

Moving down Stream: Using e-technology to enhance social work field education

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In 2009, Massey University introduced Moodle (aka Stream) as an institutional innovation to support and enhance teaching and learning. The social work field education (practicum) programme has embraced Stream as an opportunity to creatively advance current educative practices. The development of a meta-site for field education provides academics, students and field educators¹ a forum in which field education can be advanced. This paper will outline the rationale for a research project that examines the perspectives of field educators and academic staff on the opportunities and challenges associated with on-line teaching and learning in the field education area. The research will assess the value of the Stream environment and consider ways in which the current innovation can be further developed.

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

Background

Massey University, a multi-campus and dual mode 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). The introduction of Moodle (known as Stream) in 2009 sought to provide students with an engaging, rich-media environment (Brown et al., 2011). As an online environment it is intended to be connected, innovative, flexible and relevant to learners (Bates, 2010; Kehrwald, 2011).

In the Bachelor of Social Work and Masters of Applied Social Work programmes at Massey University students are required to undertake two 60-day practicum in social service agencies. Students may study either internally or by distance and the practicum may be located throughout New Zealand. Students are, in the main, supervised and supported by a registered social worker in the practicum agency. 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. Field educators may lack confidence, specialised knowledge or pedagogical skills 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. Aside from this contact the field educator is largely isolated from the University.

From our 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. Given the time and resource constraints on both academic and agency staff we question whether online technologies, and specifically Stream, can be used more effectively for the benefit of field educators. In 2011 we began to re-develop the Field Education Stream site that had initially been established for practicum students 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 utilised; primarily a news forum, text and audio resources, as well as relevant university documentation.

Stream also has the potential to be used as a forum in which academic staff can provide feedback and encouragement to field educators as student's 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. Academic staff could also use Stream to facilitate and guide field educators in their often challenging roles as educator, coach, mentor, supervisor and assessor. Stream might also offer a quality

¹ Field educator refers to the person in a social service organisation that is supervising and supporting a student throughout a 60-day practicum. This person is usually a registered social worker.

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 and Vaughan, 2008).

The Stream site then may offer a new opportunity to support the ongoing 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 Stream site

The potential functions of the Stream site may include enhancing relationships; developing a community of practice; augmenting professional knowledge and practice; and ultimately improving student learning. There is however no compulsion for field educators to be active in the Stream setting and so a learning environment that is relevant, flexible, convenient and accessible is necessary (Cleveland-Innes, 2010). We are particularly interested in exploring how the Stream site can be connected, innovative, flexible and relevant to field educators as learners. At this point it is unknown whether the field educators are interested in such a learning forum or what type of digital environment they might prefer to enhance their professional development as field educators.

A formative evaluation of the Field Education Stream site will gather information to guide future decisions as to the shape and function of the site so as to enhance its quality and effectiveness (Reeves and Reeves, 2012). The research involves a literature review and semi-structured interviews that will collect the perspectives of field educators who have accessed the site, field education staff who have used but not developed the site, and a teaching and learning consultant.

Stream as connected

The Stream 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 endeavour to ensure a successful practicum (Zepke and Leach, 2010). However, field educators may differ in their preference to develop stronger relationships with the university, particularly through an online environment. 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 and Reeves, 2012, p.120). Building a community of practice takes considerable time and requires strong leadership. Furthermore it will only be successful if there is sufficient interest and commitment (Hay, 2011).

Developing the Stream site then needs to be purposeful to ensure that there is responsiveness to the needs and preferences of the field educators (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008). A series of questions may be asked: Do field educators want engagement and connection through Stream? 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?

Stream as innovation

Learning technologies such as Stream 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 Stream 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 Stream 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, analyse 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?

Stream 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 so that diverse needs are met. At present, the site is largely a repository of print resources and contains links to relevant professional websites and podcasts. Resources have been categorised 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 for a broader use of tools, for example, discussion forums or chat. Audio messages from university staff could also be used as a means of support, teaching and encouragement. Questions however remain as to the value, purpose and likely use of these by field educators especially given the voluntary access to the site, the workloads of the field educators and their perceptions of the accessibility of the Stream site.

Stream as relevant

Field educators are both educators and learners whilst they support students on practicum. They are teachers 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 Stream 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). 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 and Reeves, 2012). Questions in this domain include: How can the Stream 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 Stream 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. Receiving adequate training, feedback, encouragement and support is important to ensure the success of practicum (Chilvers, 2011). The Stream environment potentially offers a mode for creating better connections with field educators in an innovative, flexible and relevant way. The potential of the Field Education Stream site has at this point not been examined and thus provides the rationale for this research. The project therefore will seek the perspectives of field educators as well as draw on the expertise of key university staff so that informed decisions can be made as to any future developments. Field education is at the interface of academia and practice and university staff must ensure that all developments, including within digital environments, are responsive and of sufficient value to those whom they are intended (Chilvers and Hay, 2011).

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