E-Connections: Creating Online Mentoring in Social Work Education

Melanie Hemy, Donna McAuliffe and Jane L. Fowler

Melanie Hemy, Donna McAuliffe – School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University

Jane L. Fowler – School of Human Services and Social Work, Menzies Health Institute, Griffith University

Address for Correspondence:

m.hemy@griffith.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The prospect of studying for a degree as an external or distance student has unlocked the potential for increasing numbers of students to qualify as social workers. However, undertaking education predominantly online is potentially an isolating experience. This paper documents findings from an online mentoring project trialled with Master of Social Work (MSW qualifying) students which aimed to enhance students' connections with the university and with each other. The project framework was deliberately flexible and relied on a collaborative approach. The project found that MSW students utilise several strategies to build relationships with each other early in their student careers. Participation in online mentoring was influenced by practical issues, and the students' need or desire for connection with peers, their priorities and communication preferences. Implications for the support of external students are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The prospect of studying a professional degree program online has unlocked the potential for increasing numbers of people to pursue social work education. Many of these students would perhaps not otherwise have had the opportunity to study on campus for a range of reasons, including location, family and employment responsibilities, or a disability (Alpaslan & Lombard, 2011; Collins, 2008; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). Despite widening access, online education has the potential to be an isolating experience that may jeopardise successful completion of a program (Baxter, 2012; Carroll, Ng, & Birch, 2009). One strategy that has been used by higher institutes of education to address issues of student engagement and retention is mentoring. However, online education raises additional challenges because mentoring programs have traditionally been developed to provide face-to-face support.

Some Australian social work programs, known as external or distance degrees, are being delivered primarily online. One such program offered by Griffith University, School of Human Services and Social Work, is the well-established external qualifying Master of Social Work (MSW). An online mentoring pilot project called "E-Connections" which aimed to reduce risks to retention through enhancing students' connection with the university and with each other was funded by a Learning and Teaching grant. This paper documents lessons from the project and outlines recommendations for future support of students who elect to study externally.

Overview of literature

A growing proportion of people come to study social work from a multiplicity of life experiences, and ethnic, cultural and language backgrounds (Collins, 2008; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). Many are already working in the field and wish to gain formal qualifications (Collins, 2008). In the United Kingdom (UK) the development of social work distance or "open" education has occurred alongside growth in student diversity. It is being used to address declining resources coupled with increasing demands for higher numbers of suitably qualified social workers (Collins, 2008). Similarly, in the United States, distance education programs were created to attract greater student numbers and to encourage participation of non-traditional students. There has also been a need to address changes to social work education standards and registration (Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman, & Cross-Denny, 2011). In Australia, distance education developed initially as a result of the challenges of delivering education to a widely dispersed population and it is now a well-established mode of teaching social work (Crisp, 2018; Miles, Mensinga, & Zuchowski, 2018; Reiach, Averbeck, & Cassidy, 2012).

Distance education involves students and teachers operating from separate locations using a variety of technologies such as synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards, video conferencing, social media and email. It provides choice and a level of control over how and when learning takes place for students and those who enrol in external programs may do so because of the flexibility and autonomy they offer. For students in remote locations or with multiple responsibilities such as employment and caregiving, it may be their only option (Alpaslan & Lombard, 2011; Collins, 2008; Crisp, 2018; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010).

However, the factors behind choosing this mode of education may, in fact, present ongoing challenges to the student and university, and influence student learning and persistence (Kazmer & Haythornthwaite, 2001; Yorke, 2004). A growing percentage of social work students, particularly those with family responsibilities, must continue employment during their studies as a necessity (Braswell, 2010; Furness, 2007; McInnis, 2004; Ryan, Barns, & McAuliffe, 2011; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Ryan et al. (2011) found that work commitments impacted negatively on the 83.6% of on-campus social work students who continued to be employed during their study. Even allowing for the flexibility that online study offers, employment has been found to be negatively correlated with persistence in distance education (Kemp, 2002) and students with carer responsibilities have also reported difficulties (Lister, 2003; Moriarty et al., 2009). Oliaro and Trotter (2010), in a study of external social work students at Monash University, where an external Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) has been available since 1989, noted that their students were older and more likely to have family responsibilities. Predictably, they also found that this group were more likely to live a considerable distance from the university and study part-time. Crisp (2018) investigated the demographics of Deakin University BSW students studying online, and found similar characteristics, while Miles et al. (2018), in a study of James Cook University MSW students, found a high rate of attrition in the online cohort.

For external students, education may be an isolating and stressful experience, having an adverse effect on academic progress and often leading to significant levels of student disengagement (Baxter, 2012; Collins, 2008). Although distance education has changed significantly since research conducted by Lake (1999), it is still relevant to note that those online students who disengaged from university did so for social, rather than academic, reasons. Lake (1999, p. 16) said that:

To create the learning environment the inexperienced student must be linked into a communication network, rather than remaining as a fish hooked to the end of a single line, held by a distant tutor, and responding to poorly understood tugs.

The importance to student retention of assisting students' academic and social adjustment to university is well known, as is the value of supportive peer relations and meaningful inter-action with academics (Andrews, Clark, & Thomas, 2012; Fowler & Zimitat, 2008). A series of reports in the UK that focussed on student retention and success in higher education found that a sense of belonging, closely aligned with academic and social engagement are critical to their persistence (Thomas, 2012). It is also apparent that distance students appreciate the motivation, support, modelling and mentoring provided by their tutors, and integration with the student community was one of the key motivating factors in progression for distance students (Baxter, 2012). Some authors have emphasised the development of peer support mechanisms to reduce the geographic and temporal aspects of physical distance, and psychological isolation from peers and academic staff (McLeod & Barbara, 2005; Thomas, 2012).

In the on-campus context, student-to-student mentoring, also called peer mentoring, has been used by a number of higher education institutions to enhance student engagement. The UK Higher Education Academy provides examples of successful peer mentoring schemes at six different higher education institutes that participated in the "What works?

Student retention and success program" (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Andrews et al., 2012). They found that, not only did peer mentoring assist students to quickly gain a sense of belonging as they adjusted to university, but longer term "pastoral" mentoring assisted those students who needed more than transitional support. Fowler and Muckert (2004) also found that students in a mentoring program reported significantly higher scores on a range of personal, academic, and social adjustment indicators and significantly lower levels of stress.

In the context of distance learning, Boyle, Kwon, Ross, and Simpson (2010) examined three mentoring schemes at open universities in the UK, Korea and New Zealand, and found significant increases in student retention as a result of being mentored. Some of these students admitted that, without the support of their mentors, they might not have persisted with their study.

E-CONNECTIONS PROJECT DESIGN

This project was concerned with exploring and addressing the problem of student isolation and was intended to be developmental and exploratory. The framework was deliberately flexible and, whilst the team had a plan with specified aims, the evolution of the scheme was guided by what emerged from the reflection and collaboration. It was not a research project but is shared here because of the value to the field of the lessons learned.

Griffith University has had a number of mentoring schemes over the years including one-on-one peer mentoring offered to all commencing first year undergraduate students in the School of Human Services and Social Work. These mentoring schemes have traditionally relied on face-to-face contact and have depended on students coming onto campus to continue the connections with others. As more courses are moved into the online format, students exercise their choices about attendance which can impact on mentoring schemes.

In 2007, Griffith University introduced a two-year qualifying Master of Social Work, Australian Association of Social Workers' accredited degree in collaboration with Open Universities Australia. This external program is offered almost exclusively online with the requirement that students attend campus for designated intensive workshops in accordance with accreditation requirements. Although all students have access to online forums for individual courses (i.e., subject or unit) and may connect with peers through them, these forums are not appropriate settings for discussing non-course-related issues or supporting each other in a more personal sense.

The E-Connections project was funded by a small Learning and Teaching grant from the university and, as such, did not require ethics approval. These competitive grants aim to promote innovation in learning and teaching. The project provided an avenue to connect external MSW students with each other through the university's existing Blackboard-based Learning Management System known as Learning@Griffith.

The project was managed by a paid Project Officer who invited a selected group of MSW students to join one of three purposefully designed online groups. The authors comprised the project team and recruited two recent graduates and one final year external MSW

student to act as volunteer peer mentors. These graduates and student were known to the staff as having previously expressed interest in ways of developing support mechanisms for social work students studying at a distance. The project officer conducted one briefing session about mentoring with the three recruits, and each was allocated an online group to work with over the duration of the project.

The initial design of the project was trialled and monitored across a period of 15 weeks (one semester) with three groups: male students (Group A); students who self-identified as rural or isolated (Group B); and students in a specific geographic region (Group C). The membership criteria for the groups were chosen for different reasons. The first group was only for men. Although there is debate about the gendered nature of social work in the literature, male social work students may feel marginalised and excluded (Parker & Crabtree, 2014). Providing men with a space to discuss some of the issues unique to the male social work student experience was seen as worthy of a trial. The second group was for students who identified as being geographically isolated. Some of these students were living in locations with few services and a considerable distance from tertiary education institutions meaning that it was unlikely they would have social workers or students in the community (Bowles & Duncombe, 2005). The third group were living in a geographical region at considerable distance from the campus but not isolated. This criterion was chosen because it offered a relatively large pool of participants, some of whom had already formed links with each other. It was of interest to explore whether the E-Connections project would enhance these tentative beginning relationships.

E-Connections had three phases. First, students were provided information about the project and links to resources about mentoring, support and online learning. They gave their consent for involvement and knew that participation was voluntary. The second phase established a "group space" for each of the mentoring groups with resources relevant to that group. The third phase, which is the focus of this article, used a Blog format to run discussions between group members in each of these private online group spaces. The students were familiar with this format which allowed for the allocation of students to groups and the uploading of text and multi-media.

Project strategies

The approach taken by the project team was to respond to emerging factors through collaborative decision-making. As it unfolded, a number of deliberate steps were taken to engage students and encourage connections.

First, in establishing the groups, each mentor was charged with facilitating connections between participants in a way that encouraged student ownership of the group. The initial email to students made it clear that the project was to be student-driven and they could decide on group ground rules, boundaries and topics for discussion, and how to connect with each other. Mentors established discussion threads and posted initial introductions and comments that reflected what they thought might engage the students in their group. Topics included: Introductions; Media / General Interest; University / Academic / Placement; Home / Family / Isolation; Handy Hints / Resources / Survival Tips; Employment; Local Links; Social Work; and Griffith Services.

In a second step taken to boost student participation and encourage conversations, mentors introduced additional discussion topics. The topics were: "Feet up, chocolate and a good wine or a half hour walk?"; "If I wasn't going to be a social worker this is what I'd be"; "Everything else" and; "Beer & prawns". Then, as a result of feedback from the mentors and a few students, the project team emailed a further invitation to students who had not engaged with the online forum at all.

Later, a more widely accessible group for mentors, the project team, and students (including students who had not yet participated) and entitled "Last Chance Café" was opened to provide an opportunity for everyone to join together. It contained forums entitled "Reflections on the Process" and "The Anonymous Zone" which was added to accommodate people who may have felt inhibited by their contributions being identified.

LESSONS LEARNED

The results of the E-Connections project were mixed, as might be expected from an evolving pilot project, but the contributions from participants provided the project team with valuable insight into student learning and peer support needs.

Each group developed in a unique way. Group A had only three participants from an invited 11, with two of these male students engaging quite closely with the mentor. Group B, the rural and remote students attracted eight of 15 potential participants, the highest rate of engagement. One student from Group B set up a Facebook page and invited others in the group to join. It is not known how extensively this was utilised. In Group C, the students in the same region, five from a possible 16 joined. Their connections were primarily with the mentor rather than with each other. The mentor of Group C also extended opportunities for external MSW students in the area to connect by inviting them to meet face to face but only one student accepted.

"Last Chance Café" did not recruit any new students but attracted personal and light-hearted comments from group members. Eight participants contributed 34 posts to "Reflections on the Process" which provided useful feedback to the team. Only one post was made to "The Anonymous Zone".

Although participation rates were significantly lower than expected, which provided results within itself, the students who did engage found E-Connections to be a positive and supportive experience and recommended that it continue. This was demonstrated by the following comments:

> I think this is a great idea, and it may take students a while to catch on – but I think it's worthwhile pursuing, because it really is helpful to have people around that you can chat with about the course (and whinge to about hard assignments!).
> (Student, Group C)

> …as a rural isolated student, I found it comforting to know that there was a place to keep in touch and in the loop with study and external interests. (Student, Group B)

However, the reasons offered for the lack of engagement are actually the key discoveries of the project. These cluster around the following themes: *having enough support*; *other preferences for making connections*; *existing peer networks*; *limited time available*; *technology*; and *little interest in peer support*.

Having enough support

It was found that a significant number of students felt they already had ample support through their workplace, field placement organisation, family or other personal networks. One student's comment captured this theme well when she said, "I feel like I have all the support I have needed" (Student, Group C).

Feedback from students who did not participate in the groups also indicated they had sufficient support: "Fortunately, I have good supports from colleagues in my workplace, so feel I have this support through other means"; " Exercise, healthy eating and connecting with those I already know are really important at this stage"; and "I choose not to use Facebook and don't really find I need much peer support or contact (I find the lecturers and course coordinators really helpful for any study related issues)".

Other preferences for making connections

A second reason given for not participating in online mentoring was that students preferred to relate to peers in other ways, especially face to face if possible.

> I like working individually and have met a few ladies in the area already, that more than enough suffices for any study related contact or socialising. (Student, Group C)

> In regards to contact with other students myself and another two ladies meet up often for coffee and try to go out one night a month for a few drinks and a relax. These ladies are great, and meeting up allows us to discuss any issues with the coursework we may be having, and we all try to help one another. (Student, Group C)

Existing peer networks

Most distance students value relationships with their peers and a significant number of students chose not to become involved in the project because they already felt well connected with them. In fact, the project unearthed many existing relationships and networks that the team were unaware of including social media, telephone and face-to-face contact between the students.

> I am actually doing my studies this year from [overseas] but feel very connected to other students in my course. I think doing a course like social work means the people replying to my posts on blackboard are interested in one another's experiences and are very supportive! Also, after we did our week intensive we started a Facebook group which keeps a number of us in contact! Also, I made a friend during a group assignment. Whenever we see each other on Facebook chat and Skype chat we have a chat. Sometimes it's in great detail about stress with assignments and things we are looking forward to in our personal lives. We are quite open with each other. We probably make contact a number of days a week. (Student, Group C)

Some of these existing networks had been established at the beginning of the social work program during a one-week, on-campus intensive course. Activities in this course are primarily group based and lecturers intentionally cluster students whenever possible with others who are living in similar locations. In addition, teachers of other online courses that utilise teamwork may group participants similarly.

> I had to do a group presentation for Social Work 1 and (tutor) was very helpful in allocating people from the Northern Rivers area for our group (3 of us) so that we could meet in person, although it also worked well communicating via email and we entertained the idea of using Skype, but it wasn't necessary. (Student, Group C)

> I (and perhaps others) made a study buddy via the discussion board from my area when we began the program, and for the purpose of car-pooling to attend the intensive. It worked out well. We have become good friends and connect regularly. (Student, Group C)

Limited time available

A common reason given for not engaging in the peer mentoring project was lack of time. Students invited to participate in the pilot project were on field placement during the semester in which the trial took place and were required to complete assignments and contribute to online discussions related to their placement. The majority were also enrolled in an additional academic course. Many of these students were studying online because of other responsibilities such as employment and parenting (Alpaslan & Lombard, 2011; Collins, 2008; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). These combined demands leave little time for connecting with colleagues, as the following comment from a mentor illustrates:

> Overall people … already have a lot of activities they are required to be a part of throughout their subjects. Also, most people enrolled have jobs, children, and lives that in conjunction with full time study leave them quite time poor. When priorities are outlined, responding to a forum that is not marked, not required, and more socially orientated would be low on the list of priorities for most people. (Mentor, Group A)

The following remarks are typical of the feedback from students with regard to their difficulties in finding time:

> I work 3 days, have placement 3 days and study on my day off so do not have any spare time for further discussion boards/groups. (Student, Group C)

> To be honest, I have been quite overwhelmed with work, study and personal life. I am completing the theory and research unit this semester as well as working full time…. Work has been extremely busy…and so by the time I get home, I really only have the energy and motivation to check my unit sites and try and keep up with the readings and assignments. (Student, Group B)

Issues with technology

A further discovery was the difficulty experienced by a few students with regard to technology including problems encountered in accessing and using the electronic sites. Through a university online platform, students utilise a site for each course in which they are enrolled as well as various other organisational sites. E-Connections utilised a Discussion Board blog which was embedded in the placement course sites. A small number of students who responded to questions about limited or lack of engagement in the project reported that they found it too difficult to locate the Discussion Board and others mentioned that the logging-on process hindered their participation:

> The Mentoring program sounds very interesting and would most likely be valuable. I tried to have a look – went to Learning@Griffith site, but could not find it. Can you please indicate where this is?? (Student, Group B)

> Being a distance student means I have to log on to numerous sites. Having yet another to log on to is almost too much to worry about at this stage in the process. (Student, Group A)

> Not all of the difficulties were related to the university site. One student who was overseas stated, "I have not entered the site [be]cause using Internet is such a stress and slow in [country]. I only think of using it for necessary things" (Student, Group C).

Having little interest in peer support

Finally, one group (Group A: males) did not feel a need to engage with student peers in any kind of forum. The mentor of this group (who was himself a final year MSW student) reflected on gender differences:

> …in general, men typically are not the most social group of people especially in the context of a university online forum… The concept of talking about social work-related issues or talking to other students when you already have a full time subject load and it's not assessable means it most likely won't get a second look. There is a risk of such actions being perceived as too "touchy feely" when the underlying mentality from a lot of men would be "I just want to finish my degree and get out of here and earn some money." (Mentor, Group A)

DISCUSSION

The primary aim of E-Connections was to help external MSW students to build relationships with each other and with mentors as a means of enhancing their student experience and engagement. External students face challenges when it comes to connecting with their peers (Maidment, 2006; McLeod & Barbara, 2005) but the lessons learned from this project showed that mentoring cannot easily be translated into the online environment. Although many students value peer relationships, time restraints, existing support networks, preferences for alternative ways of connecting and issues with technology reduce the likelihood of them utilising online mentoring in any formalised way. This knowledge will be helpful to educators who are considering how to support their distance students.

All students, especially mature students make major adjustments to their lives in order to study, and many choose distance modes precisely because they may be managing multiple demands (Hemy, Boddy, Chee, & Sauvage, 2016). It seems that one of the reasons for not engaging in online mentoring is that students perceive it as another demand on their time. In the face of higher priorities or tasks that offer greater opportunities for "learning richness" (Boyle et al., 2010) they choose not to contribute. Kazmer and Haythornthwaite described making such decisions, as students "assessing what has to be done and what can wait, letting go of things that can be reparable…or expendable…" (2001, p. 517). If online mentoring is to be offered to students, it is therefore important to acknowledge the existence of their other demands.

The project team learned that students are well able to establish their own peer networks, given the opportunity, skills and confidence. Mature students, despite the challenges they face have greater resourcefullness than their younger peers (Fleming & McKee, 2005) and may feel less inclined to engage in a mentoring relationship. It was evident that the students targetted in this project had already established relationships with their peers early in their program and maintained the relationships in a variety of ways. At Griffith University, all MSW students complete an introductory course which includes an on-campus component. During the initial, online phase of the class, students are encouraged to get to know each other, and then attend, on campus, a 10-day intensive period of interpersonal communication skills development. Students are assigned to groups with others who are living in a neighbouring location whenever possible. Opportunities for relationship building and skills development are therefore embedded early in their program. It seems that the success of this strategy in creating an environment in which students felt supported, connected and able to contact peers, precluded the need for mentoring to some extent.

Although the peer mentoring scheme has not continued, as a result of the project, the school has become more intentional and explicit in encouraging the development of peer relationships through other activities. Early relationship-building activities now extend to other first-year online courses and the external BSW program. For undergaduate students, the development of skills that help them to establish peer networks and therefore enhance their sense of belonging is significant (Andrews et al., 2012). Embedding these strategies into first-year courses is therefore essential.

If mentoring schemes are to be effective, it is also important to consider when to introduce them to students. Evidence in the literature shows that, for undergraduates in their first year of study, mentoring is valuable (Moriarty et al., 2009; Thomas, 2012). However, although E-Connections was introduced early in the students' program and could have been helpful for the remainder of their studies, it commenced while the invited sample were undertaking field placement. This meant that they had less time available to engage with the project.

Placement however, does offer additional opportunities to benefit from supportive peer networks. Students who are placed with peers enjoy support and learning from each other (Walker et al., 2014). This may be enhanced by group supervision and other occasions to meet with each other face to face. The university liaison person may also facilitate increased connection by, for example, inviting students in a similar location to meet. For example,

when visiting distance locations, one of the authors frequently invites students preparing for placement to meet with others in the same area who are at different stages in their degree. Students in this project also suggested setting up a "Google Map" and a Facebook page and sharing names and email addresses as aids for networking. It seems likely that reliance on other, more informal, means of connection using social media will become the norm for students electing to study online.

In a final note, it was clear from this project that technology continues to play a part in both enhancing and impeding peer relationships. Rural and remote students in particular face technological barriers to engaging online. The literature indicates that, for distance students, access to technical support, feeling competent and confident with technology, and functional and user-friendly platforms are all essential to online study (Roberts-DeGennaro, Brown, Min, & Siegel, 2005). Until there is widespread access to high speed internet connection, the effectiveness of mentoring schemes via standard online platforms will be impeded. However, because students are increasingly comfortable with social media and innovative platforms to communicate continue to emerge, universities should more easily be able to harness their potential to facilitate student experience and engagement.

In summary, online peer mentoring was found to have limited effectiveness for distance students. Opportunities to build relationship skills and establish peer networks early in their program through on-campus skill development, online group work, group supervision and peer meetings during placement were shown to be effective strategies for supporting students.

LIMITATIONS

This project was not intended as research and involved a small number of MSW students. As such, it offers limited scope for transferring the results to other settings and to undergraduate students who are typically younger, may have fewer competing demands and whose existing networks may not be as established.

The strategies used to identify and engage participants present similar limitations. The project team's choice of specific sets of students was based on assumptions that they would be most likely to benefit from mentoring and could be rich sources of feedback about the project. The evolution and character of each group was heavily influenced by the individual mentors who, in their turn, were affected by the progress of their group. Had we employed different mentors and invited other participants, the groups could have developed otherwise.

Monitoring and ongoing evaluation of the project by academics which involved access to online discussions, may have hindered participation and inhibited conversations. However, when the team provided the opportunity to contribute anonymously, only one post was received which may indicate it was not a concern for students.

CONCLUSION

The E-Connections project aimed to connect external MSW students with each other and provide mentoring through a discussion forum situated within the Griffith University

online platform. Students were invited to participate in one of three specific groups and to contribute to discussions led by trained mentors.

Through taking a developmental and exploratory approach, the project was guided by consideration of factors as they arose, ongoing collaboration between the mentors and project staff, and feedback from students. A key theme that emerged was that external students utilise several strategies to build relationships with each other. Online mentoring offers one way to connect and participation is influenced by need, decisions about priorities, preferences in methods of communication and practical issues. Face-to-face contact is preferred by students to establish peer relationships.

Online mentoring may therefore be of greatest value if offered early in the degree program to supplement other opportunities to connect. It may be of greater assistance to undergraduates who have no previous experience of online study and less established support networks, and when offered during online courses when students may feel more isolated than during their time on placement.

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