'PRACTICE-BASED' CAN MAKE ONLINE PERFECT: STUDYAGE ONLINE

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Abstract
Developing an interactive practice based, online version of a post-graduate program already in traditional independent study distance format produces a number of pedagogical and development shifts. Not only will the need for effective online interactivity change the nature of the learning and assessment experiences, the fundamentals of the online environment demand inclusion of new, practice based content, from students and staff, to stand alongside traditional academic sources for independent learning.

The "StudyAgeOnline" pilot project reported here demonstrates the educational design brief used for making this shift and the significant implications for academics, educational designers and contributing experts. Particular comments are made on the questions, challenges and tensions which can emerge when existing curricula are only a part of the new learning opportunities brought about by students contributing from their own practice based experience in an online learning environment.

Keywords
Health sciences, postgraduate, continuing professional education, ageing and aged care education, gerontological education

Introduction

"Practice based" learning approaches in postgraduate level education are currently in demand for two broad reasons. First and widely acknowledged, professional adult learners are running their work lives at a pace which must take into account frequent and timely adjustments to their career paths. Whether they are novice or experienced consumers of continuing or postgraduate courses, there is a common need for the learning to be both job related and just in time. The second way in which a practice based approach can influence postgraduate programs is less obvious but has significant implications for the traditional academic content and delivery. Because professional knowledge must now be calibrated to rapidly changing policies, work practices, skill requirements and knowledge bases (Poole and Spear 1997, pp.50-51), a postgraduate's reflective learning needs to take into account a more contemporary frame of reference. This extends beyond the traditional study guide and reading list. Marrying research-derived knowledge with the working knowledge of current professional experience is essential to provide cutting-edge continuing professional development (Eraut 1994). In this framework educational design must

balance the use of previously developed learning resources with a carefully constructed framework for student contribution and participation. The latter can make up a considerable part of the course content within which the academic becomes much more of an observer and facilitator than the absolute content expert. The role of "expert" in the practice based sense is more likely to include both guest practitioners and at least some of the enrolled students as well as university lecturers. In health sciences education, the consumer, now recognised as an important stakeholder in health services (Duckett 2000), and a consumer representative can also be a relevant expert contributor.

While the educational framework for StudyAgeOnline was developed in response to a specific set of project circumstances, it can be seen as drawing on the established curriculum design features favoured by 'practice based' educationalists. It strives to realise the features of a 'praxis' learning environment as identified by Grundy (1987). Here the curriculum is both active and reflective, real rather than hypothetical, and interaction and 'meaning making' promote construction and application of the student's own knowledge. Whether StudyAge can demonstrate assessable outcomes which justify its worth as an example of a practised based postgraduate learning is yet to be evaluated (Barrie 1999). The StudyAgeOnline project has responded to the challenges set out above. A modular online educational design informed by both academic and practitioner expertise has been developed and trialled. In this paper we briefly describe the educational framework and how it was operationalised in an online environment, provide reflections on our experiences and suggest recommendations for the future.

The StudyAgeOnline educational framework.

The design of the StudyAge website has been based on the following features of its educational framework. Figure 1 is a screen capture of a module's webpage at the key concept level.
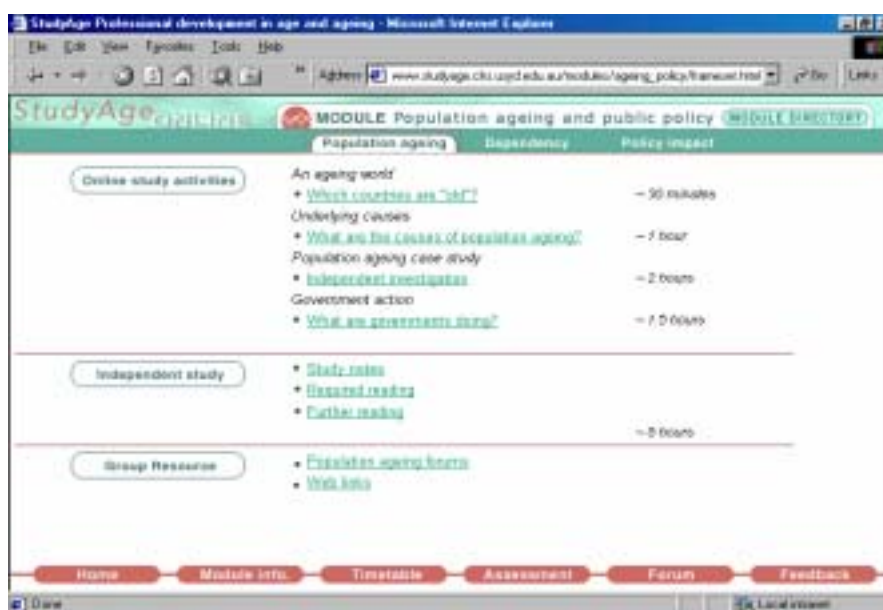

Figure 1 Key concept page in StudyAgeOnline

Modularisation. Each module expects about 50 hours of participant learning time undertaken over 4-6 weeks (that is, all of the learner's activities related to satisfactorily completing the module including assessment). Participants may choose to undertake the module without undertaking the assessment.

Close relationship between CPE and pathways to a university qualification. Modules to date have been directly mapped to units of study in an approved University of Sydney program, the Master of Health Science (Gerontology), due to the robustness of its existing overall curriculum (but we note later some challenges to curriculum thinking which emerged in the transformation process).

Theoretically informed educational model. Constructivism (Elmer & Newby, 1993) and situated learning (Wilson & Myers, 2000) provide the conceptual framework underpinning this model.

Industry relevant content. Overall content areas for the pilot project were selected from priorities for continuing professional education (CPE) identified during industry and government consultations in 2001. The educational model is applied using a strategy which facilitates content generation by participants and their interaction among themselves and with expert contributors.

Explicit nexus between practice knowledge and research-generated knowledge in ageing and aged care. A further foundational concept is that participants must be able to learn within/through/for their professional practice in a research-informed/evidence-based environment.

Core online educational technology. Web-supported learning environment using a custom-built learning management/content management system using Java servlets and JSP based XML input and output.

The transformative experience

Teaching and learning strategies, resources and staff all underwent a transformative experience in a team based development approach. For the academic content writers involved it was the first time they had worked with an instructional designer. As it was a pilot project, the module model approach was developed as part of the pilot. Most of the writers did not have much online experience. To clarify redevelopment goals two distinct content placeholders were designed into the web site structure.

- Independent study activities – designed to align with traditional distance provision in terms of academic reference and independent study guidance.
- Online study activities - designed to connect students to both each other and the expert facilitators for the key concept areas of the module

The use of these two categories allowed content writers to base their development work on a familiar academic model before needing to think outside their normal distance delivery experience to create new practice based activities. The use of "key concepts" as the structural markers within each module added a degree of rigor to both the recasting of original content and the scoping of new content areas. Academic staff involved in this pilot module development were generally not early adopters of online learning strategies; rather they were experts in their field willing to undertake a new approach without much prior understanding of what the finalised learning design and resources would be like.

The pilot project modules were developed from the materials and experiences of units of study which have already been offered to students in a traditional paper based distance master's degree program. This development process was informed by consultation with representatives of industry, government and professions involved in the delivery of healthy ageing and aged care. The introduction of online learning activities has required new practices including the tutoring of academic staff in the necessary restructuring of curriculum content, moving from a traditional distance education independent study model to one of significant involvement and potential interaction among participants and module contributors, and appreciation of online learning techniques.

Practice based learning for both students and academics

While the practice based activities in StudyAgeOnline make use of common online formats such as surveys and forums they are structured to follow or complement offline activities which focus on reflection on professional practice. The responses to these sequences are captured online and then available for expert/participant commentary. The right balance between this new online content and the traditional academic learning resources has to be achieved during the delivery of the module itself. Academic staff need to be involved and aware of how the module participants are progressing with both their understanding of the academic content and their participation in the professional practice forums. This generally presents academic staff with a more dynamic delivery model than that of traditional distance programs. It also introduces an academic role which needs to be more inclusive of experts other than themselves or close colleagues – an inclusiveness which must be carefully introduced to avoid a

'them and us' outcome. The overall impact of an online practice based approach should be a learning experience for both student participants and academic coordinators. It should provide clear advantages through exposure to: multiple professional perspectives; the impact of current policy and research on practice and the recalibration of assessment criteria to include meeting the real needs of the profession.

Participating in an online "learning community"

The StudyAge assessment schema includes an online activity participatory requirement. This is an essential feature if there is to be a reasonable degree of contact between participants, the invited experts and academic coordinators. While the sum of this professional and academic contact should lead to a fruitful exchange of professional experiences, the extent to which it can be fostered into a fully developed online "learning community" will depend on a number of practical issues. Busy professionals need a strong motivation to stay in voluntary touch with colleagues and the much discussed "online community of learning" may only become a reality when reaccreditation underpins the need for further contact.

Reflections and recommendations

The online educational model briefly reported here comprises several innovations including modularisation, with an interactive online environment as a core teaching and learning strategy, and moves towards a model where participants and the interaction among participants and experts creates content as well as extends and enriches learning. In the pilot reported here all of the innovatory areas were new and challenging to most of the academic staff involved. Workshops, individual consultations and other support activities were used to present, discuss and refine both the general educational models and the specific module development work. This alone was a demanding experience for academic staff who were novices in all or most of the innovative aspects, suggesting care should be taken when multiple innovations are introduced to teaching staff who are not themselves the drivers of those innovations. In addition, the intense review and reflection engendered by the transformation process described here leads to unintended curriculum review. In future development projects following this model, this outcome needs to be acknowledged as a legitimate and resource needy activity within the process.

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