Chapter 5

Virtual Situated Learning Environments

Developing Inter-Professional Skills for Human Services

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how ICT can be used to create environments in which students engage in work-related learning opportunities through virtual situated learning environments. These VSLEs are created digitally as real-life learning opportunities. Situating students of human services in these environments presents the opportunity for learning opportunities that are authentic, apply adult learning principles and are learner centred. They enable participants to develop inter-professional skills by presenting scenarios that require inter-professional engagement in a safe and secure environment in which participants can experiment with different approaches to problem-solutions. They provide a safe-fail environment in which students can experiment with different approaches and see the consequences of not working appropriately without negatively affecting real clients. The chapter presents an example of a VSLE used to engage students in a related field of employment relations and outlines an example of how a virtual community centre may be used to develop employability skills for students in human services.

Any genuine teaching will result, if successful, in someone’s knowing how to bring about a better condition of things than existed earlier. -- John Dewey

INTRODUCTION

A report on employability skills to the Australian Business, Industry and Higher Education

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Collaboration Council (Precision Consultancy 2007, p.1) states that graduates need to apply “a broad range of employability skills learnt in many contexts and through a range of experiences”. Employability skills for Australian industry were identified in a 2002 Government Report (DEST 2002) as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, innovation, planning and organising, self-management, life-long learning and technology. While identifying these skills as necessary,
the learning approach required to develop these skills is less clear.

One field of thinking is that while these skills are generic, the context in which they are learnt is different. Becher (1994) uses the term “academic tribes” to describe disciplinary differences that, he claims, result in four intellectual cultures each with its own approach to learning and teaching. Using the work of writers, Biglan (1973) and Kolb (1981), he links disciplinary perspectives to subject matter research that he argues will affect both teaching and learning. He identifies, first, the natural sciences as underpinned by an emphasis on hard, pure subject matter and requiring abstract reflective enquiry. Second, humanities and social sciences relating more to soft pure subject matter and concrete reflective enquiry. Third, science-based professions as using hard, applied subject matter and abstract active enquiry and social professions as soft applied subject matter and concrete active enquiry.

Others, notably Trigwell et al (1999), Meyer and Vermunt (2000) and Prosser et al (2003) argue that these disciplinary differences, if not factored into educational design, can create dissonance in student learning.

While recognising the potential differences between disciplines in attempting to graduate students with appropriate employability skills, the task is complicated further in areas where there is need for professions to work at the intersection of a number of disciplines to present a holistic solution to complex problems. This creates the need to design learning environments that cater to a variety of learning styles associated with a broad range of disciplines.

Arising from the Report of the World Health Organisation (1998) that advocated teamwork across disciplines through inter-professional learning, there has been a growth in government pressure on universities to deliver learning opportunities that are designed to develop inter-professional skills. Starting in the United Kingdom health care industry, the spread of interest in inter-professional learning approaches in Australia is evidenced by the establishment of a Discipline-Based Initiatives grant scheme by the then Carrick Institute (now Australian Learning and Teaching Council) in 2007. This DBI aimed to ‘encourage greater sharing of quality practice and learning within and across disciplinary communities’ with one of the principles adopted being to ‘foster creative interdisciplinary engagement’ (Carrick Institute 2007). Examples of learning initiatives for inter-professional education presented at the first DBI forum on trans, multi and inter-disciplinary learning and teaching curriculum design covered a broad spectrum of disciplines with the Health and related Sciences (Biotechnology, Community) prominent.

In a recent publication devoted to the implications of the increasing focus on inter-disciplinarity for higher education teaching and learning, Davies and Devlin (2007, p.3) identify three main types of learning. The first is multi-disciplinarity, which they define as the co-existence of a number of disciplines. The second is cross-disciplinarity, described as the investigation of a topic from outside a particular field of study with no cooperation from within the field of study concerned. The third is inter-disciplinarity in which the subtleties of the nature of academic disciplines is recognised. The latter, in turn, can occur by students undertaking an elective subject on general topic eg women’s studies from a variety of disciplines, or pluri-disciplinarity, where two or more disciplines combine their expertise to jointly address an area of common concern. For example a complex issue, such as obesity management, requires an integrated approach from behavioural scientists, molecular biologists and mathematicians (Aboelela et al 2007).

The implications of the move to inter-professional education, and the underlying complexities involved in identifying what is actually meant by the term inter-professional, results in significant pedagogical issues for universities about methods of education delivery and the learning environment
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