



APT 2021

19th Academic Practice and Technology Conference (APT2021)
Co-hosted online by the London School of Economics & Political Science,
Imperial College London and University College London.
Friday 2nd July 2021

Session Start Time	14:20
Breakout Room	4
Title of Abstract:	Therapists on Twitter: A case study of facilitating #TraineeTalk, an innovative international social media learning community for student counsellors and psychotherapists.
Presenters (lead & co-presenters)	Dr Peter Blundell Caz Binstead
Institution	Liverpool John Moores University & #TherapistsConnect
Format	Case study
Abstract	<p>In this case study, we will discuss a social media project for student counsellors and psychotherapists on Twitter, called #TraineeTalk. We are a group of qualified and experienced UK counsellors and psychotherapists and educators; our project aim was to build connections between students of counselling and psychotherapy, in any part of the world, and at all educational levels. In addition, for the last twelve months we have facilitated a weekly Twitter discussion group, which is open to any counselling and psychotherapy student in the world. This case study will describe our experiences as well as the students who took part in this project, including a critical examination of both the challenges and benefits to students. We argue that social media can be used to develop innovative and international professional learning communities, which can foster student engagement whilst also deepening students' sense of professional identity and belonging.</p>
Session Description	<p>Learning communities are an important part of counselling and psychotherapy students' educational experience. They can influence how students develop their own therapeutic approach. Counselling and psychotherapy have traditionally been delivered 'in-person' rather than in an online or virtual format (Anthony, 2015). Therefore, these learning communities have been located within the teaching institutions that deliver each specific course or training. There have been limited attempts to develop or foster learning communities for students of</p>

counselling and psychotherapy outside of these spaces, including transnationally.

There are professional learning communities (PLC) outside of the field of counselling and psychotherapy that use social media platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter, for educational purposes. These communities have been found to offer good opportunities for informal learning, representations of good practice and opportunities to develop new practices (e.g., Gómez-Martínez and Romero-Rodríguez, 2021; Goodyear, Parker, and Casey, 2019). However, despite calls for greater understanding and use of social media networks for therapists (Blundell, 2021); the available research into therapists' use of social media either professionally or personally is nascent. Research has found therapists can often feel isolated and alone in their work (Winning, 2010); therefore, they may use social media to combat that loneliness (Blundell, 2021). However, research into counsellors' and psychotherapists' use and engagement with open social media networks or virtual learning communities for educational purposes is non-existent.

This session is a case study describing and critically reflecting on a social media learning community called #TraineeTalk for counselling and psychotherapy students. The facilitators of this Twitter community, who are experienced therapists and educators within the UK, reflect on their experiences. This community fosters inter-institutional networking as students from different training providers discuss and debate their learning process and develop their knowledge. The project is transnational and whilst most attendees are UK based, we have students from a wide variety of countries, including Malaysia and USA. This learning community uses a weekly Twitter discussion group, using the hashtags #TraineeTalk and #TherapistsConnect, to explore pertinent topics for counselling and psychotherapy students. The facilitators choose a topic and open the discussion with starter questions and reflections. Students are asked to answer these questions and add any of their own thoughts. The discussion is facilitated for an hour but can continue for much longer (sometimes over days). The open community enables a broad discussion which encourages critical thinking in an open forum.

Our presentation will include the following:

- A rationale for the project
- Our experiences of designing and facilitating this project.
- Students' experiences of the community; including student reports of a deepening sense of belonging and professional identity.
- A critical examination of this learning community as a teaching tool.

We also argue for more research into open social media learning communities, including those for counsellors and psychotherapists.



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Session Start Time	14:20
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Title of Abstract:	Developing an online community for a distance learning course in law
Presenters (lead & co-presenters)	Sara Thornes Rebecca Oglethorpe
Institution	Leeds Beckett University
Format	Case study
Abstract	<p>In this case study we discuss the development of an online course community for a postgraduate distance learning course in Law. The course has a diverse student body - in terms of age, geographic location, personal and professional circumstances, prior experience of the subject and length of time out of formal education. These differences, combined with multiple intakes and varied study pathways led to students feeling isolated. They found it hard to connect with others and became reliant on interactions with module instructors to feel 'seen'.</p> <p>In 2018/19, student feedback expressed dissatisfaction and anxiety at the lack of opportunity for interaction with others. One student commented: "I would request that you don't forget us distance learners ... you are without a window into our efforts and activities."</p> <p>There was a clear need to address these concerns and as a result in September 2019 we introduced a new course community using the Microsoft Teams platform.</p> <p>We will discuss the highlights and challenges of developing the community; share feedback received from students and staff through both formal and informal channels; and describe the importance to us of providing a safe space to establish both student and instructor social presence.</p>

Session Description

Introduction

The Postgraduate Diploma in Law distance learning course launched in September 2017. The issues we faced in the early years of this course and have worked hard to overcome, demonstrate clear ties to the conference themes of both Staff and student experience and Building new communities and developing new identities.

The course can be studied full or part-time, as a PG diploma or a masters, starting in either September or January. In the first year, the course grew from seven to over one hundred students around the world. The sudden growth in student numbers created increased pressure for tutors. The Course Director was inundated with administrative tasks and beyond operational activities, there was little time for community building.

We found ourselves facing issues common to distance learning courses - limited student engagement, low (perceived and actual) participation from instructors and student feelings of isolation and detachment - all of which negatively impact student satisfaction and retention (Brown, 2001; Paquette, 2016; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

We implemented several strategies to improve this situation for the 2019/20 academic year, the most significant being the introduction of a course community.

Rationale

A successful online community can help to reduce the impact of the issues described above by providing a safe space for students to establish themselves as real people, where they can connect with and support each other. From this, an inclusive and understanding environment is established, promoting discourse between students, and their instructors (Aragon, 2003; Paquette, 2016; Shea et al., 2005). Of course, it is not enough to simply build a space and say, "let them come." The role of the instructor in leading by example; demonstrating positive behaviours such as regular posts, showing appreciation of contributions, and providing support and encouragement is key in forming the community (Brown, 2001; Shea et al., 2005). Coupled with this is the fact that students must want to be part of the community, otherwise they simply will not participate (Brown, 2001).

In the Community of Inquiry model, Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000) discuss the importance of Social Presence, Teacher Presence and Cognitive presence. Providing the opportunity for students and instructors to establish their social presence was the missing link for our course. The community allowed not only students to introduce themselves, but through tutors sharing their interests and experiences (instructor social presence) students were able to get to know them prior to starting the taught modules (Aragon, 2003; Paquette, 2016; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Overview

In September 2019 we began a pilot of Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) as a platform for collaboration and discussion that would run concurrent

with, and support the content delivered via the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). This included the development of a course community site and a pilot with a substantive module (Public Law) where activities moved from the traditional VLE discussion board to MS Teams. In our presentation, we will share our experience of developing the course community and how this fed into improved engagement and results for the substantive module.

We will begin with why we believed there was a need for the course community (evidenced by student feedback in 2018/19), before moving on to planning, building, and communicating the purpose of the community to staff and students.

We will discuss the impact of presence and the substantial role played by the Course Director in creating an open and inclusive space, ensuring regular formal and informal communications, and encouraging students to participate (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Paquette, 2016; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017; Shea et al., 2005). We will provide examples of the interactions and the impact they had in terms of community building.

We will describe what we consider one of our major successes - the welcome activity. Here we saw connections form across a range of personal and professional themes, along with a clear sense of camaraderie. Tutors also introduced themselves, sharing their interests, research areas and industry experience. The students appreciated this openness, which led to many conversations on a range of topics such as home countries, family life, or interest in a particular field. Importantly, these posts allowed instructors to see the students as real people and gain a better understanding of who they are as individuals, and vice versa (Aragon, 2003; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Paquette, 2016; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Finally, we will share the results of our evaluation of the community, incorporating data from a staff and student survey, feedback from module surveys and anecdotal evidence. We will provide examples of the positive impact on student satisfaction, motivation, and engagement – consistent with effects identified by others (Aragon, 2003; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017) and highlight areas for improvement that were identified.

Conclusion

The development of the course community has been hugely successful and has given students a place to connect. What we have witnessed is an impact far beyond mere friendly interaction in a community space, but also the enhancement of academic engagement and achievement. In the Public Law module that piloted MS Teams for activities, we saw students acknowledging (through comments and emojis) the contributions of others, showing peer support and engaging in discussion. They also interacted with the tutor by showing appreciation for feedback or asking follow-up questions. On the same module in the

previous year, there was no student-student interaction in discussions and no responses to tutor feedback.

We believe that this change was underpinned by the course community providing the space for social presence to be established. In the community, tutors and students could get to know one another. This enabled students to enter the teaching space confident that they were in a safe, supportive environment with people they knew and trusted. In delivering this session we hope to help others find the value in establishing space for social presence, whether through development of a community, or by implementing elements of the community on a smaller scale, such as introducing a welcome activity into their module.