Enabling Professional Communication for Practitioners across Europe

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Abstract

This paper describes the evaluation of an online course in Neonatal Medicine, which involved medical practitioners across Europe. It focuses on analysis of the discussion groups. The project aimed to develop an online course for practitioners and included the development of 4 modules. Delivery was achieved using hybrid technology via distribution of course materials on CD ROMs accompanied by an online learning environment and associated discussion boards. The conclusion was that the project had met its stated aims. It was evident that participants enjoyed the course and found it valuable, with the most important element of the course being cited as the opportunity the course afforded for the sharing of expertise and best practice with colleagues across Europe.

Introduction

The growth in the use of the Internet been paralleled by a growth in the number of online courses. The perceived benefits of this form of learning include the opportunity to learn anytime, anywhere and to communicate and collaborate virtually across countries. For teachers online courses have been seen as beneficial as a way of reaching new student markets, offering more flexible learning opportunities for students, facilitating the tracking of student progress and activities, as well as providing an opportunity for creating new and innovative learning environments.

A considerable body of research has been carried out on the effectiveness of online courses. However, many research questions still remain unanswered. For example: How effectively do these kinds of systems support learning? Which aspects of learning are best suited to online learning and which to face-to-face?

An overview of some of the current research interests can be found in [1-4]. This paper focusing on the relevance of these questions in relation to a professional community distributed across Europe. A full report is provided elsewhere [5].

The online course in Neonatal Training

The project aimed to develop an online course in Neonatal training, delivered to doctors across Europe. The course was divided into 4 modules: Neonatal Sepsis, The Central Nervous System, Outcome Evaluation for Neonatal Conditions, and Neonatal Respiratory Module. Each module began with objectives, followed by 4 sections: revision materials, curriculum topics, resources, and 'the future'. The modules ran consecutively, each running for ca. 1 month. Each required 4 learning hours a week and overall the programme represented 64 learning hours.

The central philosophy throughout the course was a process of cooperative learning through real, authentic and problem-centre issues. Participants were divided into learning groups and worked cooperatively on addressing a series of posed problems around the curriculum content. The role of the tutor was to initiate and facilitate discussions and guide the cooperative learning process in addressing the problems set.

The online resource was divided into 2 'zones', a CD-ROM zone and a Website zone. It was hoped that this approach provided a more structured user-friendly learning environment for the participants. Asynchronous communication was divided into 3 main areas, i) group discussion, ii) a coffee room and iii) a staff room. Participants also had access to a synchronous chat and paging facility.

Evaluation methodology

A multi-faceted evaluation was carried out, following the philosophy of utilization-focused evaluation outlined by [6]. This consisted of i) an evaluation questionnaire, ii) analysis of data gathered via reflection fora, and iii) analysis of the Website and course material. Full details of the evaluation have been reported elsewhere [5], this paper will concentrate on the analysis of the online discussion fora.

There were two online reflection fora; one for the supervisors and one with the trainees. In addition, the course was monitored throughout and a detailed evaluation of the materials and the CD ROM content was carried out. The discussion boards associated with each of the 4 modules were analysed, along with data gathered about individual participants’ usage, logins and postings.
Data analysis

Ten participants contributed to the online reflection fora. A number of key themes emerged. Feedback on the Website was mixed; on the one hand they felt that it was good, but a navigational issue arose in terms of being able to find things once they were up for a while.

A total of 19 participants were initially enrolled on the programme, supported by 5 tutors and 1 project manager. Seven participants with very low logins (less than 20 logins) were deemed to have dropped out of the programme and their participation was excluded from the evaluation. A new cohort of 6 participants joined the programme half-way through and completed Modules 3 and 4 and was therefore included in the final evaluation and analysis. Usage varied between participants but typical logins for active participants were in access of 100 logins during the programme. In general each participant tended to have their own preferred study time, some choosing to work afternoons, others in the evenings, some only during the week, whilst others also accessed the course at weekends. This flexibility of working patterns was evident in the responses from participants as well. For example one participant stated: “...I find doing this relatively easy as it fits round my work commitments and family” (KT). This was reflected in her use of the Website, which was during the evening, Monday to Friday. Most participants logged into the site on a regular basis to keep up to date with new materials and messages being posted.

Eleven of the participants have high login records and evidence of active participation ranging from 294 to 96. One of the most active of these was a member of the (late starting) Group 4, with a total of 193 logins. The remaining 8 participants have logins of between 60 and 25, although many in this range were from Group 4. There were a total of 8 female and 10 male participants. The female participants logged in a total of 1181 times (59.1% of the participant logins) and the male participants logged in 817 times (40.9%). In terms of the total number of postings, the female participants posted a total of 254 messages (66.7% of the participant postings) and the male participants posted 127 messages (33.3%). The number of postings maps well to the ranking order for the number of logins, with participants who login in frequently also being more active in terms of their postings.

Analysis of the discussion boards indicated that the majority were concerned with administrative and support queries. One participant posted double the number of messages (163) of any of the other participants. A cluster of 3 postings followed this between 86 and 88. The postings then tailed from 65 down to 14, again mainly echoing the login ranking, with one exception. The high login of 193 from the Group 4 participant did not link to a high number of postings, which at 26 was towards the lower end of activity. The main fora fall into 4 categories: group discussion fora, the ‘supervisors forum’, the ‘coffee room’ and a ‘notice board’. Discussion activities within these 15 fora fall into 5 types: ‘Administration’, ‘Task setting’, ‘Socialising’, ‘Help and Support’, and ‘Feedback and Discussion’. These categories were developed from analysis of emergent themes from the questionnaires and the reflection fora, along with analysis of the content within the discussion boards.

Conclusion

There were a number of important findings and recommendations from the evaluation. A selection of key findings is highlighted here and will be elaborated upon in the conference presentation. Overall the participants enjoyed the course, found it useful and unanimously said that they would use this form of learning again, however a key issue for all participants was a lack of time to dedicate to the programme. A consistent theme is the sense of the development of an online community and participants appeared to enjoy the course particularly because it gave them the opportunity to network and discuss views with colleagues.

Participants felt that the schedule of the overall programme was too tight and that not enough time was available for discussing each of the modules. In addition, it would have been helpful if there had been a greater break in between modules. The value and importance of the online discussions came out consistently as one of the best aspects of the course. The role of tutors in leading group discussions and guiding modules was critical to the success of the course. Participants stated a preference for those modules where the supervision was good and it was evident that there was a direct link between this, participant satisfaction and enjoyment of the course.

References