Moving through Moodle: Using e-technology to enhance social work field education

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At Massey University, New Zealand, the Moodle program was introduced as an institutional innovation to support and enhance teaching and learning. Within the social work field education program Moodle has been embraced as an opportunity to creatively advance current educational practices. The development of a meta-site for field education enables greater connections between the university and the community. This paper explores the perspectives of field educators and academic staff on the opportunities and challenges associated with on-line learning in field education. Specifically it assesses the value of this Moodle site and considers ways in which the current innovation can be further developed. *(Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2014, 15(2), 119-128)*

Keywords: Online environment, Moodle, field education, community of practice

Massey University, a multi-campus university in New Zealand, aims to provide higher education of a quality and kind that will enhance the capabilities, potential and intellectual independence of its students, on a life-long basis (Brown, Argyle, Kendall & Sandbrook, 2011; Massey University, 2009). Students may study internally at one of three campuses in New Zealand or by distance education whereby they receive tuition online, through written materials and by attending short on-campus courses. The introduction of Moodle in 2009 sought to provide students with an engaging, rich-media environment (Brown et al., 2011). Moodle is an acronym of Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. It is an internet-based e-learning environment used for educational purposes. As an online environment it is intended to be connected, innovative, flexible and relevant to learners (Bates, 2010; Kehrwald, 2011). It is utilized by both internal and distance students.

In the Bachelor of Social Work and Masters of Applied Social Work programs at Massey University students are required to undertake two 60-day practicums in social service agencies. Students in these programs may study either internally or by distance and may also choose to have their practicum in any geographical location throughout New Zealand. Academic staff at the university support students in finding appropriate practicum opportunities that will enable them to meet the learning outcomes of the practice papers.

In practicum, students are, in the main, supervised and supported by a registered social worker. These field educators commit to educating and assessing a student throughout the practicum period, however they may have had no or minimal training for this role. Although the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) requires students to be supervised by a registered social worker whilst on practicum there are currently no national standards for the accreditation of field educators (SWRB, 2013). Individual tertiary institutions may have their own criteria for approving individuals to be field educators. At Massey University field educators are expected to have a Bachelor of Social Work or equivalent qualification and to have been in social work practice for a minimum of two years. There are no requirements for field educators to attend supervision or training specific to the field education role prior to them becoming a field educator, although this is encouraged. Field educators therefore may lack confidence, specialized knowledge or pedagogical skills

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required to ensure student learning (Chilvers, 2011). Voluntary face-to-face training for field educators supervising Massey University students is restricted to two or three regions each year and may not be attended due to, for example, workload commitments, geographical location, health or interest.

Field educators communicate directly with academic staff during the planning stage of the practicum, they are visited approximately mid-way through the practicum by an academic staff member, and they may choose to phone or email staff if any concerns arise. Prior to the practicum the field educators also receive a handbook which covers the key requirements and expectations of the practicum, the templates for the assessment components and material on supervision. Apart from these contacts the field educator is largely isolated from the university.

From experience, positive relationships between the university and agencies as well as clear expectations and understanding of the field educator role are more likely to ensure quality practicum (McDermott, 2008; Sturre, Keele, Von Treuer, Moss, McLeod & Macfarlane, 2012). Given the time and resource constraints on both academic and agency staff we question whether online technologies, and specifically Moodle, can be used more effectively for the benefit of field educators. In 2011 the Field Education Moodle site that had initially been established for practicum students was redeveloped so that it was more relevant and accessible to field educators. Access is offered to all field educators although acceptance of this invitation is required. At present asynchronous modes of communication are utilized. These modes include a news forum wherein any participant in Moodle can send a message or initiate a discussion with other users of the site; articles and written materials relevant to the field educator and student; audio resources recorded by academic staff; podcasts on facets of social work practice and work-integrated learning; and the relevant university documentation.

Moodle also has the potential to be used as a forum in which academic staff can provide feedback and encouragement to field educators as students' progress through the practicum. It may also be a place where field educators can connect with one another thus developing a community of practice where ideas and strategies may be shared. The value of developing such a community is noted by McKerlich and Anderson (2007) (as cited in Rockinson-Szapkiw, Baker, Neukrug, & Hanes, 2010, p.164) as a factor contributing to effective on-line learning. Similarly Greig, McLuckie, Payne and Williams (2002) observe that collaboration is associated with the '...broadening of professional perspectives...' and the development of insight regarding the '...views and attitudes of others...' (p.269). Academic staff could also use Moodle to facilitate and guide field educators in their often challenging roles as educator, coach, mentor, supervisor and assessor. Moodle might also offer a quality learning environment which may be of particular value to field educators who are new to the role or who have not been able to attend face-to-face training with the university (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

The Moodle site then may offer a new opportunity to support the on-going learning of field educators. This is important as part of our professional commitment to supporting and strengthening the social work profession and to benefit our students as learners in the practicum environment. Through building positive relationships and offering valuable resources to the field educators they in turn may better support students, the university and the wider social work profession. In the current competitive environment the provision of

appropriate incentives to field educators, such as relevant resources, may also assist in retaining quality practicum opportunities.

EVALUATING THE MOODLE SITE

The potential functions of the Moodle site then may include enhancing relationships; developing a community of practice; augmenting professional knowledge and practice; and ultimately improving student learning. In particular, the distance mode of program delivery is associated with providing educational opportunities to students who might otherwise not have access and the online environment can be used to enhance this experience. A concern for equity of access is identified by Horvath and Mills (2011) as a primary concern for tertiary education. The Moodle site offers the opportunity to engage and support field educators throughout New Zealand thus potentially contributing to the availability of practica for students. There is however no compulsion for field educators to be active in the Moodle setting. Given prior research on online learning as well as the Massey University objectives for Moodle we are particularly interested in exploring how the Moodle site can be connected, innovative, flexible and relevant to field educators as learners (Cleveland-Innes, 2010).

When we decided to make the Moodle site accessible to the field educators we were not certain whether they were in fact interested in such a learning forum or what type of digital environment they might prefer to enhance their professional development as field educators. Our rationale was based on assumptions that field educators may also find the resources in the site of value, especially during formal supervision sessions with students. During on-campus training field educators had anecdotally indicated that connections with other field educators was of considerable value and hence we thought the Moodle site could perhaps provide another forum for these connections to occur. Although initial uptake for guest access was approximately one third of all field educators, on-going usage of the site has been variable and we have remained uncertain as to the views of field educators on what would be of most benefit to them.

Therefore, in 2012 a formative evaluation of the site was conducted with the purpose of gathering information to guide future decisions as to the shape and function of the site so as to enhance its quality and effectiveness (Reeves & Reeves, 2012). Once ethical approval was received from the university a literature review was undertaken and surveys were sent to a teaching and learning consultant from the university, two academic staff members who had used but not developed the site, and seven field educators who had utilized the site on several occasions. Of these potential participants we received completed surveys from the three university staff and three field educators. These surveys were then analyzed with the key findings outlined in the following section.

HEARING FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

The Purpose of the Site

The academic staff agreed that the purpose of the site was to provide an accessible interactive forum for the key stakeholders in social work field education, namely the students, the staff and the field educators. The site was seen as a tool to enable communication. In contrast the teaching and learning consultant, who was not familiar with prior internal discussions about the site, commented that the purpose of the site was not immediately evident and questioned whether field educators accessing the site would understand its primary purpose.

Initial Impressions of the Site

The initial impressions of the site were largely negative across the participants. The text-heavy content was seen as an old-fashioned approach to interactive media and made the site seem bulky, cluttered and unfriendly for use. Furthermore, the multiple resources and substantial amounts of information created a sense of being overwhelmed. The site was also perceived as difficult to navigate. The current mix of resources for students and field educators also meant time was sometimes wasted reading material that was not relevant for the field educators. The scrolling functionality was considered difficult as sometimes key information was missed as the field educator scrolled through the text blocks. The information about the university staff in the first section of the site was seen by one participant as dominating the first page. In contrast to these perspectives, other participants indicated the site was intuitive, easy to navigate and straightforward for logging in. These impressions were acknowledged by university staff as reflecting the early development of Moodle at the university when the majority of sites utilized a template of text blocks and the scrolling function.

The Strengths of the Site

Several strengths were identified by the participants. The Moodle site enables university staff to potentially have access to all field educators who have students on practicum in that particular year. This therefore provides an opportunity for one portal communication and for a repository of relevant resources. Having a 'one stop shop' in this sense enables greater consistency in communication with all field educators and students and allows for selected materials to be provided to these stakeholders. Having easily accessible, helpful and interesting resources was consistently cited as a strength of the Moodle site. These resources were utilized both for the development of the field educator in their specific role with students but also in other aspects of their professional role. For example, one participant indicated they had drawn on the resources in the Moodle site in their training of other staff in their social service agency. Being able to access the resources in electronic format was seen as particularly beneficial. The assessment documentation and field education handbook were located in the site which meant field educators could access these easily and as required. The Moodle site includes tips from previous students and this was noted by one participant to be helpful as a random glossary entry and relevant to both students and field educators. The Moodle news forum was acknowledged as helpful for academic staff to convey messages or resources to the field educators, especially as the message is received by the field educator through email. This function meant that field educators had immediate access to this information and did not have to re-enter the Moodle environment.

Supporting the Learning and Development of Field Educators

The field educators indicated that the Moodle site is a tool that could further support their learning and development in this role. Incorporating more tools that field educators could use with their practicum students during formal supervision sessions was considered important. These resources could further enhance the field educator's current knowledge and skills in this professional process. The Moodle site could also be viewed as a forum for supporting the development of a community of practice for social services staff who are the field educators or who are in less formal mentoring roles with the students. Maintaining a list of students and the agencies in which they are placed for their practicum on the Moodle site could increase networking across agencies and field educators. Students are currently

encouraged to network with other social service agencies whilst they are undertaking practicum, and having a more accessible list of where they are all situated may enable them and their field educators to make stronger connections. Exemplars of assessment documentation on the Moodle site was also noted as a way for field educators, especially those with limited experience of supervising students or those from disciplines other than social work, to feel more confident about the work they are submitting to the university at the conclusion of the practicum. The face-to-face training that is offered to field educators in different regions in New Zealand was identified by one participant as valuable, especially as someone new to the field educator role. Although it is not possible to offer this training in all parts of New Zealand on an annual basis, recordings of the training could be made available through Moodle, thus enabling online professional development.

Areas for Improvement

Further development of the Field Education Moodle site is clearly necessary given the feedback from the six participants. Suggestions from the participants around areas for improvement could be categorized into three distinct aspects: purpose, structure and access.

PURPOSE

Clarifying the purpose of the Moodle site and communicating this effectively to the people who access the site was seen as imperative. People accessing e-technology want to know why they should engage and how they connect with this particular group. This also needs to be clearer within this site. Introducing the purpose of the site could be communicated through podcast by, for example, the Director of Field Education. This would enable field educators to understand why the site has been developed and how it may be relevant to them. It could also provide an overview of what the site contains and encourage them to explore the different interfaces.

Transparency around who is involved in the site, whether they are academic staff, field educators or students could support the development of a community of practice for people involved in social work practicum at the university. Forums could be a tool for introductions and on-going discussions either among field educators or across the stakeholder groupings. While academic staff may be needed to stimulate these activities, some forums may become self-sustaining as field educators strengthen their own connections and see value in particular discussions. Participants noted the importance of relevance for the field educators and the need for academic staff to make the site personal. Having academic staff communicate both individually and through specific groupings on a more regular basis may support these personal connections. Monthly *Adobe Connect* meetings, communicated through the Moodle site, could also provide an opportunity for field educators who wanted further connection with the university. This may also assist with the resolution of issues that have arisen during the practicum or enable field educators and academic staff to share ideas, knowledge and further advance field education practices.

STRUCTURE

The structure of the site is important. Field educators wanted to have a site that was convenient to access and for navigation to be more straightforward. The site also needed to be both visually appealing and offer something of value to a wide range of people. One participant noted that some people may be more willing than others to engage in an online

learning and development environment depending on their learning styles and preferences. People who prefer to learn aurally may be more inclined to engage in podcasts or video casts rather than written text. Visual learners, similarly, may prefer a more dynamic, colorful and visually appealing site. Field educators who enjoy reflecting on their own practice as well as their work with students may also be more inclined to use the site as a place to access tools that can enable them to further enhance their work. Theorists too may see value in the site as a repository of academic articles or forum for discussion with similarly minded people thus supporting their on-going development as both teacher and learner.

Training on how to effectively utilize the Moodle site could assist field educators to understand not only what was housed within the site but also what may be of particular benefit to them. This orientation could be created using a podcast as well as having written guidelines or frequently asked questions for users. An introduction to the site could also occur at the face-to-face training days for field educators so that an awareness of the site was gained prior to field educators being sent the invitation for guest access.

The use of tiles which house specific areas relating to field education, rather than relying on text blocks and continual scrolling, could enable efficiencies of space in the site. Further, this approach could create spaces that were specific to either students or field educators. This may eliminate the concern that some material was not of relevance. The spaces could remain open to both stakeholders so that, if desired, either user could access and utilize the materials within that specific section. The design and style of the text blocks were also noted as being an area for improvement with greater consistency required as well as the use of a larger font to assist people with eye conditions. The inclusion of rich media that are by their nature more interactive, visual and interesting could revitalize the site and increase its appeal. Again, a range of media increases accessibility for people with differing learning styles.

Several academic staff members have teacher status in the Field Education site and therefore communication may stem from any one of these people. To curb confusion as to the source of any messages or resources, a communication plan could be of considerable value. This plan, developed initially by the academic staff, could incorporate the aims and intentions of the site, a timeframe for development, decisions as to what is housed in the site and a checklist that prevents repetition of what is in the Field Education site and individual paper sites. This plan could be articulated to the field educators and students, thus reinforcing the primary purpose and design of the site.

ACCESS

Feedback from both the academic staff and the field educators in this project indicated that field educators may have varying levels of competence to utilize an online tool such as the Moodle site. Teaching students how to utilize the Moodle site, but from the perspective of the field educator, may be of value. Students may then be able to coach their field educator if they were less confident about accessing and utilizing the Field Education site.

Issues around gaining access to the Field Education Moodle site were raised by several participants. At present field educators are emailed information as to how to sign up to become a guest user for the Moodle site. They are required to follow a link and provide specific information within five days of receiving this email. Many field educators do not meet this tight time-frame and it is likely that they lose interest in the site at this point. Some field educators do make contact with the university to request additional time to reinstate the

guest user access. Once the field educator completes the required information the university Information Technology System (ITS) staff then activates their access to the site. At times delays from ITS have meant that some field educators have contacted the academic staff to enquire about their access status. This has led to further work for the academic staff in terms of following up with ITS. This is clearly a university system issue that needs to be further addressed. Lengthening the time for field educators to follow the process to become a guest user may be of value. Most field educators have high workloads which may mean that this process is of lesser priority as other work concerns need to be addressed first. Enabling all field educators who have confirmed taking a student on practicum within the calendar year to be given automatic guest access would be preferable although this is not to say that all field educators would actually visit the site or actively engage in it. Having an online environment that provides 'immediate gratification', in the words of one participant, is still necessary if field educators are to see the value and relevance in the Field Education Moodle site.

MOODLE AS CONNECTED

The Moodle site is currently accessed by only a few field educators. These people primarily view the assessment documentation and resources related to supervision. Access is only occurring during the period that students are on the practicum. This raises questions as to how best to connect with field educators when students are only on practicum for a three month period once during each year. Field educators may also choose not to take students every year.

It is important that assumptions are not made as to engagement, connecting or collaboration. While academic staff may prefer to increase interactions between themselves and field educators during and outside of the practicum period this may not be a shared goal. Elements of collaboration already exist between the university and field educators as they both endeavor to ensure a successful practicum (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Wolfer, Carney, and Ward (2002, p. 57-8) identify other opportunities that may result from a closer relationship between university staff and field educators: for collaborative field-based research; to discuss the relationship between the university curriculum and tasks undertaken by students in the field; and to further develop connections between the university and various fields of practice. However, field educators may differ in their preference to develop stronger relationships with the university, particularly through an online environment. Greig et al., 2002, (p. 36) identify three points regarding user perception that are likely to affect the user's engagement in an online community. First, users need to consider that they have both experience and knowledge that is worth sharing; second, users must place value on collaboration; and finally, users require confidence in their ability to use the available technology. At this point field educators have not indicated a desire to develop or participate in a field education learning community that may 'collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct learning that is personally meaningful' (Reeves & Reeves, 2012, p. 120). Building a community of practice takes considerable time and requires strong leadership to challenge traditional approaches and promote innovation and change (Moore, 2005). Furthermore, it will only be successful if there is sufficient interest and commitment (Hay, 2011).

Developing the Moodle site then needs to be purposeful to ensure that there is responsiveness to the needs and preferences of the field educators (Garrison & Vaughan,

2008). A series of questions may be asked: do field educators want engagement and connection through Moodle? What type of connections do they want? How can this be delivered? When do they want to be connected? Who do they want to connect with?

MOODLE AS INNOVATION

Learning technologies such as Moodle may involve tools for information delivery, tools to provide active learning, and tools to provide knowledge. These tools may have value for field educators who are working as professional social workers as well as educating students on practicum. No monetary resources are transferred from the university to social service agencies for practicum students. While there is an implicit expectation of reciprocity with the student expected to positively contribute to the work of the agency during the practicum the reality is that the benefits for the agency are often less than for the university (Shardlow, Scholar, Munro & McLaughlin, 2012). Offering digital resources and an opportunity to become more connected with the university and other field educators may be seen as a benefit for field educators. As a digital environment Moodle offers an innovative means of interaction that may be immediate despite geographical distance. It may also become an online training environment that can be accessed by field educators when convenient. The inclusion of a range of resources, whether text, video or audio, may also support field educators to continue their own professional learning and development. While the Moodle site is innovative in the sense that it is accessible for field educators rather than only students it is important that consideration is given to how the site can be 'a learning environment that encourages learners to seek, find, analyze and apply information appropriately' (Bates, 2010, p. 23). Questions to be posed include: What tools are of most relevance and value to the field educators? What resources do the field educators want to access? What will motivate the field educators to access this online environment?

MOODLE AS FLEXIBLE

Designing a flexible as well as relevant and accessible online environment is likely to be of greater benefit to field educators. Field educators will come to the site with various understanding and knowledge about digital resources. To be of value then the site may need to include a range of strategies and tools, including training scenarios or sessions, so that diverse needs of the users are met. At present, the site relies mainly on asynchronous communication and is largely a repository of print resources and contains links to relevant professional websites and podcasts. Resources have been categorized to enable easier searching. A news forum is used to convey messages from academic staff. Curriculum resources, for example assessment documentation, are also available. There is potential to develop synchronous activities that will provide field educators with the opportunity for a higher level of communication with university staff. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2010) identify highly interpersonal interaction as a characteristic of the training of human service workers and also note that interaction is likely to increase learner's satisfaction and motivation to learn (p. 162). The use of Adobe Connect to facilitate online discussion forums offers the advantage of being interactive, operating in 'real time' and being cost-effective in relation to both time and travel costs (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al.,2010; Wolfer, Carney, & Ward, 2002). The role of university staff in facilitating online forums is important if the objective of achieving an inclusive learning environment is to be achieved (Greig et al., 2002, p. 38). Other tools, for example audio messages from university staff, could also be used as a means of support, teaching and encouragement. Questions however remain around enhancing the flexibility of an online learning environment. These

questions include: what is the value, purpose and likely use of these tools by field educators especially given the voluntary access to the site? how can there be consideration given to the workloads of the field educators and their perceptions of the accessibility of the Moodle site?

MOODLE AS RELEVANT

Field educators are both educators and learners whilst they support students on practicum. They are educators of students with a responsibility to the university to support the student to meet the required learning outcomes. Further they are learners in their professional roles as social work practitioners as well as field educators. As life-long learners, the Moodle site could provide field educators with another learning environment. It is well-known that motivation is increased if tools and resources are seen as having value and being relevant (Bates, 2010). In this regard, Levine and Chaparro's injunction is apposite: that it is important to focus on the requirements of users on online sites (Levine & Chaparro, 2007, p. 37). Achieving this is one challenge for offering digital resources to field educators. There is considerable diversity in field educators, not only in terms of their social work positions but also in respect of the time they have to engage, interest in using technology, interest in ongoing interaction with the university, perceived relevance of university-provided resources, and availability of technology. Incorporating authentic tasks may assist with increasing the perception of relevance (Reeves & Reeves, 2012). The role of university staff is central to the successful enhancement of the Moodle environment and engagement with field educators. Horvath and Mills (2011, p. 39) observe that university staff must become familiar with the different modalities and receive appropriate training in the use of applications. Further, adequate time should be allowed for the preparation of materials and technical support is essential (Horvath & Mills, 2011, p. 41). Questions in this domain include: how can the Moodle site be of value to field educators? how can issues of diversity be addressed? what tools and resources are most of use to field educators in their dual role as educators and learners?

CONCLUSION

The Field Education Moodle site at Massey University is currently designed for both students and field educators. Over the past two years academic staff have begun to shape the site so that it offers more relevant resources to field educators with the intention of better supporting them as both educators and learners. All field educators need to both understand and continue to develop in their critical roles of both practitioners and educators of students. Receiving adequate training, feedback, encouragement and support is important to ensure the success of practicum (Chilvers, 2011; Sturre et al., 2012). Drawing on the perspectives of field educators and university staff, this paper has examined the potential of the Field Education Moodle site to be connected, innovative, flexible and relevant. Several questions have been identified in each of these domains that require on-going examination and action so that these university criteria may be better achieved. Field education is at the interface of academia and practice and tertiary staff must ensure that all developments, including within digital environments, are responsive and of sufficient value to those whom they are intended (Chilvers & Hay, 2011).

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The Journal does also accept *best practice* papers but only if it present a unique or innovative practice of a Co-op/WIL program that is likely to be of interest to the broader Co-op/WIL community. The Journal also accepts a limited number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical discussion of the importance of the issues, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.