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Facilitating online discussion tutoring and moderating skills in clinical psychology lecturers

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Abstract

The inclusion of online approaches in clinical psychology training has necessitated an examination of the skills required by trainers. This paper describes the development of a short tutorial to promote online discussion tutoring and moderation skills in clinical psychology lecturers.

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Key words: online education clinical psychology training eLearning

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in the use of online technologies in education, both generally and in relation to professional training (Crook & Light, 2002). Some authors argue that there are unique aspects of online education that facilitate professional development (Crook & Light, 2002), such as the ability to experiment with a new professional identity (Gee, 2003), belong to a community of practice without geographical and physical constraints (Wenger, 2000) and try out skills and ideas in a safe environment.

Online education, can, however, demand new ways of thinking on the part of the lecturer (defined here as those clinical psychologists who provide academic teaching to trainees as either paid university employees or guest lecturers), both to initially engage the learner and to help them build on their previous learning (Salmon, 2003). This can be somewhat daunting, even for the experienced lecturer. The following brief paper outlines some of the basic skills required of facilitators of online discussions and suggests one means of providing support for lecturers in developing these skills. The paper is based on the experience of implementing an online component to the University of Edinburgh Clinical Psychology Training Programme.

Using Information Skills in Clinical Psychology training

As well as basic information literacy skills such as reading and writing, learning online requires some more advanced information skills such as the ability to identify what information is required for a given purpose, track it down, organise, evaluate and utilise it in ways that are moral and effective (Wang, 2007). In addition, it involves understanding the social issues surrounding the information and the context in which

it is accessed, and an awareness of the legal and ethical use of such information.

These are the competencies which make up information literacy (SCONUL, 1999), a quality now frequently viewed as a pre-requisite for lifelong learning (Bundy, 2004).

Online discussion is seen as one of the key ways in which trainees and others can engage, exchange ideas and ultimately learn (Salmon, 2003). Successful discussion requires successful facilitation which, in turn, requires lecturers to develop the information skills outlined below.

Online discussion

There has been a shift in education paradigms towards learner-centred, constructivist, social learning (Kreijns et al., 2003) and discussion boards have been identified as a tool which is responsive to learner needs and encourages reflection. They have a number of additional teaching benefits, including:

- optimising lecture content. Lecturers can focus on material which is most suited to face-to-face teaching during lecture time and facilitate online discussion of other topics in more detail at a later point.
- Facilitating trainee feedback. The lecturer can obtain trainee feedback over a long period. Such feedback generally involves more critical thought than is possible through face-to-face discussion. (Prester & Moller, 2001).
- Creating a content bank. Since discussion boards should contain information, topics, issues and resources which are directly relevant and inherently interesting to the trainee, they become a source of learning materials in their

own right as well as a valuable means of developing new teaching materials based on learner needs (Presterer & Moller, 2001).

- Creating a single information point. Discussion boards can be used as a central point for responding to frequently asked questions, organising tutorial groups, placement details, supervision instructions, etc.

Discussion boards are particularly appropriate for clinical psychology training where reflective practice is an important component of continuing professional development and where trainees on clinical placement face real-world situations which often cannot be predicted. Online forums provide an opportunity to discuss these situations with teachers and peers. In addition, the feeling of remoteness which trainees can experience on placement can be diminished through online discussion by creating a constant link to their learning community.

The need for skill development

Just because an online environment makes it possible for discussions to take place, does not mean that they will do (Kreijns et al., 2003). For discussion boards to work as effective teaching tools, they need to be moderated well and facilitate learning around key areas (Presterer & Moller, 2001). The moderator, therefore, plays a key role in constructing postings to the discussion board in such a way as to elicit responses from participants, monitoring discussions and shaping responses if usage is low or if the discussions are not heading towards course objectives. Feenberg (1989) categorises the moderator role into 3 distinct function groups:

- contextualising skills include: opening the discussion; clarifying guidelines and defining objectives.
- Monitoring skills include: recognising individual participants; guiding direction of discussion and prompting responses.
- Meta skills include: clarifying confusion of context, objectives and relevance; reducing the risk of information overload by summarising and unifying threads.

Some staff may, however, lack confidence in using online technologies in teaching. This can be for a range of reasons including: discomfort using the technology; uncertainty about how to structure information effectively online; uncertainty about what an appropriate online communication style might be; difficulty in providing clear guidelines or objectives; difficulty relating online discussions to face-to-face teaching or simply forgetting to check for discussion board posts on a frequent basis (Pagliarello, 2007).

The tutorial

Box 1: An example of a face-to-face induction tutorial for online moderators of discussion boards

Aims

This tutorial is intended to help you learn how to facilitate online discussions for clinical psychology trainees.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this tutorial you should be able to:

- describe the necessary components of an effective online discussion.
- Structure a discussion board into categories and threads conducive to a manageable and flowing discussion.
- Create an environment which facilitates social community building amongst trainees.
- Guide a discussion in a way which enhances reflection and depth of learning.

You will also have a basic understanding of how to:

- engage all students in discussion.
- Handle difficult students in an online context.
- Integrate your online discussions with your face-to-face teaching.

Preparation

Please bring a list of answers to the following questions to the tutorial:

- what are some key issues trainees might want to discuss over the course of your subject?
- What administrative information might be usefully included in the discussion board?
- How might you help the trainees' reflective practice through online discussion?
- How could the discussion board identify areas trainees should work on?
- What learning outcomes could the trainees achieve through collaboration with others in the discussion board?

We will look at these questions as part of our online discussion.

Tutorial activities

During the tutorial you will be asked to do the following:

- complete a short (anonymous) quiz to assess your current knowledge gaps in the context of online discussion facilitation.
- Read information on discussion board issues and good practice guidelines.
- Reflect on each of these issues by responding to questions in the discussion board.
- Access your own online learning module and set up some discussion categories and threads for your trainees using the principles learned in this tutorial.
- Complete mini-quizzes on each topic.

Ongoing moderation

After the tutorial you are encouraged to log-in to your own course discussion board at least once per week for the rest of the academic year and do the following:

- check new discussion board postings.
- Respond where appropriate.
- Check that students are using the discussion in the intended way and correct where necessary.
- Communicate with teaching staff to connect face-to-face teaching with online discussions.

This should take 1-2 hours per week. You will retain access to the online tutorial content and you are encouraged to review the information and guidelines whenever you wish.

Review

After a few weeks of moderation, a follow-up tutorial session will be scheduled to identify what is going well and which areas need improvement.

An analysis of the teaching methods

Salmon & Giles (1998) note the importance of training for online moderators, for example through a short induction session, to introduce them to the technology and its uses in a blended learning environment e.g. an environment that utilises a range of teaching methods including face-to-face and online delivery. An example is given in box 1. While this is not an exact representation of what the trainees will experience because it is a finite, time-limited and synchronous session, it will allow the facilitator to identify to some extent with the trainees' experience (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). It also provides an opportunity for the lecturers to experiment with the medium while receiving instant encouragement and feedback through the familiar medium of face-to-face communication. The presence of an eLearning professional also minimises technical problems that might impede learning.

The inclusion of a short self-test at the start of the session establishes the lecturers' baseline knowledge and highlights any gaps in this, allowing them to focus more on topics relevant to their needs. Examples of topics which the session might cover are how to:

- Adopt a style of communication appropriate to online discussion.
- Structure, phrase and time information to encourage participation, deep learning, collaboration, reflection or other desired response from trainees.
- Transfer control of the discussion to trainees when appropriate.
- Transfer context from one medium to another (face-to-face to online and vice versa) to facilitate integration of discussion topics with lecture materials.

Each topic has associated online activities which are supplemented by key readings which the lecturers can access during and after the tutorial. Reflection and collaboration have been identified as key factors in building knowledge through online learning (Prester & Moller, 2001) and the main focus of the tutorial should, therefore, be reflection on the topics through the use of online discussion. This not only helps acquaint the lecturers with the practicalities of using discussion boards but encourages them to think critically about the issues under discussion.

Follow up sessions are important for the lecturers to have a sense of their own progress as facilitators, as well as to air concerns and give feedback which can lead to the improvement of the training for future lecturers.

Challenges

Encouraging lecturers to move towards a blended learning approach (linking online and face-to-face teaching) is not without its challenges. Successful online learning requires time and commitment from the teaching staff, many of whom are already busy and overstretched. In addition, by definition, online learning relies heavily on technology. Technical challenges, such as Firewall restrictions at NHS placement sites, can present a significant barrier to trainees' use of online resources, as they are either unable to access the site or access is so slow that they give up. Research has, however, indicated that providing easy access to technology and high quality learning resources is not in itself a guarantee of student participation (Crook & Light, 2002). There is a need to ensure that trainees perceive online learning as a legitimate part of their learning experience from the start.

Conclusion

Online tools, such as discussion boards, are increasingly being used as part of professional education. Online discussion does, however, need careful structuring and moderation to be successful and staff who are unfamiliar with online teaching may need to undergo some training in order to implement it effectively. One example of a brief tutorial session was given (see Box 1) which aims to identify gaps in knowledge and provide information and experiential learning in the area of online discussion. While there are significant challenges in engaging both the lecturers and trainees in the online environment, there are also significant benefits (Salmon, 2003), with research indicating that online activities can significantly increase trainee knowledge, for example in relation to challenging behaviour in learning disability services (McKenzie et al. in preparation).

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