Chapter 21 Technology-enhanced learning for social work education and practice

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The Chapter provides a good overview of the difficulties and more positive aspects of Technology-Enhanced Learning and Information and Communication Technology skills within learning opportunities and social work practice. It encourages practitioners to relate information to their practice.
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Contexts

A feature of twenty-first century social work practice is that practitioners are spending large amounts of time on technology-enhanced tasks. Work practices are changing not just to accommodate developments within the 'digital age', but are also being driven by government imperatives such as the Modernising Government agenda (Cabinet Office 1999) and E-government strategy (Cabinet Office 2000). These policies stipulate that all services be e-accessible by 2005, to improve public access to services and engage with citizens and their communities. Inevitably, educational providers and employers face the challenge of identifying how best to teach capability in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and how it can best be utilised to enhance social work practice. Social workers, who previously would not have expected ICT to be part of their skill-set, will need to become engaged both as learners and as practitioners.

To address teaching capability, the care councils of Scotland, Wales and England incorporated ICT into their social work degree qualifications, requiring ECDL (European Computer Driving License) equivalent skills. In 2009 after consultation, the English care council made revisions to the requirements for the social work degree in England, removing ECDL equivalence. Instead, along with some specific ICT requirements, the benchmarks (Quality Assurance Agency 2008: section 6.4) explicitly included skills achieved through blended learning:

> *Approaches to support blended learning should include the use of ICT to access data, literature and resources, as well as engagement with technologies to support communication and reflection and sharing of learning across academic and practice learning settings.*

Instead of teaching a separate syllabus of ECDL skills this revision suggests that 'blended learning' (or technology-enhanced learning - TEL) can provide opportunities to develop generic ICT skills of use to work-based learners as well as social work practitioners. While engaging in learning about social work, learners will simultaneously be using and developing skills in the technologies that help deliver that learning and which may be equally useful in their practice.

This chapter explores an example of integrated ICT skills development incorporating ECDL skills requirements and TEL on an open and distance learning social work degree. It draws on the project *Prepared for Practice?* (*P4P*), (Cooper et al. 2009; Nix et al. 2009) a small-scale study of graduates which investigated the experiences of work-based learners during their studies as social work degree students and how, once graduated and working as social work practitioners, they perceive their studies in preparing them for technology-enhanced social work practice. The chapter considers the successes and limitations of the integrated ECDL and TEL approach encountered, focusing especially on the views of the more confident P4P participants, who reveal the evolving role of technology within their professional practice and their attitudes towards it.

E-learning approaches

E-learning emphasizes the electronic or digital nature of learning materials and tools to deliver learning, including websites, electronic documents, and media on DVD-ROM. Blended learning highlights the nature of the mix involved, often indicating a combination of face- to-face with digital technology. Since technological horizons are continually broadening, learning can be taking place with the help of a growing list of technologies, including mobile devices and social networking tools. Technology-enhanced learning emphasises the intention that the learning experience be supported and enriched by the contribution of technology.

Technology-enhanced social work practice refers to any equivalent developments which support and bring benefit to social work practice, and improve or enrich the experience of service-users and carers.

The introduction of technologies into the workplace may be disruptive. As Rafferty and Steyaert* point out (2009: 590-93), during the policy era 'of accountability and monitoring' staff perceived computerised systems as less about enhancing practice and more about managerialism, producing 'unreflective people-processing' (White 2009:129), and taking practitioners away from their face-to-face contact with service users and carers (Peckover et al. 2008; Shaw et al. 2009). Others have argued that technologies could improve practice, provide better information sharing and save time (Ousley et al.* 2003: 194). However, since the 1990s additional arguments have been emerging, affirming the potential of technologies to enrich the quality of peoples' lives, learning and practice (Rafferty and Steyaert 2009: 589-91). There are encouraging signs that this is starting to occur among graduates in the United Kingdom. Some P4P participants are now actively pursuing how best to employ technologies to benefit service users and carers. Indeed, some are sufficiently interested to want to help design improvements in their own work-based computerized systems. Since poor uptake can have potentially devastating effects on outcomes for service users and carers, there is interest in research which explores how work-based learners come to accept and use technologies, and the links to home and educational use (Thorpe and Edmunds 2009).

Technology-enhanced learning tends to be delivered through an online virtual learning environment (VLE) or learning management system (LMS) – basically a one-stop website. Courses within it will be made up of a blend of content using a variety of media and computer-based or electronic facilities, sometimes accessible via course websites. By being regularly required to use these facilities the learner, therefore, has the potential to develop and maintain the relevant skills (Oliver and McLoughlin 2001). The motivation to use a VLE comes partly through necessity to engage with course materials but also through the benefits it offers, such as the convenience of resources provided in one location.

TEL features depend on choices made by educational providers (Ayala* 2008) but may include all of these facilities:

- course websites containing electronic course materials (to access information in a variety of ways);
- online communication forum and discussion tools (to reflect and communicate interactively with peers bringing a range of perspectives);
- library facilities - online journals, databases, recommended websites (to retrieve and evaluate information to support practice such as decision-making);
- media-rich case-studies, interactive simulations - online/offline (to interrogate diverse practice examples and perspectives);
- applications to locate, capture, store, share, and present information.

The programme of ICT skills development evaluated in the P4P study was designed for students to develop across three years (or levels) of study, from awareness-raising, to applying, to critically evaluating the skills, corresponding to their development as reflective and critical practitioners in social work practice.

Student perspectives

The following student perspectives are drawn from twelve P4P participants who were interviewed in 2009, six months into their post-qualifying social work practice. The interviewees, who had volunteered to participate in follow-up evaluation before graduating, represented a range of experience both in terms of ICT and social work practice. All had combined being employed in social work during their degree studies. The examples discussed demonstrate how the participants engaged with TEL evaluating the usefulness of the learning and how they selected out what was relevant to immediate tasks, roles and responsibilities.

In terms of adjusting to TEL, the majority of P4P participants perceived that they started the degree already confident in basic ICT skills. Whatever their original starting-point, the majority of P4P participants agreed they emerged from using TEL during their degree with higher confidence

levels in ICT and Information Literacy (IL) skills. Several P4P participants indicated they found TEL useful as work-based learners because they were able to use its flexibility to select activities to suit their work or travel arrangements, and it therefore prepared them for independent learning. For some, being in the workplace sometimes proved a barrier to learning, hence having additional flexibility to learn away from work via TEL offered distinct advantages.

The motivation of participants was influenced both by the importance given to ICT within their practice settings and by recognition given within the educational qualification, for instance, by the proportional weighting of marks given in assessments. Activities, such as communicating in online forums, received variable levels of commitment due to lack of marks awarded. Likewise, some found the detailed work required for the bibliographic database too time-consuming and complex compared with their own preferred techniques. Despite the principles it highlighted regarding detailed record-keeping, it would appear that the rationale for the bibliographic database's use was too remote from an equivalent application in their particular social work practice setting.

Most P4P participants disliked ICT skills activities which did not have immediate relevance to their studies or were couched in a social work practice they did not recognise. Participants also reported that they wanted systems such as online communication systems provided for study to resemble as closely as possible those they encountered in their social work practice, perceiving any switch between educational and work systems as disorientating as well as time-consuming. Some P4P participants were able to extrapolate and transfer skills from one system to another, but if pressured by lack of time or confidence, they were unlikely to make connections and therefore perceived the activity or skill as fruitless.

The issue of whether to provide generic or customised and contextualised activities highlights a dilemma that faces educators. Confident and already skilled P4P participants valued opportunities to select their own route through learning materials, self-assessing their need and deciding when to study something. As one participant put it, 'there is not enough time to learn

everything in case it might be necessary' (Nix 2009: 26). Less confident participants preferred step-by-step guidance and integrated activities to provide regular practice. The majority of participants reported receiving in-house training for in-house systems. This therefore suggests that degrees need not teach service-specific skills. Practitioner motivation is then also likely to be higher, and timing and support more appropriate. Nonetheless, one participant felt it would be helpful to be given authentic examples by educational providers, for instance, of systems in neighbouring local authorities, to broaden their understanding of underpinning principles and uses.

So, having encountered technology-enhancements during their learning, how did participants see these enhancements transforming their own social work practice and the practice of others, and what were their attitudes? To contextualise their motivation, the P4P participants almost unanimously agreed that ICT has a crucial role to play in their work. They indicated that as well as the subtle benefits ICT can bring to practice, such as imparting information in more accessible ways to service-users, a key driver is the fundamental task of accurately recording and sharing information and avoiding gaps - thus helping to manage risk.

Examples which participants gave of their recent social work practice incorporating ICT or IL skills included:

- Managing their workload using tools such as an online calendar, spreadsheets, or saving template documents to be used more efficiently.
- Using search skills to locate information on behalf of service users or to make a case to colleagues in support of a particular decision.
- Producing clear, legible, professional-looking reports and documentation to share with others
- Using in-house database systems effectively and swiftly, thereby allowing more time to be spent with service users.

This suggests that there is indeed considerable synergy between the skills needed for TEL and technology-enhanced social work practice.

For both study and social work practice, computer systems need to be user-friendly, intuitive to understand, and tasks straight-forward to achieve in order to optimise time spent at the computer. It was evident that among the more confident participants some took a particularly proactive approach, engaging with TEL and adapting it to add value to their practice, such as evidence gathering and evaluating and interpreting information. For example, a former IT manager now working in a Children in Care Team indicated that the degree took away her fear about where to look for information.

When asked to work with applications using different methods than her norm on course activities, she found it required additional concentration and was sometimes frustrating. However, she noted that she learnt different and sometimes more effective techniques. In one case when an activity did not suit her approach, she instead came up with her own method, which in itself she found useful. She attributed her ability to take on learning two new computerised record systems in two different practice learning opportunities to her growing confidence.

The importance of effectively capturing and sharing information was widely recognised by the P4P participants, many of whom work in social work settings where a particular computerised system is already embedded. Although some appeared to be satisfied with, others were critical of the design of the systems and practices developing around their use. Three of the twelve participants stood out as being particularly reflective about the quality of the ICT systems and usage in their workplaces, and since developing their skills whilst studying the social work degree were interested in bringing about improvements. Comments from two of them are summarised next.

One participant had strong views about the dangers of people entering incomplete data into the system, thus leaving the possibility of others entering data into the wrong location in the system. She felt this introduced risks and she speculated that it was caused by people finding the systems difficult or unworkable. She also experienced different practices working in different teams: in a

Referral and Assessment team and later in a Children and Care Team where she discovered information had been inputted in different ways, leading to inconsistencies.

Another participant commented on the frustration of data not flowing from one system into another by default, which is a common issue (Shaw et al. 2009: 621). For example, data from scanned health documents could not be copied and pasted into social work care plans and therefore required typing in again. At her own request and as a result of her increased confidence she spent extra training time with the IT department to evaluate any new system, to gain a holistic understanding and better support her colleagues.

It appears that strengthening confidence and the ability to critique their own and others' practice enabled these participants to engage with ICT systems. It is reassuring to discover that 'champions' are emerging who are prepared not only to support their less confident colleagues, but also motivated enough to address their concerns about less than effective systems, and willing to help inform design improvements to those systems and change practices.

Technologies also bring benefit to people who use services, providing up-to-the-minute information and research and allowing the speedy sharing of information. One participant referred to methods of communication she selects to suit different service users. She may, for example, use mobile phone text messaging with teenagers (in her view their preferred way to contact her), and with a mother with learning difficulties and another with hearing difficulties (for whom the text format allows greater accessibility). Her use appears to be discerning.
Another participant, working for a drug and alcohol service, revealed that her agency uses a combination of their own website and links to social networking sites to attract young people to revisit their website regularly to view updates to drug-related information.

Several participants mentioned new working practices on their horizons, including smart-working, mobile-working using smartphones and home access to work networks; and using the new

database, ContactPoint, which is being introduced in some social work departments. Their concerns included managing employers' expectations of employee work-life balance, which can include the assumption, for example, that staff and resources can be reached at all times using mobile technologies, including at home. Some participants commented on a reluctance to use a smartphone, believing that practitioners can fall into the trap of over-using them – for example, checking their emails even during a break in a training session.

As educators we may wish to consider how best in future to investigate and monitor practice needs and create a match with TEL, so that the practitioner can simultaneously keep abreast of emerging technologies while engaged in social work education.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the use of TEL and ICT skills within one social work education programme in order to prepare learners for current technology-enhanced practice. The 'snapshots' of the views of P4P participants have highlighted the kinds of issues that arise in such preparation. The examples given illustrate that the skills developed by using TEL have a generic application to core tasks in social work practice, both in terms of working effectively with computerised systems and processes, but also regarding the quality of the information that can be found and shared, and how best it can be communicated, including with service users and carers. This has demonstrated that rather than view this as a happy coincidence, we should explicitly recognise that TEL has a role to play in preparing practitioners for practice.

As technological tools for learning and practice evolve, practitioners will need to keep abreast of change and be open-minded about future innovations. Involvement with and evaluation of such tools will ensure that new systems and approaches are fit for purpose, including for social work practice, and are neither inappropriate nor imposed. Such ongoing appraisal is crucial to ensure technology is indeed enhancing practice.

Questions for reflection:

1. How far do the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees resonate with your own experiences of e-learning?
2. What would be two or three key messages about the use of ICT in the workplace that you would want social work employers and educators to take away from this evaluation?

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