Chapter 9
Leadership Online: Student Facilitated Interprofessional Learning

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ABSTRACT

A study investigating the effectiveness of a curriculum innovation involving students as online facilitators of interprofessional learning (IPL) provides a focus for this chapter. The research aim was to investigate whether Year 3 health and social care students were effective in facilitating online discussion forums contributing to the IPL of their counterparts in Years 1 and 2. Findings suggest that they were equally as effective as academic staff while offering some additional benefits. The account provides evidence of a successful online interprofessional initiative involving students promoting IPL.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the potential of students to provide leadership in promoting interprofessional learning (IPL) amongst their student peers. We draw on our findings from a study carried out at Coventry University in the United Kingdom (UK). Debate about the most appropriate models of IPL is ongoing and approaches are both diverse and numerous. However, the possibility of students being prime movers in inculcating interprofessional beliefs, values and attitudes in their peers has been largely unexploited. Our focus in this chapter is on the benefits that less well advanced students gain from online facilitation provided by a more advanced student. The chapter will be of interest to institutions developing either a blended or online approach to promoting IPL, which requires online facilitation and to those willing to consider that students can play a part in others’ learning and are a valuable resource for advancing IPL as online facilitators.

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STUDENT MENTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Throughout the chapter we use the term ‘student leadership’, which invokes a sense of advocacy, guidance and direction. The general literature refers to ‘peer leaders’, ‘peer tutors’, ‘peer facilitators’ and ‘peer mentors’. However, the term ‘student proctor’ has also been used in American contexts to describe students helping other students to learn (Saunders, 1992). Notwithstanding subtle differences and connotations to these concepts we adopt the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘mentorship’ and use them interchangeably throughout discussions. The model of student leadership adopted involves peer mentoring by senior students of less advanced students (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). Leadership capability seems to be an increasingly important attribute sought by employers (Wagner, 2008) therefore evidence of having engaged in a formal programme of peer leadership might prove beneficial to students when composing their curricula vitae in preparation for employment.

The sound body of research evidence on peer-led learning highlights its academic benefits for all concerned (see for example, Gosser et al., 2001). Research by Goodlad and Hirst (1989) suggests that students benefit from peer mentors in that achievement is improved and is less variable. Students are generally positive about input from peer mentors, possibly because the learning feels less formal and the learning environment is less threatening without the presence of academic staff (Hayler, 1999). Indeed, Jamieson and Thomas (1974) had some time ago highlighted issues of power and conflict in the student-teacher relationship that has a profound effect on student satisfaction and learning. Micari, Streitwieser and Light (2006) suggest that students may be well placed to help other students understand material that they have recently learned which provides them with an innate ability to help students in a manner best suited to their developmental level. This point is supported by Saunders (1992, p. 216) who suggests that ‘the value of peer tutoring is that recent student experiences are passed on to others, and that relatively more advanced students have valuable insights, which academic staff do not’. The criticism of academic staff suggests that students might be more up-to-date with current thinking and practice but may also relate to other issues such as staff being ill prepared or struggling to find time to offer support and guidance (McCall, 2007). Gallew’s (2005) research findings on the benefits gained from senior occupational therapy students developing a lecture for first year students suggest that they perceived that the senior students were enthusiastic, confident, professional and possessed positive leadership skills.

Saunders (1992) raises several other important points in his critique of a peer tutoring initiative in engineering at what was Nottingham Polytechnic in the early 1990s, which still have contemporary relevance. He stresses the importance of thorough briefing about the organisation, aims and expected outcomes and need to attend to training requirements. Highlighting major decisions that must be made by course teams when setting up peer mentoring projects, Saunders encourages debate around issues such as whether schemes should be compulsory or voluntary, whether students should work on their own or with other tutors and whether tutoring should be assessed.

Despite recognised potential benefits of peer mentorship, its use in IPL has not been widely adopted. In fact, Micari et al. (2006, p. 285) point out that students ‘rarely enjoy a formal opportunity to help other students advance in their intellectual development’. They attribute this to ‘academia’s reluctance to endow un-credentialed students with the authority to teach, or ...simply the absence of an infrastructure to support such an endeavour’ (Micari et al., 2006, p. 285). Reflecting on the fact that students are generally positioned as learners and not as sources of learning, they suggest that this influences how they are viewed by Faculty and how they understand their own capabilities and purpose.