Chapter 1
Educating a Multidisciplinary Human Services Workforce Using a Blended Approach

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores technological developments in the human services and the educational requirements of a skilled labor force. It is argued that learner experiences can be enhanced by adopting a blended approach that includes face-to-face and online activities. Careful planning is required that matches desired learning experiences and learner characteristics with appropriate educational design and architectures. The main views of learning discussed are absorption, behavioral and cognitive with consideration of the most appropriate learning architectures to support these. A case study highlights the complexity of applying these in practice, as well as the importance of community building in the online environment.

‘Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous’.

INTRODUCTION
The human services industry in Australia employs 1,121,000 persons, approximately 10.9 per cent of the total workforce. Over the past five years employment in this industry has increased at rate of 3.9 per cent per annum, with the average age of workers 43 years (Australian Government, 2008). Certain
characteristics distinguish the human services workforce from a number of other occupations. In the human services, workers are engaged in diverse roles and multiple functions with qualifications that range from short courses through to university degrees. The courses include: social work, psychology, aged care, disability, mental health, children’s services, counseling, welfare studies, community work, human services and youth work. Employment is distributed widely across all levels of government, non government organizations, health, and social and community services fields. Several unions and diverse employment arrangements and awards have contributed to a blurring of disciplines and tension regarding professional identity and boundaries. A high gender imbalance (85 per cent female) together with increasing proportion of care related roles makes a disproportionate amount of fractional employment (part-time) another significant issue (Lonne, 2007). There are limited career paths for workers engaged in direct practice and wide salary disparities. Related to these are the difficulties of recruitment and retention in certain areas such as child protection and significant workforce mobility.

Human services have traditionally relied upon face-to-face interaction as a major form of communication and transmission of information in both educational and workplace settings. As in social work education, most human services courses give considerable attention to group learning and relationships (Shardlow & Horwath, 2000; Smith & Wingerson, 2006). This chapter explores the use of information communications technology (ICT) tools to educate the human services workforce. First, human services education is considered within the context of a multidisciplinary workforce and the varied needs of learners. This is followed by a discussion of the main approaches to teaching and learning and the architectures to support these. A case study illustrates the experiences of a human services worker engaged in continuing professional education. Future trends for educating a multidisciplinary human services workforce are identified using a “blended approach” that includes face-to-face and online delivery as well as a variety of educational approaches and architectures to support these instructional/learning strategies.

EDUCATING A MULTIDISCIPLINARY HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE

In Australia the first social work program provided via distance education was developed by Monash University in response to pressure from the State Government to address a severe shortage of professional workers in rural Victoria. With the increased use of ICT tools for both on and off campus programs, the distinction between face-to-face learning and “distance education” became blurred. Moreover the distance education program initiated to meet the needs of rural workers soon attracted metropolitan students in need of, or attracted by its flexible delivery. In terms of levels of satisfaction and educational standards, Oullette (2006) found no significant difference in interview skill acquisition when comparing classroom based and online learning. In a further study by Siebert (2006) of a post graduate clinical social work skills course, the final results of online students were considered comparable to students in face-to-face classes. Using the virtual classroom of a graduate social policy course, Roberts-DeGennaro (2005) found that students enjoyed learning through the virtual classroom as much as traditional on-campus components of the course. Following their study of classroom and online field practicum seminars over a three year period Wolfson et al (2005) decided to offer the fourth year practicum seminar for social work students exclusively online.

Research on flexible learning in rural New South Wales in Australia found that human services were in a transitional period undergoing a rapid rate of change and growing complexities of job roles. This was reflected in a “tension between the need