:	Blackboard

Please describe whether the e-learning activity was complementary/ supplementary (indicate %age):

The BSc Health Studies / BSc Nursing degree programme by distance learning is an integrated programme with all support being given fully online. It incorporates the following elements:

- Printed materials written by University of Paisley teachers and mailed to students,
- Online discussion, both synchronous and asynchronous, to debate the main issues raised in the printed material and in practice,

- Links to relevant further online resources such as electronic journals and relevant web sites,
- Individual student guidance given online,
- Assessment of the students' application of theory to clinical practice through project work,
- Assessment of participation in the online interactivity.

Is the course assessed: Yes. See above.

Academic Staff Development:

What existing skills were required?

The existing skills are the skills of:

- Curriculum design
- Instructional design
- Constructing a coherent timetable
- Generating teaching materials
- Maintaining a current knowledge base
- Teaching
- Diagnosing learning needs
- Communication
- Small group management
- Assessment design
- Evaluation of learning
- Evaluation of the programme

These existing mainstream pedagogical skills are the foundation skills for online teaching.

What new skills were required?

The new skills that the teachers required to develop were:

- Using the functions of a virtual learning environment,
- Integrating teaching materials with the functionality of the virtual learning environment,
- Stimulating interactivity in an online community,
- Monitoring the online activity of students,
- Assessing online participation by students.

How much time was required to develop new skills?

These new skills have developed incrementally and continuously over a period of six years. Our process is that a teacher, new to the virtual learning environment, receives basic induction into the virtual learning environment, and then works alongside an experience online teacher for a semester. Within two semesters the new teacher will assume full responsibility for student support on appropriate modules.

How much time was required to develop the e-learning activities?

We developed the e-learning activities incrementally, piloting and developing new activities with each module. Again this is not a process which can be quantified: it is continuing and continuous.

How much support staff time was required? (please describe job roles if possible)

Teaching in an online environment is essentially a collaborative enterprise. The input of support staff is not peripheral but central. Essential support staff include administrators, technical help and librarians. Support staff time is considerable, but varies significantly with the size of the student cohort and so is unquantifiable.

What skills have been learned from the experience?

The skills learned by the students include:

- Keyboard and computing skills
- Information retrieval from electronic databases
- Debating and discussing online
- Collaborating in sharing resources

- Submitting assignments electronically

The skills that have been learned by the teacher include:

- Inducting students into learning via a virtual learning environment
- Maintaining an online community
- Tracking students' participation in the community
- Conducting live keyboard-mediated discussions
- Moderating asynchronous discussions
- Guiding students to online resources
- Assessing online participation
- Educational counselling of individual students
- Collaborative working with Administrator, Librarian and technical support staff

Future work:

Do you intend to further develop this case study?

This case study is not a one-off event; it is a reflection on six years of development, with the focus on the last year. That development will continue.

If yes, why are you intending to develop it?

I intend to develop our programme of learning because it is successful and efficient but can become more so, for both students and teachers.

If yes, how do you intend to develop it?

The development we plan relates to analysing the collaborative ethos that is necessary for the generation of e-learning activities, comparing the results from online learning with those of on-campus learning, developing guidelines for good practice and evaluating our practice of awarding a component of the overall mark for the module to the assessment of online participation.

If no, why not?

N/A

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