

Does online learning work for you? Student Case Study Competition Entries 2007

In 2007 as part of the ELTE project students were invited to submit case studies of their experiences of online learning and four of the entries received are included in this document

Winning entry

Julie Murdock - "Online Learning; Don't Get Stuck on the Merry-go-round"

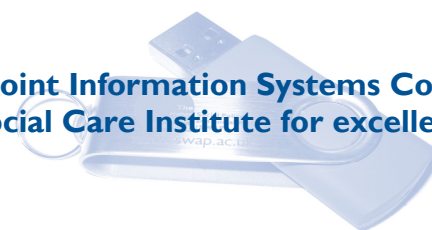
As with most changes that occur in social work, there are good and bad sides to online learning. Stick to the rules, and you are well on your way to instant, relevant and reliable information (which comes in handy when you are starting your assignment the night before the deadline). However, fail to avoid the pitfalls and you could be entering a minefield of inaccurate information which could render your assignment about as useless as a paper broly.

For me, I entered social work training after online learning had already been well-established. It was expected that I – along with the other rookies – would embrace the idea effortlessly and without question. I still remember my first assignment and the horror that struck amongst us newbies in the lecture hall at the casual mention of the compulsory referencing of online journals. How do we find these so-called online journals? How do we search for the article we want? Moreover, how do we even *know* which article we *should* want? After three hours spent in the campus library fervently struggling with log-ins, passwords and search bars and vainly searching the intranet for anything about the chosen assignment topic (anti-oppressive practice), we eventually struck gold. We discovered the British Journal of Social Work and, more importantly, the Mecca for all would-be social workers: Community Care.

Rule one of online learning? Know where to look. Searching online journals and e-zines without direction could be like driving in a city centre without sat nav.

Now that I am half way through my third year, I can navigate around research sites such as SCIE and Rowntrees (usually) with reasonable ease. Podcasts on

Funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee and the
Social Care Institute for excellence



psychological theories and green papers downloaded from the Department of Health's website have been, for the most part, relevant and reliable. However, I still spend hours on virtual merry go rounds searching and searching for information on subjects in vain. This brings me to rule two of online learning: if you want information which is well-referenced and reliable, you have to dedicate time to trawling the depths of the internet to find what you want. Of course, there is the option of gathering information instantly by running a search on a journal host site and clicking on the first article that comes up. But how do you then ensure that this information is the most reliable and relevant, out of the countless articles that you can possibly reference? The short answer is, you can't. Online learning is not a shortcut.

Neither, of course, is online learning a substitute for paper-based learning, which brings me to rule three: never forget the value of your books! There is no information out there which is more reliable and comprehensive than that contained in a book. You cannot glean the depth of information provided by giants of social work such as Thompson and Dominelli in their online articles alone. If you submit an assignment solely with references beginning with "http://", do not be surprised if your tutor assumes you are a lazy student and awards you with a poor grade.

Online learning has been a journey for me, as it has been for many students. There is a vast treasure trove of information out there which is free, (sometimes) quick and accessible from home. I have, however, learned the hard way about the potential pitfalls in the journey of online learning. I have developed a critical mind for online articles and try not to fall victim to the potential bias which interweaves them. Social work is changing and workers should embrace the changes in technology and use it to their advantage; as long as you keep your eye on the disadvantages, online resources can provide an integral aspect of the learning process for social workers and students alike.

Other Entries

Paula Doherty - "Does Online Learning Work for you?"

eLearning is a very broad topic but the use of technology can be used to enhance and facilitate many aspects of learning. It is important that I confirm my belief that the concept of online learning is established and is a valuable tool for continued multi-faceted learning. The WWW Consortium of web designers have made accessibility for all a priority, which posits its continued centrality in overall education. This is embodied in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 in the provision of services and information with the concomitant that educational providers and web designers are required to make any material they provide as accessible as they possibly can.

The range of e-tools is immense and I have used many. I have found 'etraining' for fitting central heating, to online tools to help with my teenage children's issues. Online learning can take many guises and, as with any learning, it has to be treated with caution since it is the 'learners' imperative to be sure that the 'knowledge' being gained is (a) accurate (b) conscionable and (c) fit for the purpose intended. The elearning process is therefore limited by research method and the integrity of the information providers. It is also limited by the researcher's knowledge of 'where to search' and 'what for'.

It is different to classroom learning because it is an individual process insofar as methods of searching online vary as do the articles that 'catch the eye' of the

researcher. This is inspiring because it provides impetus for pieces of written work not set by the limits of set library texts and journals and can take in 'lay' opinion from *blogs* or online debates. Juxtaposed to classroom learning it is less structured but accessible at times to suit.

Elearning is accessible, information that does not have to be carried around, can be saved, and so is convenient and enabling. Some elearning can be voice activated, translated and 'saved' for future reference. The user sets their own pace and the lack of paper means it creates less waste, although I am unaware of the environmental impact of the energy used by a computer versus use of paper! In addition, the information online can be updated more readily.

Having used various forms of online tools as aids to learning and development I have found them to be helpful for a variety of reasons such as self assessment of a knowledge base especially law based tools which are helpful in a social policy and social work context. Online tools also provide a range of learning material in the form of videos, podcasts and real time debates and provide variety. Even the basic email has proved to be invaluable where a question crops, which can then be answered without recourse to hanging around telephones/ department corridors.

The limitations I have left until last because some of them apply to classroom learning too. For example time constraints; being lost in a maze of information; not understanding the information, all of which can be overcome wherever. The specific limitations of elearning are the problems of being 'knocked offline' halfway through an assessment or a search; the server working slowly thus losing continuity; having to wait for replies to electronic queries; lack of facility to send a question; sites that do not have a search capacity and therefore require exact phrases or keywords to be input; and lastly computer breakdown at an important time leading to student stress levels increasing. Elearning is here to stay and therefore careful consideration of the purpose of a site is essential.

Rebecca Elizabeth Arkell - "PebblePAD"

E-learning to me is more than needed in a modernised society. I'm dyslexic and find it hard to keep up when I'm in a lecture; because of e-learning I'm able to download the lecture notes before the lecture starts. This helps me to prepare myself for what I'm about to learn. The lecture notes are always given on PowerPoint which is useful as it is a visual stimulus. I think e-learning helps meet different learning styles that people have.

We use a specific programme at our university called pebblePAD which enables use to record our thoughts and feelings daily. This is a great help because in year 3 of my course we need to reflect on how we have grown throughout the course. With pebblePAD we also have certain activities to complete which then get marked electronically by our personal tutors. This adds variety to our learning. PebblePAD wasn't easy to use at first because it isn't as simple as it seems. There are certain things you need to know like how to send your web folio page (an internet page we created about ourself as part of an activity) to your personal tutor. We were given lessons on how to use Pebble PAD which made the learning quicker. Everyone has their own Pebble PAD and the thoughts we record are confidential. Pebble PAD is colourful and can be customised to your own taste (changing background colour, font size etc). There are 4 different areas to choose from when you enter Pebble PAD, create new, view, tools and upload file. Create new then gives you a choice of different things you can create such as action plan. This breaks down into 7 steps to follow which at the end gives you the action plan you wanted to create. It is a great learning aid because you can

plan when you're going to do certain assignments or even what you're going to put into the assignment. View allows you to view what you have previously done. On pebble pad you can even create a CV. Pebble PAD will be such a great benefit to me in my next 2 years of study, its going to help me organise my time, collect my thoughts and to view what I have recorded previously. If all universities had access to Pebble PAD I think it would be both a gain to the student and the teacher. It helps organise students, to keep there thoughts in a safe place and to transfer work between student and teacher.

My university also supplies everyone with there own email address and contact book. This is great because it allows us to email each other if we need help with the assignments. We have a discussion board online where questions are set by lecturers and we are all free to comment. I enjoy reading others comments and getting feedback from the lecturers. There are endless benefits to e-learning and I think it should be used more often.

Lisa Maughan - "Inside the Internet"

Becoming a social worker is a challenging and time consuming process, not only do you have to complete an academic degree you must also prove that you can function at the required level for professional registration. As a mature student I already have all the pressures and demands on my time associated with motherhood and family life. Therefore being able to access learning materials at home and at a time of my choosing has been invaluable to me during my studies so far.

Through the internet there is a wealth of information available at my fingertips and for past assignments this has enabled me to gain a more rounded view of the subject area. For example most service user organisations have a website which contain publications detailing research, campaigns etc, and this information is usually more up to date and valuable than can be found in many of the books in the library.

The internet has also proven to be a useful tool for my skills development. Last semester one of our assessed pieces work was a presentation. As it had been quite a while since I last gave a presentation I needed to brush up on my skills. By typing 'presentation skills' into my search engine I was presented with many websites offering valuable advice on how to conduct a professional presentation.

In addition to using the publicly available information on the internet I also joined an online line library which, for a fee, gives you unlimited access to tens of thousands of books, journals and magazines in many different subject areas. One advantage of this is that the search facility will search entire documents for words and phrases; this saves a lot of time which would otherwise have been spent flicking through books in the library. The main advantage I find though is that I can easily fit my studying around my family.

There are two main disadvantages I have found of using the internet at home. The first is not really a disadvantage more a word of caution, that, although there is a wealth of information available I found some of the information to be inaccurate, incorrect or just plain inappropriate. I quickly learned to only use information from trusted sources such as universities, professional organisations, government departments and charities. The second disadvantage is that as I have internet access at home I never have an excuse not to study such as 'the library is shut so I can't do any work'. Therefore if I am not careful I can find myself working too hard and feeling guilty about putting my feet up in front of the telly, which is great for my studies but not so great for my sanity!