

Online Collaborative Learning in Social Work Education

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Abstract

This paper details the authors' experience in enabling and encouraging online collaboration amongst seasoned social work professionals and educators. Communication within social work is widely researched and documented, however little or no work has been done on examining the life of a virtual social worker. This paper examines both the process of running, and the impact created, by an eModerating course designed by the authors to provide participants with a holistic insight into the practices and experience of teaching and learning online, which was hosted on the Virtual Learning Environment, WebCT, for the Scottish social work education community in 2004. It also examines the importance of motivation in driving and developing effective collaborative learning opportunities in social work education. Combining the authors' practical experience, feedback from the eModerating course, and drawing from relevant published literature, this paper outlines the importance of understanding motivational approaches, the need for acquiring new skills and updating existing ones for online tutoring and learning, and makes practical suggestions for enabling and improving collaborative learning opportunities in the social work sector in Scotland.

To the best of the authors' knowledge the eModerating course was the first professional development course, featuring a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities, conducted entirely over the internet in Scottish Higher Education.

Keywords

Collaboration, communication, motivation, eLearning, eModerating, asynchronous discussions, synchronous discussions, social work.

Introduction

Over recent years the popularity of online communication methods has grown, as has awareness of the collaborative opportunities offered by the internet for people who are dispersed over a wide geographical area. With increasing knowledge of the tools available, be they synchronous or asynchronous, demand for use is emerging and growing across the board. In the areas of social work and social work education this demand has been slower to 'catch' and spread, however there are signs that this community is becoming aware of the opportunities and are seeking ways to engage with and use the media. This interest can be credited to both students demanding more in the way of multimedia and interactive opportunities but also to geographically dispersed agencies seeking new ways to collaborate Scotland wide. As access to staff development on how to leverage the benefits of the internet improves, the current demand for collaborative opportunities is also set to grow resulting in an increased research requirement into the possibility of a virtual social worker. Possible benefits of increased online collaboration for social workers includes freeing up time spent travelling to meetings, to dedicate to service users and other key work.

This paper addresses some of the above concerns and discusses preliminary outcomes of an eModerating course designed and run specifically for social work educators in 2004. It should be noted that at the time of course delivery, learning online did not include support for ubiquitous, readily-available video conferencing, therefore the eModerating course featured text-based communication tools only. To the best of the authors' knowledge the eModerating

course was the first professional development course, featuring a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities, conducted entirely over the internet in Scottish Higher Education.

Context of Work

The context of this paper comes from the authors' work on the Stòr Cùram project, a Scottish project that took place in 2004-2005, and which aimed to create a national digital repository of reusable learning objects (RLOs) for use within social work education. In particular, it draws on the authors' experience of designing and facilitating three implementations of an eModerating course. Both authors have extensive experience in the field of eLearning, staff development and web / materials development.

The authors' role within the Stòr Cùram project was varied and some of the work undertaken is detailed within this paper. However to place the importance of the eModerating course into context, the authors will outline some of the activity here. In 2004 the authors conducted a skills audit in the form of an online and paper-based questionnaire with social work educators from the Higher Education Institutions across Scotland which offer an Honours degree in social work. 57% of social work educators working in Higher Education in Scotland responded.

Based on the findings from the educator audit, the authors developed and delivered a programme of staff development which included a bespoke eModerating course hosted in WebCT and national and departmental workshops and presentations. This was complemented by personal support and guidance, and the dissemination of good practice advice on e-learning, blended learning and the use of RLOs within social work education.

One of the findings from the skills audit was that computer literacy and confidence in engaging with the online environment amongst social work educators was low. Over half of the social work educators who responded to the survey rated their computer literacy as being very poor to satisfactory (See Figure 1). This finding informed the design of the course structure and materials, although the authors' recognised that an individual's self-rating might differ from their actual ability. Lack of confidence, negative experiences online, or prejudice towards the online environment, amongst other things, could all impact the desire to learn online and a learners' perception of their ability to engage effectively with the medium.

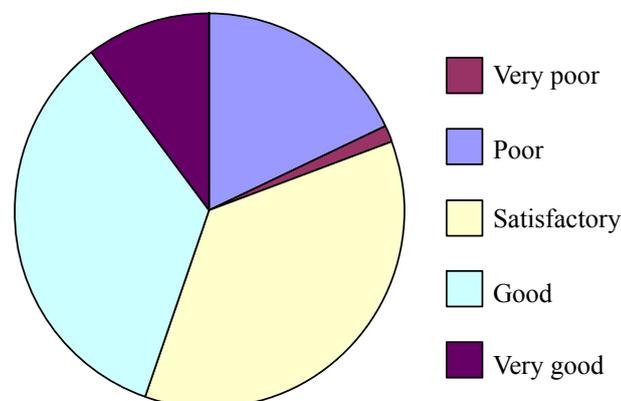


Figure 1: Breakdown of computer literacy self-rating by Scottish social work educators.

Communication within Social Work

In the field of social work, verbal communication and the ability to effectively read non-verbal signs of communication is key. These are skills built up through fieldwork experience, training and years of work. When individuals are engrossed with this style of communication it can be challenging moving to the use of new communication tools within an alien environment, which at the time of course delivery did not support ubiquitous, readily-available video conferencing that would have enabled visual clues to be seen.

From an early stage students and those new to social work are taught the benefits of identifying and gauging non-verbal communication. The ability to judge and deduce facial expressions, posture, orientation, eye contact, proximity, touch and fine/gross movement is an invaluable skill required by the social work professional.

"Non-verbal communication is an interactive process. That is, one person's non-verbal behaviours will influence, and be influenced by, the non-verbal behaviours of others. It is similar to a form of dancing in which one partner's movements reflect, and are reflected by, the other's. We therefore have to bear in mind our own 'steps' in the dance and not focus too narrowly on those of the others involved." (Thomson, 1996, p95)

Emphasis is placed on the area of symbolic communication within social work, meaning the art of deducing meaning from what individuals say, related to their environmental context. With non-visual and non-contextual communication this is harder to ascertain. The interactive process of assessing non-verbal communication is of importance when placed in the context of the online environment. The authors were curious about how social work professionals would cope with the removal of such visual and contextual cues, and if the non-visual nature of written online communication would create an uncomfortable environment for them to learn within.

Within social work education, students are taught the value of listening and waiting their turn to contribute to the conversation. Therefore the speed of synchronous online communication, such as occurs in live chat sessions, can take a novice by surprise. Whereas within training the importance of listening and allowing others to finish what they are saying has much importance attached, it quickly becomes clear that when discussing online, the art of commenting before others finish will help avoid discussion becoming stilted.

As skilled communicators in the face-to-face world, the social work educators within the eModerating course found themselves having to adapt their skills and this was achieved through a variety of means. The authors noted participant fascination with, and use of, emoticons (☺ and ☹ for example) and the apparent empathy they could express through use of such. This can likely be attributed to the more visual feel that emoticons bring to a discussion where an individual can choose to express their happiness or frustration (for example) at any point in the given discussion. In future, it would be interesting to look at whether or not social work professionals become more open to illustrating their feelings online through use of such emoticons or whether they maintain close control of their visible emotions as they would in a face-to-face scenario. The authors did caution participants to not allow early enthusiasm for the use of emoticons to overload a discussion with unnecessary and, at times, off-putting use.

Discussion focused on use in an appropriate context, i.e. within small group work or discussions where informality was the general rule.

As Hoffman (2004) acknowledges online tutors lack the clues signalling a demotivated audience that face-to-face instructors enjoy which include, but are not limited, to bored looks or confused expressions. Therefore participants in group work as well as the online tutor need to detect the "*invisible energy*" (Hoffman, 2004) being transmitted. Hoffman recommends making use of the inbuilt feedback mechanisms, surveys, submission buttons, a yes or no option, which would substitute the traditional nod or shake off the head. Keeping an eye on the amount of time it takes for participants to respond to queries or to submit queries of their own are all indicators of interest and sustainability of a topic or discussion. Within the synchronous environment there is also the option for a virtual raise of the hand which can provide indication of interest levels and feed into motivational strategy.

The eModerating Course

From the skills audit, it was clear that the maximum amount of time educators could commit to staff development opportunities was a few weeks per annum. With this in mind the authors decided to make the eModerating course three weeks in length, with participants expected to contribute six to seven hours of their time per week to the group and individual exercises. Course details to participants prior to commencing were also purposefully brief as the main aim of the course was to facilitate learning by doing.

The course covered effective practices for tutoring and collaborating online and, through the experience of being an online learner, provided participants with a holistic insight into the experience of teaching and learning online. The course was conducted entirely online within WebCT so that participants were immersed in the online environment. Designed to be as interactive as possible to facilitate 'in practice' and theoretical learning, the course featured learning objects relating to social work as well as those relating to the subject of eModeration. This approach allowed the participants to focus on a subject they felt comfortable with (social work) which helped to counter-balance the lack of confidence in engaging with the online environment. Contextualising their learning in this way ensured that the participants would not only experience at first hand how they might apply this way of learning within their own teaching practice but the authors also hoped that it would spark new ideas about the application of online learning within the subject of social work education and the wider social work community.

Within the three week framework, the course design catered for self-paced, asynchronous learning but with time allocated for synchronous chat sessions. Resources were released to participants on a weekly basis so as not to overwhelm with too much information initially and in order to manage the progression of the participants through the course. Other than that, the participants' pathways through the course materials were flexible meaning that the participant could engage in just-in-time, personalised learning or follow a basic structure moving from one learning object to a chat session to the next relevant learning object and so on.

Emphasis was placed on communication for a number of reasons. The authors used both synchronous and asynchronous discussions to let the participants see at first hand the benefits online communication can bring to the learning experience.

"...there is a crucial advantage in using material generated by real questions and discussion from real learners. This will provide a learners' perspective on a topic that cannot be 'authored' by subject experts." (Mayes, 1997, p4)

The authors were pleased to note that many participants were surprised and enthused by the opportunities that they came to realise were possible through online communication and collaboration. These included but were not restricted to the following list, which align with other documented benefits of collaborative learning online:

- i. To promote active learning and as a significant tool for engaging students (subjects which were discussed in the synchronous and asynchronous chat sessions)
- ii. To facilitate peer-to-peer, student-to-tutor and tutor-to-group communication
- iii. As an arena for providing peer, tutor and group feedback
- iv. Access to a geographically dispersed community of practice. Peers from a variety of organisations can tap into a rich resource of information, support and perspectives
- v. Potential for collaboration, support and information from peers as and when required and at times out with normal working hours via asynchronous discussions in particular
- vi. Opportunity for building relationships and forming a network with colleagues from other organisations and backgrounds within the field
- vii. Chance to discuss experiences, approaches and share knowledge regarding best practice
- viii. Opportunity for vicarious learning

"Vicarious learning is important in classroom experience, where the questions asked, and comments offered, by some learners can often articulate and expose aspects of conceptual difficulty experienced by others. These dialogues can involve discourse between learner and teacher, discussion between peers, or even direct interaction with courseware". (Mayes, 1997, p3)
- ix. Catering for those who are less socially confident at verbal communication in a group setting, through enabling participants to review ideas before posting

"Participants have the luxury of time; they have time to give more thought to their contributions to discussions" (Palloff and Pratt, 1999 p.xvi)
- x. The potential enhancement to their work practices, enabling them to: provide remote support to students; answer questions arising during a student's placement; give feedback on and assess the student's performance in the field; etc

Over the duration of the eModerating course, it was encouraging to see participants realise that they would have to develop new, or adapt existing skills in order to make effective use of the new environment. For example, they acknowledged the need for care in the construction of messages posted in discussion boards as, unlike a spoken conversation, a record of the content would remain and could be taken out of context in a way that differs from the immediacy of an unrecorded spoken conversation. The authors were pleased to note evidence of self-correction in this circumstance, with a number of participants identifying this as an area for caution. Participants recognised the need for reflecting on a submission before posting and

that they could broaden the scope of expression, such as influencing the tone through the use of emoticons.

Online Collaboration

As the target audience of social work educators was dispersed across Scotland and the survey had revealed a wariness of new technology, the authors felt it important to encourage full use of the facilities. A welcoming environment and trust in the process became almost a "moral imperative rather than an outcome of the pedagogy and technology." (Jones, 1999)

All participants were encouraged to actively contribute and lead discussions centred on different activities.

"Successful learners in the online environment need to be active, creative and engaged in the learning process." (Palloff and Pratt, 2001)

Evidence of the participants' engagement with the course could be seen in their contributions to discussions. After initial reticence from many, the volume of postings became such that the authors had to switch to prompts about time-management rather than encouragement to post. In the final run of the course, over 200 posts were made under one of the discussion topics in the first three days. The authors responded to this phenomenon by citing Salmon's Five Stage Model (2004, p.63) and the need to 'tame' time spent online.

"Although a face to face tutorial may last two hours, it has a clear start and finish time and is rarely interrupted by anything else. ... Online is not like that. It has a reputation for 'eating time'." (Salmon, 2004, p.63)

It became clear that time management was an area the participants were not readily prepared for, anticipating that life online would save them time in their face to face meetings and teaching. Time spent eModerating is generating some debate within the academic world as the medium becomes more common within the public and private sectors. The amount of practical support required in terms of time allocation, technical support, equipment, software and a productive yet comfortable environment are the more practical considerations that need to be taken into account when looking to make the move into the online world. (Duggleby, 2000)

With the majority of participants being new to synchronous chat, the participants were quick to point out functionality that helped them to follow the fast pace of the discussions. The authors used chat room software in which the participants could pick a colour for their name. The participants found that this visual aid to be of real benefit in following contributions. Due to conflicting work requirements, not all participants were able to attend every chat session so the authors posted a transcript of each session which all could review. Participants noted that it took them a while to be able to make sense of a transcript and to tease out the different threads within the discussion, however, the visual clue provided by the different colours associated with the posts by different participants allowed them an entry point into the transcript helping them to follow threads and draw meaning from contributions made by individuals.

The course benefited from the input of invited guest experts who moderated synchronous chat sessions, introducing participants in a live setting to some of the considerations and techniques that can be used to manage synchronous communication. These sessions were very popular with the participants, and allowed them first hand experience of the potential difficulties but also the opportunities of synchronous chat for online collaboration. With the focus on techniques that can be applied for ensuring a well structured and useful chat session, participants debated the potential pedagogical applications for this medium. Techniques covered included how to create a visual aid or picture of those taking part in the session and how this could be used to structure question and answer sessions such as in a Round Robin, or using it to track participation, or make notes of comments made by different members.

The importance of 'netiquette' became apparent and chat room protocols were explored in response to the basic 'mistakes' participants were making during their first encounter with synchronous chat. These included: dominating the conversation; asking numerous questions or making comments whilst the moderator was answering somebody else or without waiting for the moderator to invite them to contribute; and constructing long posts which took a while to type and which were no longer relevant to the conversation by the time they were posted. Through this process of trial and error and with the invited expert on hand to point out an issue and a solution at just the right moment, the participants gained skills and an understanding of the role of an e-moderator in a short space of time. They experienced at first hand the need for timely prompts and dealing with issues as they arise.

Many unprompted posts were made to the asynchronous discussion rooms after a synchronous chat session in which the participants expressed their excitement about the session and their surprise at how much they had enjoyed it. A number of participants outlined ways in which they intended to incorporate synchronous communication into their own courses based on their recent experience. Plans for using synchronous chat as a means for developing social interaction with participants, for mind mapping ideas, voting, providing immediate feedback as the tutor, were all outlined. The experience of communicating in real time with an expert eModerator and the power they have to encourage in-depth debate, clarify points, and weave the numerous contributions from a vociferous group into a coherent set of ideas for further analysis, had a significant impact. The importance of moderation within the online discussions should not be underestimated.

In both the synchronous chat sessions and the asynchronous discussion rooms, lurking (where someone is present but does not contribute) was discouraged by the authors, however, in the early stages it was an activity that most participants sought solace in. Early on in the course, the authors set the participants the task of discussing, via asynchronous discussion, what guidelines they would set themselves as a group regarding expectations of behaviour when communicating online. The aim of this task was to not only provide an opportunity for the participants to use the medium but to discuss as a group why it might be useful to provide a set of guidelines, what guidelines they would set and to create a resource participants could be referred back to in cases of conflict. The authors provided some prompts for key point to include, such as creating a process for dealing with lurking or flaming (where one participant argues excessively with another or posts a defamatory message). From previous experience, the authors have found that guidelines created can vary greatly from group to group but with the participants in this course, there was a particular emphasis on confidentiality - a pertinent

focus for social workers. It became clear that the group as a whole discouraged lurking, possibly linking it to a sense of someone 'listening in' and not behaving in an open manner.

"Another interesting phenomenon in online communities is how status plays out in group and personal identity and how it affects the common good online. By contributing to the group, a participant can get credit and bolster his or her standing." (Preece, 2000, p180)

Motivating Factors

Given that social work covers both public and private sectors, addressing the motivational requirements and encouraging collaboration across both spheres, was expected to prove challenging. The authors anticipated motivation to be an important tool for encouraging participation within the eModerating course and that they would need to be fairly inventive in ways to initiate and encourage continued participation. Once accepted onto the course all participants were required to complete a pre-course questionnaire where they agreed to the expected hours of participation each week and committed to completing the course. Extrinsic motivational factors, such as institutional and managerial expectations, were helpful, however, the majority of participants found the online environment to be something of a culture shock and therefore required additional motivational prompts. Such prompts included playing on their curiosity, and reminding them that they would gain new skills that would be applicable across their personal, as well as working, lives.

The participants' first task was to introduce themselves and provide reasons for their desire to partake in the course. Through these introductions some of the following motivational factors emerged:

- i. *"I'm needing to up my skills to be competent in the virtual environment and to get a more informed sense of what is possible and what is not. Also, to get a better handle on what being a e-mentor actually means, not least in getting a sense of how much time is involved."*
- ii. *"If I could do this already I wouldn't need to be on the course learning how to do it! Still it is a bit scary!"*
- iii. *"We use WebCT for a number of modules but like many things in life I've kind of started in the middle and not read the manual so I'm doing this course to try to help me develop skills in on line learning."*
- iv. *"Now the thought of doing anything with IT is a real challenge for me, so this is my brave attempt at challenging myself."*

(Taken from the Stòr Cùram eModerating course. (2005). Transcripts not published)

When the course evaluation comments were reviewed, many of the comments focused on extrinsic motivation:

- i. *"As my new contract includes the preparation and use of chat rooms for group supervision and designing learning objects the course has given me a good start"*
- ii. *"It opened my eyes to the possibility of working on-line with candidates and others e.g. staff. I now feel that I can make a case for using such a medium as*

part of general "blended" support and training. I think I have the confidence to try this out soon."

- iii. *"The course is extremely appropriate and useful for me in my role of supporting social work staff seconded to Dip SW and also for Practice Teaching Forum. It gave me lots of ideas and a good structure for planning future training using e-learning."*

(Taken from the Stòr Cùram eModerating course. (2005). Transcripts not published)

Such comments in the course evaluation suggest that once participating in the course, unforeseen opportunities emerged and as such the authors are hopeful that motivation to continue use of their new skills may continue.

Online Learning Experience

The use of the comprehensive and stable Virtual Learning Environment, WebCT, provided the authors with flexibility in terms of content offered through the course but also in the number of participants given access. Engaging with online participants provides its own sets of difficulties and when dealing with an anxious and vocal group, care has to be taken from the outset to ensure that the process is as smooth and pain free as possible.

"If installation problems occur, participants begin the experience with a negative impression." (Hoffman, 2004, p.10)

The authors were curious to see how seasoned educators would feel about becoming students again. There was a period of adjustment for the participants, many of whom had not met before, and time was required to become comfortable with group communication. Given the importance of personal contact and confidentiality in the field of social work, the authors had to work hard to install a sense of ownership within the group and made efforts to 'humanize' the course space within WebCT. This was addressed in a variety of ways which included introductions where participants were required to upload a photo of themselves and provide a little personal information as well. The personal information shared ranged from owning a pet to a fondness for the Sound of Music, and influenced further activities by allowing the participants to group together according to interests and explore those features of their personality in more depth.

"Psychologically, the more people discover that they are similar to each other, thus, the more they tend to like each other, thus, the more they will disclose about themselves." (Preece, 2000, p.154)

The introductions helped to illustrate that messages posted were not from disembodied 'voices' on a screen and that there was an individual behind them. However, the perceived safety of anonymity also allowed participants to experiment with the environment in ways that they may not have been comfortable doing in a face-to-face environment.

"The anonymity and perceived safety of the medium allow participants to explore and experience components of their personalities that they might not otherwise access." (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

The authors found course participants to be forthcoming with details of their hopes and fears for the course from the outset which enabled potential complications to be dealt with quickly and easily. Even before the course commenced the authors found that the slightest technical hitch in relation to working online was off-putting to participants. An observation that others have noted:

"One of the easiest ways to demotivate students is to place technical obstacles between them and the learning experience." (Warren, 2000)

As such, a lot of emphasis was placed on informing participants of what they could do to avoid or deal with any technical issues. This was done in a number of ways including providing a pre-course induction pack in hard copy and via email. The pack contained technical information as well as the aims of the course, expectations regarding participation and suggestions for managing engagement with the course and other participants. It also detailed how the course would be structured, the expected time commitment for successfully completing the course and FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions). Through the provision of answers to questions which might be worrying the prospective learner, providing clear details as to who to contact if a problem did arise, and a friendly introduction to the course, the authors aimed to allay some of the concerns associated with learning in an unknown environment.

The technical specifications for partaking in the course were presented in a pro forma in which the participants could find the URL for the course, note their own account access details, find the contact details of the authors and write the contact details for their own IT support officer or department. This focus on providing the participant with easy access to technical and support information was deemed necessary for a cohort of learners with varying degrees of computer literacy and experience. The authors had gathered from the skills audit that an understanding of how to troubleshoot a technical problem could not be assumed. The authors found this to be more noticeable amongst those with a longer service history, who may have had less experience with a range of devices and online mediums. When such participants did encounter a technical problem there was a greater tendency to make a phone call to one of the authors, expressing the desire to "talk to someone" to help them through the issue. However, as the course progressed and confidence appeared to grow, the authors noted that the need for immediate human-based contact and support lessened.

Through personal experience in the course of their work in eLearning the authors are aware of the potential for fuelling anxiety through language choices when teaching people online who are inexperienced in the use of technology. This concern can understandably be attributed to the fact that not only are the individuals learning new skills in the context of a new environment but that the information is often presented in what, to them, may be a new language. Within a face-to-face teaching setting, the authors have noticed individuals new to the online environment display a range of emotions, such as concern, anxiety, and frustration if extensive technical terminology, or jargon, has been used. Individuals have expressed feeling de-skilled and a sense of hopelessness at understanding this new sphere for communicating, learning and working.

With this in mind and with reference to findings from the skills audit, the authors aimed to present the materials for the course in a language they believed would be understandable to all of the participants. This meant identifying and explaining terminology that participants

might not have been exposed to before. For example, course delivery required participants to have a certain player installed on their computers in order to view some of the content. A description of what the player was, why they would need it, and step-by-step instructions on how they could install it, were provided to give as much background and guidance as possible.

Some participants expressed concern that they might 'break' the learning environment, so the authors encouraged and built in time for the participants to actively test and explore the environment in the first few days of the course. The authors have encountered this anxiety before and found that helping the learner to understand that it is safe for them to 'play' with the environment, whilst at the same time providing tips and suggestions regarding the functions of the software, goes a long way to removing a barrier to the potential enjoyment and effective engagement of the learner.

Enabling and Improving Online Collaborative Learning Opportunities

In order for collaborative learning opportunities to be successful within the field of social work, the authors believe it is essential that local government offices upgrade their networks to cope with the demands that online communities and multimedia place on their systems. It is clear that discussion also needs to mature and focus on how to balance the use of modern technologies to improve access and extend the reach of services, with very real concerns around privacy and safety. Drivers for this conversation could include the potential for increasing opportunities for collaboration across the sector, while realising savings in terms of time spent travelling to meetings. Additionally, it will become increasingly important for educational institutions to prepare students for the implications of this new environment on their future working lives.

Future Trends

The authors can assert from evaluation results that within social work in Scotland:

- i. There is scope for continued use of online communication media
- ii. Use of online communication for training students and linking disparate agencies is likely to continue
- iii. The spread of online communities is likely to continue in response to the demands of workloads and geographical distribution

Further research will be required on how to balance the opportunities of online communication media with concerns such as privacy and safety. It is likely other areas for research will emerge as the sector embraces this new form of communication.

Conclusion

As noted at the start of this paper, the findings presented here have been drawn from the authors' experience of designing and delivering three, short eModerating courses for social work professionals and educators. The courses were delivered in fairly quick succession. What is lacking from the study is a body of evidence grown over time to compare participant intakes from different skills / experience levels and with different motivational reasons.

The authors can assert from evaluation results studied that:

- i. Despite initial concerns raised by participants, communicating online has the potential to become an effective complement to current face-to-face communication, as demonstrated by the willingness and enthusiasm shown for continued use of online communication tools by participants
- ii. Facilitating and engaging professionals in online collaboration is time consuming yet worthwhile
- iii. "Motivation is key in driving and developing an online community and in the case of eLearning in creating a collaborative learning environment." (Niven & Harris, 2002)
- iv. Access to good staff development opportunities is key in engaging and sustaining use of facilities
- v. By *actively collaborating* with learning technology, individuals grasp the potential and importance of the tools more quickly than via a lecture about the media in question

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