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# Blended learning in Social Care Education in Ireland: A New Opportunity

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# Blended Learning in Social Care Education in Ireland: A New Opportunity

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## Abstract

Using an action research approach this paper examines the complexity of designing and developing an innovative and user-friendly approach to professional social care education that incorporates advances in educational technology. The project has just moved to the operational stage following an 18-month period of consultation and reflection. Therefore, this paper represents an outline of the development phase and a progress report of the first eight weeks of delivery.

## Introduction

In May of 2004 the Health Service Executive[1] (HSE) southern region contacted the Institute with a view to exploring the possibilities for the delivery of an appropriate qualifying course for its residential social care workers. The following section sets out the stage-by-stage process that led to the construction of an Outreach E-Learning BA in Applied Social Studies (hereafter referred to as the OEL programme).

[1] Prior to January 2005 - Southern Health Board Health

Critical factors that influenced the design process were:

- The varied educational and experiential positions of the potential participants
- The complex operational constraints of the primary stakeholders – Employers (HSE) and the course providers (Institute of Technology, Tralee)

Working within the service provider's constraints (staff cannot be released on a full-time basis) meant that the delivery of the existing BA in Social Care currently delivered as a full-time course in the Institute was not an option.
Hence the course team needed to re-configure the methods of delivery in order to minimise disruption to care provision. The have authors engaged in an ongoing process that enabled the service providers, unit care managers and prospective students to have an input into the design of the course (in terms of content and delivery) in a form of collaborative action research. Taking account of the logistical needs of the service providers, the student's circumstances and the opportunities afforded by ICT resulted in the construction of a blended learning approach, which sought to maximise student effort and minimise service provision disruption.

The recent publication (October, 2004) of the Health & Social Care Professionals Bill, 2004 places further responsibilities on state service providers to up skill existing professionally unqualified care staff. The bill allows for the establishment of the Health and Social Care Professionals Council. The object -

> Of the Council is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence among registrants of the designated professions (Govt. Publications, 2004:11)

The bill specifies that transitional arrangements will apply to unqualified existing practitioners. Facilitation of these arrangements will undoubtedly impact on service providers who are faced with the probability of having to up skill quite a large number of care workers in a relatively short time, whilst at the same time maintaining high levels of care.

Thus we are back to where we started a situation where the HSE required its residential care staff to be accredited to the appropriate qualifying level. However, since the HSE had first approached us in May of 2004, the introduction of the Bill in October added a sense of urgency to the situation.

### The Consultation Phase

The process of meetings, negotiation and consultation has taken a long time, in fact, far longer I think than either of us imagined when we embarked on this course of action. The four stakeholders involved in the consultation phase were: HSE Residential Care Management, Unit Managers, the Institute of Technology Tralee and the potential students.

HSE Residential Care Management – The eventual enactment of the Health & Social Care Professionals Bill represents a challenge to all social care providers to facilitate existing social care workers' acquire the specified pre-requisite qualifications. However, as can be appreciated, the wholesale release of residential childcare staff was not feasible if levels of care were to be maintained in units. The desirability of focusing on the nature and type of work (i.e. residential childcare units) where the potential students are employed was highlighted – it was felt that this would make the course more applicable and would facilitate practice-based learning.

Walking a fine line between implementing a very specific 'training' course and maintaining an 'academic' tradition is no easy task. Following on from the collaborative review of the course content some of the material was re-aligned to take account of the theory and practice needs of the service providers. However, the core academic structure and content was maintained in order to ensure that the course's integrity was not compromised. Major re-alignment of the course would have necessitated academic council approval for what would essentially have been a new course, which would have necessitated greater use of resources and concomitantly delayed the process.

HSE operational residential unit management – Understandably, those who are faced with the day-to-day management of the residential units at the coalface so to speak were concerned with the possibility of losing a large number of staff on a regular basis. A collaborative review of the course content took place to ascertain the areas of the current course that unit management staff felt could be further emphasised or reduced. In addition to the existing course – new topics for inclusion were also suggested; where these topics could not be easily accommodated within the course structure, provision has been made for specific seminars and/or workshops.

During this phase we were essentially involved in a process of 'selling' the course to the operational management and potential participants. Senior management and the member of staff responsible for training and development in the sector had already come onboard. Convincing hard-pressed unit managers and hesitant staff that this programme would be of benefit to them was not a straightforward task. Our cause was aided with the introduction of the Health & Social Care Professionals Bill in October of 2004. This Bill is still in the process of becoming legislation; however, in one fell swoop it changed the vista for all those in the social care sector and; as such gave the professional project an added urgency. We

are not suggesting that unit management staff did not see merit in the upskilling of care staff; rather they were understandably fearful that the burden for the facilitation of staff being released would rest with them.

Institute of Technology, Tralee – The fact that the Institute already utilises WebCT meant that no significant outlay was required in terms of software acquisition. However, academic staffing commitments were raised as a concern and although the problems were resolved, level of educator input is an important consideration. This point is particularly relevant to low technology-constructivist courses where interaction relies on educator input as much as technology – consequently this category "probably represent the greatest workload for educators" (Weller, 2002:152). Furthermore, the fact that the computer literacy levels of the course team range from basic to intermediate has meant a considerable commitment to upgrade the ICT skills necessary to implement the WebCT element of the course.

The Institute's officers were concerned that the programme would contain sufficient content and student effort to (a) meet the student's academic needs and (b) to satisfy academic criteria that the resultant qualification would meet the required standards.

HSE care staff/students - As part of the development phase of the programme, an information session was organised allowing potential students the opportunity to meet the development team. After the formal presentation, attendees were invited to participate in a question and answer session. Aside from providing an opportunity for potential students to have questions clarified, it also enabled the development team to gauge and assess some of the fears and expectations of the potential students. Whilst there were a number of issues raised, the most commonly expressed were:

1. Fears surrounding the use of computer technology in general, and the internet in particular
2. Fears about an ability to undertake academic tasks such as essay writing and exams
3. Would the programme focus exclusively on child/residential care? Or would the qualification be a general social care BA?

With regard to point three: the development team initially thought that the potential students were concerned that the course would not be focussed enough on their area of work i.e. residential childcare issues. However, subsequent questions and informal conversations actually pointed to the fact that the potential students wanted a course that enabled them to qualify and be seen as qualifying as generic social care workers.

Given the centrality of ICT to the course, students were surveyed about their knowledge levels 3 Microsoft applications (Word, Excel & PowerPoint) and their ability to use the Internet with reference to use of search engines, retrieval and saving of web content, e-mail, using attachments with e-mails and prior participation in online discussions. On the basis of the information supplied, a number of students were facilitated in undertaking a basic computer skills course prior to commencement of the programme.

The importance of providing study skills was noted and incorporated in to the induction week and on an ongoing basis. It is very easy to get carried away with the possibilities offered by the E-learning element and forget to prepare the students to be students! Despite new technologies, the students on this programme are still required to research, scratch their heads, ponder, agonise what to write and all the other tasks that are part and parcel of being an undergraduate.

## The Programme

Endeavouring to meet the needs of all the stakeholders, and maintain academic credibility for the programme it was decided to offer the existing BA in Applied Social Studies (Social Care) though a blended learning approach incorporating face-to-face class contact that is offered in a mix of college and outreach locations combined with utilisation of an E-Learning element – hence the name of the programme the Outreach E-Learning or OEL for short. It is important to note that the E-Learning element was not simply chosen to facilitate the student effort requirements; it also facilitates our vision and understanding of the role that the education process plays in the development of the adult learner. The resultant OEL 1st year programme therefore incorporates the following elements:

- Induction week
- Nine face-to-face blocks – 28 hours spread over 4 days per block. In order to facilitate as many students as possible seven of the nine class blocks are to be delivered on an outreach basis in Macroom and Cork
- A self-directed learning element that is facilitated through the Internet – nominal student effort is 56 hours per month

## Blended Learning

Thus far we have used the term; blended learning as if it is an uncontested and clearly understood concept. We should acknowledge that there are a number of

models and debates as to what exactly constitutes '*blended learning*' (Alonso et al. 2005, Oliver & Trigwell: 2005, Australian National Training Authority: 2003, Clark: 2003, Driscoll: 2002, Valiathan: 2002). The simple answer is that there is no universally accepted definition. Oliver & Trigwell (2005) have identified a number of definitions (and the limitations of each definition) these include: Mixing E-Learning with traditional learning, Mixing Online Learning with Face-to-face, Mixing Media, Mixing Learning Theories, Mixed Learning Objectives and Mixing Pedagogies. Whilst taking note of the problems associated with any definition we have used a blended learning model that incorporates a mixture of online learning with face-to-face teaching.

A further useful framework for the categorisation of online courses is offered by Martin Weller (2002:147) in his work: *Delivering Learning on the Net*. As can be seen from figure 1, the x-axis represents a pedagogical continuum extending from Didactic instruction on the left to Constructivist facilitation on the right. The y-axis represents a continuum of technology employed – ranging from high-end complex technology at the top of the scale to low-end technology at the bottom of the scale.

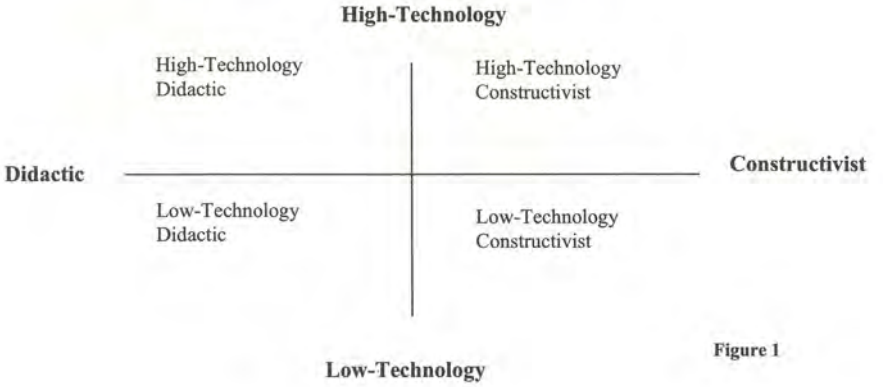


**Figure 1**

In making a choice for the underlying philosophical and operational considerations the low technology constructivist type course had much to recommend it - "such courses use relatively simple technology: for example, they may focus on a simple Web site containing text and images and an associated Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) technology" (Weller, 2002:149).

Whilst WebCT certainly provides a complex range of attributes and can be configured to be high or low technology simply by choosing the range of options necessary for delivery of the course. For example completely automated assessment strategies can be employed. Interactive multi-media solutions can also be delivered using the WebCT platform, in short we could have, if so desired or required gone for a high end technology online course.

In a social studies course the ability to reflect and debate is crucial. Weller's (2002) point of view regarding low technology constructivist type courses echoed the course teams' viewpoint where he (Weller) notes that this type of course "is particularly likely in topics that are not very technically oriented but involve a good deal of debate. Examples might be online courses in theology, history,

philosophy and so forth" (ibid. p.149). Obviously for our purpose, a course such as Social Care fits into this range of interactive constructivist type courses.

### The E-Learning Element of the OEL Programme

As with the term blended learning, we also find that E-learning has multiple meanings. The variety of possible uses and the ever expanding range of hardware and software options, results in a situation where E-learning can be anything from a simple means of a remote access information retrieval system to a fully interactive multimedia experience. This lack of clarity was recognised by the Department for Education and Skills when in 2003 they noted that:

> If someone is learning in a way that uses information and communication technologies, they are using e-learning. They could be a pre-school child playing an interactive game; they could be a group of pupils collaborating on a history project with pupils in another country via the Internet [...etc.] – it all counts as e-learning (Cited in Oliver & Trigwell, 2005)

Central to the delivery of this programme is the utilisation of a learning management system (LMS) – WebCT. This software supports the facilitation and management of web-based learning through the provision of a variety of tools and features that offer web-based content and activities, support of learning objects, track and manage students, and support various communication and assessment processes. This multi-functional platform enables lecturers and students to interact in a variety of arenas:

- Discussion boards enable students and lecturers to 'post' their contributions on various topics. These postings can be read at a later date where all participants can learn from each other and/or contribute further to the discussion thus re-enforcing the creation of a mutual learning environment.
- Dedicated e-mail addresses for each lecturer means that a subject query can be directed effectively and appropriately. The course team undertake to respond to e-mails on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. The

efficacy of this level of response will be monitored throughout the first year to see if the levels are appropriate.

- Aside from core textbooks, course material will be delivered through the course website. Each module will have its own folder that contains details of – assignments, course material, reading directions and suggestions, hyperlinks to other appropriate websites.
- Each lecturer facilitates a monthly online synchronous discussion. This session is hosted at a mid-point between class contact blocks. This presents the opportunity to interact with the lecturer in a real-time arena that enables the student to clarify module.content.

Threading a way through the sometimes-grandiose claims that proponents of ICT in education make can be somewhat confusing. The British Journal of Educational Technology's editorial *Rhetoric and reality-the present and future of ICT in education* (Nichol & Watson, 2003) refers to the work of Martin Cohen (2000) in which he identifies 8 discreet discernible clusters of policy regarding the use of ICT in education. With apologies to Mr. Cohen for a little artistic licence, the 8 headings of the views and values of policy makers are:

1. Messianic idealism – where ICT is regarded as the biggest advance in educational strategies since the invention of chalk
2. Economic competiveness – ICT is a means to service the needs of the labour market
3. Individualised learning – ICT is a route for the creation of self-directed learners
4. Enjoyment – ICT makes learning more attractive
5. Developing quasi-publishing skills – ICT is just one of a suite of skills for individuals to self administrate (online banking, e-mailing etc.)
6. Social relations – facilitates communication and interaction with others

7. New Educational methods –"Major change in classroom culture vis-à-vis the role of both teacher and pupil. Teachers as classroom managers, with pupils as independent e-learners" (*ibid.* p.134)
8. Heresy – no room for heresy!

Whilst acknowledging that there is often a gap between rhetoric and reality we (are not computer technologists) feel that the use of ICT in this scenario is appropriate because it offers the learners a route to improve their own economic position, it affords an opportunity to create self-directed learners, it facilitates communication in a wider set of arenas than would otherwise be possible and it affords an opportunity to adopt a pedagogic approach that is appropriate for adult learners who are experienced practitioners already. It is this pedagogic suitability that we feel is the most important opportunity afforded, we are not interested in technology simply for technology's' sake.

## Pedagogic Suitability

Our staring point was to view E-learning as a tool, which would enable us to deliver a full-time course in an abridged version while still maintaining the academic rigour necessary for a course to be accepted as a bona fide social care work qualification. However, whilst this may have been our starting point, it certainly is not our concluding point. Social care work, by its very nature relies on the use of self as an intervention strategy. In order to promote a learning environment that recognised and valued the core activities of social care professionals – namely the power of social interaction, it was necessary to view ICT as a learning platform that would add value to the essential face-to-face teaching. Therefore, we were also keen that the E-learning element should not be seen purely in terms of support to the 'real' teaching that would take place in the classroom.

Students on this programme are drawn from a geographically wide area - whilst they may have the same employer they will not necessarily be familiar with ach other. The class contact is, relatively speaking quite a small component of the overall programme. In order to maximise learning and collaboration, the course content is organised around activities designed to create a social learning environment. As Palloff and Pratt (1999) argue, "in the online classroom ... attention needs to be paid to developing a sense of community in the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful". "With the introduction of communication technologies, group work and collaboration have become a viable pedagogical approach in distance learning courses" (Weller, 2002: 56).

Thus, the course structure incorporates the following components:

- Online tutorials whereby the students and lecturers interact in 'real time' discussions. These tutorials are situated at the mid-point between class based blocks.
- Discussion boards are particularly as they do not require synchronous participation. For example, the lecturer can pose a question and post it on the board. When the student is finished his/her shift they can log, see the question, they than have the opportunity to reply straight away or take time to consider a reply. These replies can act as a learning resource for the rest of the students – thus creating a community of learners.
- The course team have encouraged the students to form study groups to support each other. Whilst those who live and/or work near each other can obviously meet face-to-face, utilisation of the WebCT enables them to arrange virtual support groups independent of course team arranged communication.

We acknowledge that no lecturer is an expert on every facet of their subject, lecturers can and do learn from students. In a programme such as this, this point is particularly pertinent as all students are experienced social care practitioners, with years of experience and insight. Recognising that mutual or peer support is just as important as tutor support (Clarke et al. 2004) the development team's aim was to provide an opportunity whereby the students can display their knowledge thus creating a mutual learning environment.

We have often thought that Illich (1970) was quite prophetic with his choice of terms when, in Deschooling Society he talked about the creation of learning webs, over 25 years before the explosion of Internet access through the advent of the World Wide Web. Using the Internet in such a forum allows the interchange of knowledge and allows a conduit where the balance of knowledge does not rest solely with the lecturer – indeed the creation of learning networks.

Many of the students are quite inexperienced to third level education and as a consequence feel a little overawed and fearful of the process. Activities that enable them to display their knowledge and experience provides a meaningful way of validating their knowledge, it reaffirms that they are instructors as well as students.

Progress Report on First Six Weeks of the Programme:

The programme commenced with the induction week being held in the Institute of Technology Tralee. During this week, students were exposed to a variety of learning and teaching experiences that would reflect the blended nature of the programme. Thus, the programme included sessions on using the library, both in a 'real' and virtual sense. Technology sessions aimed at improving ICT skills such as Microsoft word and Excel were provided in addition to specific sessions that would enable the students to use the WebCT platform.

In recognising the twin track nature of the programme we also provided study skills sessions on note-taking, time-management and essay writing. Using ICT is all very well, but we recognise that first and foremost these are college students, who will be required to undertake the age-old tasks of reading, analysing and writing, regardless of how the material is delivered. Furthermore, we also recognise that the OEL students suffer the same fears and anxieties that all students face: doubt in their abilities, doubt that they will keep up with the course and so on. To his end we realise the importance of support in terms personal development and the role that the course team play in maintaining a buoyant group of students.

As part of the action research process we evaluate each week of face-to face delivery - an important component of this research process is the anonymous student feedback form. Comments from the induction week indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the week; however a consistent though perhaps not unsurprising concern was the usage of ICT:

*"Worried about my computer skills"*

*"Enjoyed week, craic was good ... looking forward to coming back.* However, the respondent also noted *"information not relevant to us, I'm not doing a computer degree"*

*"A most interesting week - but I feel it will take me a long time to have a satisfactory grasp of WebCT"*

*"A lot of preparation and work has been put into this course, I am a little nervous about the computers and submitting assignments"*

We are keen to point out that the week was not without its problems and mishaps, there were a number of organisational difficulties encountered during the induction week - some of them foreseeable, others less so. Nonetheless, the feedback indicated that there was general satisfaction and students were appreciative of the efforts that the course management and development team undertook to rectify the situation.

The implementation of the programme has not been without its own difficulties. It is all very well having the students in the college where computer problems can be sorted out if they do arise. However, when a student is operating outside of the college with its high-end technology hardware and software and concomitant support of technicians, problems can and do arise. This issue has also been noted by Wernet et al. (2000) in their evaluation research of a WebCT based course for social work students, where they noted that "necessary and sufficient hardware must be available for students to have physical access to the course learning tool" (p. 502).

The college has a powerful server with ISDN connections; by comparison, as many of you are aware, connecting from home to the Internet via a standard phone line can be painfully slow. Tasks that were effortless and quick in the college require a little more patience. In addition, some of the home computers required some additional software such as PowerPoint to open components of the course material supplied. Nevertheless, none of these problems are insurmountable; however, it is out intention as part of this research process to provide a road map highlighting some of the pitfalls that could be avoided in the future, and as a consequence guide other educators and researchers.

## Conclusion

This Outreach *E*-Learning Programme subscribes to the philosophy of extending the opportunities for participation in professional training to social care workers who are currently employed in social care settings and are therefore unable to attend a full time programme. The central feature of this programme is a blended learning approach, which combines face-to-face teaching blocks with on-line learning strategies offering participants an accessible positive learning experience in their places of employment.

As we have previously indicated this is very much a work-in-progress report. However, this paper has presented us with an opportunity to reflect on the development phase of the programme. Our backgrounds are in the social sciences, information communication technology is just one of items on a long list of skills that we are not expert in, the list also includes: contract negotiation, budgeting and project management. Nonetheless, the past eighteen months have been a useful if steep learning curve for those of us on the development team.

The design of the programme makes it possible for participants to achieve a professional qualification while honouring their commitment to their employers and their service users. In designing the programme the course team have made explicit their belief that the course should acknowledge, validate and extend prior learning and experience, enabling participants to identify future learning needs. In order for participants to build on their experiences they need to take responsibility for engaging with the new and innovative blended learning and development opportunities presented to them in this programme.

The era of lifelong learning has (with some limitations) become a reality for many non-traditional learners. The development of user-friendly software programmes and the general availability of the Internet represents a huge opportunity to everyone engaged in the education process. As we have stated previously we are not by training or temperament technologists, notwithstanding this, we are aware that failure to grasp the opportunity presented by ICT may result in education being appropriated solely by technologists. This paper represents our first tentative steps in the research process from which we hope others may profit from our experiences and encourage the use of ICT in subject areas not generally associated with high-end ICT usage.

The path of innovation is a journey that veers from optimism to pessimism and hopefully finishes on an optimistic note. In attempting to introduce a blended learning approaching to the area of social care education, we have, as a design team been guided by the immortal words of Woody Allen: "if you're not making a mistake every now and again, it's a sure sign that you're not being very innovative".

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