



Coventry University

Interprofessional Learning: exploring the benefits of engaging students in online peer mentoring

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1. Executive Summary

This report disseminates the findings of research which was conducted under the auspices of the Higher Education Academy, Health Science and Practice Subject Centre with the aim of exploring the benefits of engaging students in online peer mentoring within an interprofessional learning initiative. The project aimed to explore how student engagement in learning is optimised by peer mentoring and to determine what the mentors gained from the experience. The relationship between student engagement and peer mentoring is under researched and is widely applicable across all institutions and disciplines. The project involved twelve Year 3 students taking responsibility for facilitating online interprofessional discussion forums for a proportion of Year 1 and 2 students in the context of the Interprofessional Learning Pathway at Coventry University. The aim was to discover how effective Year 3 students were in facilitating online discussion forums promoting interprofessional learning (IPL) of Year 1 and 2 students and to explore the impact of facilitating online forums on student facilitators' cognitive, personal and instrumental development. The objectives of the project also included an evaluation of a facilitation training course adapted for the student facilitators and identifying key factors in provision of optimal support for peer mentors.

The project findings suggest that student facilitators are effective in the online facilitation role. Their input was highly appreciated by the Year 1 and 2 students and in some respects they brought added bonuses over academic staff to the role. For example, the student facilitators had been through the same process and were aware of time pressures, workload and other sources of stress, therefore could identify with the demands placed on the student they were facilitating. Student facilitators appeared to be well positioned to be able to empathise and connect with students and were enthusiastic, motivating students to engage. Their presence in the place of staff facilitators appeared to result in a diffusion of status in the student facilitated forums,

which were perceived to be less hierarchical than the staff facilitated groups because students found the student facilitators to be more approachable.

In terms of benefit of peer mentoring to the student facilitators, findings seem to support the limited literature. Students perceived that they had enjoyed intellectual, personal and instrumental benefit from the opportunity. They had developed new profession specific knowledge through the sharing of ideas that occurred in their student groups and experienced increased confidence in articulating their personal knowledge. Perhaps most importantly they had experienced a new take on interprofessional learning that had not been apparent when going through the learning process themselves as Year 1 or 2 students. In other words, their facilitation experience had helped to consolidate their understandings of interprofessional issues. Aside from the practical skills of facilitating dialogue the students had gained leadership skills and had enhanced their personal communication skills. Most students identified potential instrumental gains from their involvement in the project such as the enhancement of their cv's or improved employment prospects and in some cases the experience strengthened future plans to want to teach.

The online facilitator training course adapted for the student facilitators evaluated well. Findings suggested that it prepared students for their role and that students felt well supported as a result. Key factors in the provision of optimal support for peer mentors were identified and these have been incorporated into an online resource entitled 'Online Peer Facilitation Good Practice Guide', which will be freely available to other institutions as part of the outputs to this project. It is intended as a practical resource, which will take its users through a simple, step by step process to enable them to think about what is required to successfully adopt student led online facilitation.

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2.0 Background

2.1 Research Context

All students on health and social care programmes in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at Coventry University engage in the interprofessional learning strategy, which is woven through each year of their programme. The purpose of the 'interprofessional learning pathway' is to enable students to explore issues related to achieving effective and appropriate interprofessional working in practice, in order to improve the quality of care for patients/clients. Interprofessional team working is the ultimate outcome of interprofessional learning (IPL). This is recognised as a key component of patient centred care, which is the primary goal of modernising health and social care services in the UK that is enshrined in the NHS Plan (DoH, 2000). The NHS Plan recognised that '[f]or too long we have planned and trained staff in a uni-professional/ uni-disciplinary way' (DOH 2000 p.11). Hence there is an imperative for higher education institutions to provide education and training, which is genuinely inter-professional to promote teamwork, partnership and collaboration between agencies, professions, patients and service users.

The interprofessional learning strategy at Coventry University has evolved since its introduction in September 2005. It incorporates fourteen health and social care professions, including peers from Warwick Medical School therefore is an ambitious initiative. There is a strong emphasis on pedagogy underpinned by a social constructionist philosophy that is realized through a scenario or inquiry based learning approach. Learning is facilitated through the use of e-resources and virtual interaction between students using online discussion forums within a Moodle platform. The interprofessional learning experience constitutes a 4-week period occurring in each of the standard three year degree programmes. Discussion forums have traditionally been facilitated by academic staff, trained in online facilitation through completion of the in-house facilitation course known as 'espire'. The involvement of Year 3 students as online facilitators is a point of departure for this project.

2.2 Literature on peer mentorship

Peer mentorship, or 'proctoring' as it is also known, refers to mentoring by more advanced students of less advanced students (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). Students tend to be very 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). In fact, research suggests that students benefit from peer mentors in terms of achievement, characterised by improvement and less variability (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989).

Aside from benefits for student groups, Micari *et al.* (2006) suggest that peer mentors experience the most significant gains from their experience. They identify cognitive, personal and instrumental development. On a cognitive level, peer facilitators are required to think through and mentally process information, which forces them to 'engage with material at a deeper level, solidify their own understanding of it' (Micari *et al.* 2006). Personal development can include enhanced communication skills, confidence, improved self-expression and teaching skills. Hayler (1999) suggests that peer mentors develop transferable people management skills such as being able to guide a discussion in an unobtrusive way, listening skills and diplomacy. With respect to instrumental gains peer facilitators identify benefits with respect to future employment, enhancing their curriculum vitas and career prospects (Micari *et al.*, 2006; Solomon & Crowe, 2001).

Peer mentoring is not new. However, as Micari *et al.* (2006, p. 285) point out students 'rarely enjoy a formal opportunity to help other students advance in their intellectual development'. The adoption of Year 3 student mentors as IPL online facilitators for less advanced students represents an innovation in student centred learning and a potentially valuable contribution to IPL pedagogy.

2.3 The rationale for the project

The project rationale was based on:

- The potential for student facilitators who are advocates of IPL to enrich the IPL experience for other students. Gallew (2005) suggests that, amongst other qualities, teachers need to possess enthusiasm and passion for their subject (See also Gibbs, 2003; Gibson, 2009).
- The recency of students' involvement in practice on placement gives them credibility to discuss issues in comparison to some academic staff. Micari *et al.* (2006) and Saunders (1992) suggest that students may bring innate abilities to help other students learn because they possess teaching skills as a result of having recently learned similar material. Having completed the IPLP the student facilitators were likely to be perceived to be credible members of that particular learning community (Salmon, 2004).
- The potential for year 3 students to be less inhibiting as facilitators to other students. Hayler (1999) suggests that peer mentors make learning feels less formal and threatening without the presence of academic staff. McCall (2007) suggests that academic staff frequently struggle to find time to fully appreciate non-academic concerns of students, or are ill-prepared to do so. However, Knight (2002) highlights ability to empathise and connect with students as essential attributes of facilitators.
- The wish to challenge traditional notions of learning as inevitably teacher led by embracing a student-led approach. The perceived power imbalance between teachers and students is not conducive to a high quality learning experience (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974).
- Potential to enhance IPL for student facilitators through an active learning experience prior to qualification.

3.0 Aims and Objectives

The project aim was twofold; to discover how student engagement in learning is optimised by peer mentoring and to determine what the mentors gained from the experience. The relationship between student engagement and peer mentoring is under researched and is widely applicable across all institutions and disciplines.

The objectives were:

- To discover how effective Year 3 students were in facilitating online discussion forums promoting interprofessional learning (IPL) of Year 1 and 2 students
- To explore the impact of facilitating online forums on student facilitators' cognitive, personal and instrumental development
- To evaluate a facilitation training course adapted for students
- To identify key factors in provision of optimal support for peer mentors

4.0 Methodology

The pilot study formed the initial phase of an action research project, which could in the future potentially lead to all Year 1 and Year 2 discussion forums being facilitated by Year 3 students. The proposal was to involve Year 3 students taking responsibility for facilitating online forums for a proportion of Year 1 and 2 student forums. Each forum is comprised of approximately fifteen students. Student facilitators were to work with two forums over a four week period in November 2009 and again in March 2009. This meant spending approximately 40 hours online in total for which the student facilitators were to be paid.

4.1 Recruitment of Students

Student facilitators were recruited in summer 2008 with a view to commencing facilitation of forums in November 2008. An open invitation for involvement was posted on the IPL site on the VLE, on student notice boards and emailed to Course Directors to enable them to alert students. Students were required to complete a simple application form. Selection was based on specific criteria, which included:

- Evidence of prior active involvement in their own discussion forums demonstrating a commitment to IPL
- Acknowledgment of the time commitment to the project in the context of students' own studies
- Demonstration of good interpersonal skills online
- Having access to a pc either at home or university

Students' own previous contributions to their discussions forums were checked to ensure that they had been active in the discussions forums. Course Directors were asked to provide a brief reference for students selected to ensure that any that might be experiencing difficulties with their programme were excluded.

Twelve Year 3 students were recruited from a range of different professions (see Table 1). The ratio of female to male students was 9:1.

Course	Number of student facilitators
Adult Nursing	5
Medicine	1
Physiotherapy	4
Social Work	2

Table 1. Student Facilitators by Profession

4.2 Student Training

Salmon (2004) is a firm advocate of staff development in preparation for any e-learning teaching and learning innovation. She suggests that:

'any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods or the introduction of technology into teaching and learning should include effective e-moderator training and support, otherwise its outcomes are likely to be meagre and unsuccessful' (Salmon, 2004, p. 80).

Salmon (2004) identifies a number of prerequisites for an online facilitator such as the ability to understand the online process based on personal experience as an online learner, the need for reasonable technical skills, good online communication skills, knowledge and experience to share, as well as the motivation and determination to become a good online facilitator. It was therefore vital that students selected for involvement in the pilot project had to be prepared to commit to completing an online facilitation training programme in the three week period preceding the first facilitation period. The 'espire Online Learning IPLP Facilitator Course' runs annually and is completed by all staff new to involvement in the IPLP. The programme is delivered totally online and runs into the facilitation period. It was modified slightly (and named espire-lite) for the student group in 2008 and the group remained discrete from academic staff training group. Students who completed the training and its associated assessment received a certificate in online facilitation.

4.3 Student Support During the Facilitation Period

Thorough preparation and the provision of adequate on going support for peer mentorship programmes is vital if such projects are to succeed (Gill *et al.* 2006). The students taking part in the student facilitator project had several avenues of support on which to draw. In addition to two academic staff involved in the training programme, one of whom was the IPL Coordinator, the learning technologist responsible for the smooth running of the IPLP interface in general, provided technology advice and support. Students also had access to one another through their training forum as well as the general facilitators' cafe area. Email contact and telephone and face-to-face contact were also used to ensure that any issues that arose during facilitation, which the students found challenging, could be discussed with academic staff and/or peers with

immediacy. Academic staff supporting the pilot consciously did not routinely visit the online forums and offer any support overtly in front of students.

4.4 Conduct of Research Strand of the Project

As the project involved the collection of data for the purposes of research, with the intention of dissemination, ethical approval was sought from the Coventry University Ethics Committees. The study adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach (Reason, 1994) that enabled students to be engaged in the research process. Proposed data collection methods included:

- individual interviews with student facilitators at the conclusion of the facilitation period to identify perceived development (Appendix IV)
- training course evaluation to be completed at the end of training (Appendix V)
- an anonymous online questionnaire completed by Year 1 and 2 students participating in discussion forums at the conclusion of the facilitation period to evaluate the forum and its facilitation (Appendix VI)

These methods afforded data appropriate for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Students were given a participant information sheet (Appendix II) and a consent form to complete (Appendix III). All data were treated as confidential and anonymized through the use of numerical codes and pseudonyms for quotation purposes. Electronic information was password protected to ensure anonymity and paper copies stored in a locked filing cabinet. Digital recordings were destroyed following transcription. The lead investigator and one co-investigator remained independent of the IPLP.

4.5 Data analysis

Quantitative analysis was carried out with the support of the CIPeL Senior Research Assistant. Student questionnaires results were put into Excel to produce descriptive statistics. Open questions were coded and incorporated into the thematic analysis, which was used to analyse student facilitator interviews.

On completion of each of the four-week IPLP periods the same online questionnaire was completed by all Year 1 and Year 2 students. This enabled comparisons across groups facilitated by staff and by students. In Year 1, 163 from a possible 360 students (45%) from student facilitated groups responded to the questionnaire. In Year 2, 233 from a possible 308 students (71%) in student facilitated groups responded to the online questionnaire. Data from open questions were subject to qualitative data analysis.

5.0 Findings and Discussion

The twelve students facilitated a total of 24 Year 1 forums and 22 Year 2 forums over the two four-week periods. Each forum contained approximately 15 students from a range of professions including: adult nurses, mental health nurses, learning disability nurses, children and young people nurses, midwives, medics, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, paramedics, operating department practitioners, youth workers and social workers. As such approximately one third of the discussion forums were facilitated by Year 3 students. The slight reduction in the Year 2 facilitation was due to one student facilitator not being able to participate during a placement in India that was without Internet access.

5.1 Effectiveness of Year 3 students in facilitating online discussions

Overall research findings indicated that the Year 3 students had been effective in facilitating the online IPL experience of the Year 1 and 2 students. The students found

the student facilitators responsive and helpful (Figure 1).

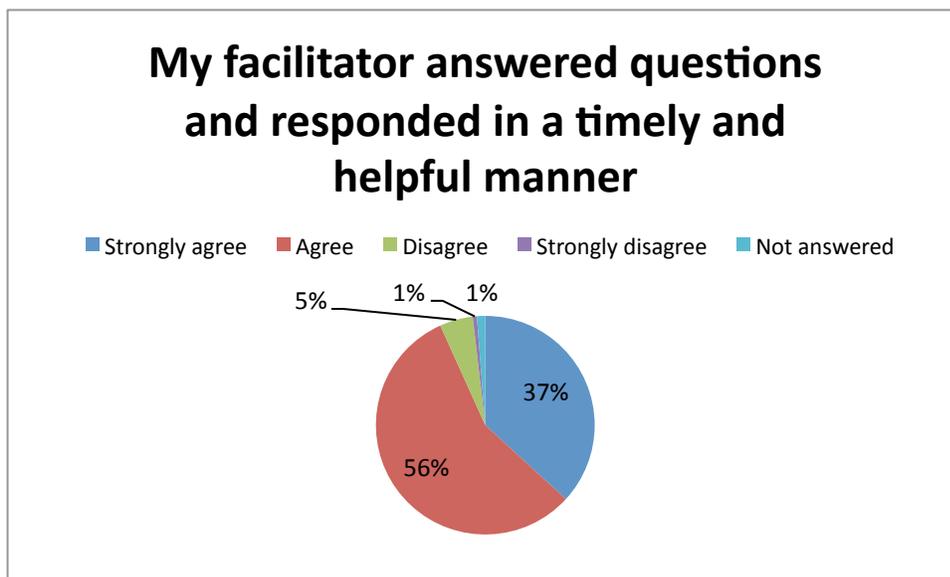


Figure 1. Pie chart of student responses to responsiveness of student facilitators.

Student facilitators appeared as capable as academic staff in promoting discussion that helped students understand their role in empowerment, (a key focus of the Year 1 IPL module); helping students understand how their profession can collaborate to improve care; and recognising the value of interprofessional working. Year 1 students reported having developed ability to listen to others' points of view and confidence to discuss sensitive issues. In fact, the student facilitators appeared to have promoted greater insight into the role of other professions than academic staff facilitators in some instances and were felt to be better at encouraging students to reflect on their beliefs and values in relation to inequality and empowerment. A series of open questions invited students to consider what they thought about having had a student facilitate their group. Notwithstanding the point made by several Year 1 students that they had nothing to compare with, the majority of student responses were very positive as the following Year 1 student comment indicates:

I think [student facilitators are]good because they were able to tell us what to expect from IPL and how it helps in many ways in terms of learning about

different professions and their jobs at the same time as keeping in mind the scenario and dealing with it.

Insight into the potential disadvantages of having a student facilitator were limited, although the lack of substantial practice experience in comparison to academic staff was highlighted as a potential drawback. Most students praised the student facilitators highly. One student expressed surprise as s/he “*didn't realise we were being facilitated by a student*”. By contrast, Year 2 students were in a position to be able to judge their student facilitators against their earlier experience of staff facilitators and were very positive, making comments such as:

Yes the facilitator did a very good job this year. Was very helpful and gave good sound help.

I think the facilitator was better than previously, as [s/he] spent more time on IPLP and emailed reminders.

Interestingly even students who had not had students facilitate their forums expressed their support for involving students in the facilitator role. Several themes emerged on closer analysis of qualitative data. The first was that the student facilitators' were able to empathise with their peers, especially in terms of acknowledging the external pressures that they were under, which students felt staff failed to appreciate. This finding possibly reflects McCall's (2007) observation that staff struggle to find time to fully appreciate non-academic concerns of students or are ill-prepared to do so.

In addition, students perceived that the student facilitators had been through the same process and were aware of time pressures, workload and other sources of stress therefore could identify with the demands placed on them. For instance, one student stated:

She knows exactly what we are going through regarding this and our other workloads having only done this last year.

Student facilitators appeared to be well positioned to be able to empathise and connect with students as advocated by Knight (2002). Having been through the IPLP appeared to put the student facilitators and students 'on the same side' inspiring a sense of trust and credibility:

They have experienced IPLP for themselves and do know what it is like. Because of this they want us to pass and therefore help us as much as possible so we could be in the same position as them in the future.

According to Salmon (2004) the student facilitators were credible members of a learning community. Comments such as, "*they have recent experience in the IPLP and can guide us in the right direction*" and "*they understand the system*" and are "*able to give advice from their own experience*" suggest that the facilitators were very much accepted in their role in leading learning. These findings support previous research (Micari *et al.*, 2006; Saunders, 1992) that suggests students may bring innate abilities to help other students learn because they possess teaching skills as a result of having recently learned similar material. The confidence that such ability inspired is evident in the following comment:

It is reassuring to have someone who is in charge so to speak, to keep things flowing and in order.

The data suggest that the Year 1 students recognised the skills exhibited by the student facilitators, developed through their online facilitator training, which contribute to them being seen as credible allies in the learning process. They also recognised the influence of the make-up of their groups and the extent to which attitudes, beliefs, levels of participation and commitment affected learning, highlighting the importance of good facilitation as a means of managing some of

these issues. These findings lend support to the importance of the prerequisites for an online facilitator identified by Salmon (2004) such as the ability to understand the online process based on personal experience as an online learner, the need for reasonable technical skills, good online communication skills, knowledge and experience to share, as well as the motivation and determination to become a good online facilitator.

A strong theme to emerge was the level of enthusiasm with which the student facilitators embraced their role. One student suggested that his/her facilitator's enthusiasm was infectious, stating "*it gives you more motivation*". Another student reflected:

[S/he] made me consider topics I wouldn't have before and will make me a better healthcare professional.

These findings reflect Gallew's (2005) suggestion that, amongst other qualities, teachers need to possess enthusiasm and passion (Gibbs, 2003; Gibson, 2009). This finding might be significant in supporting the self selection process that was used to recruit students to the role of the online facilitator based on motivation and genuine interest in teaching and/or IPL. In-depth interviews conducted with the student facilitators confirmed that intrinsic motivation was more influential than the extrinsic motivation of payment, which was not substantial and as such was considered to be a 'perk'.

Another strong theme to emerge from the data was that there was a diffusion of status in the student facilitated forums which were less hierarchical than the staff facilitated groups. Students were more approachable and used similar language. One student remarked:

We were able to communicate effectively with them better on a similar level. I feel there wasn't any pressure to the work being assessed, and were able to give personal answers to activities.

Another student commented:

It helps that [the student facilitators] are from a similar generation as yourself so have a sound understanding about thought processes in that generation.

These findings possibly support Haylers (1999) suggestion that peer mentors can be beneficial because the learning feels less formal and the learning environment is less threatening without the presence of academic staff. In this context student facilitators were perceived to be similar 'beings' even though interestingly the age range amongst students meant that some were probably not of the same generation. However, there is possibly a sense of mutual respect that springs from feelings of commonality, which is reflected in one student's comment:

"he was respectful towards us and encouraged us to participate without being condescending"

The student facilitators appeared to effectively challenge the perceived power imbalance between teachers and students (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974) with potential positive implications for the both the student experience and for their learning.

Mutual respect appears to have been influential in nurturing engagement and making students feel that their comments were worthwhile and of value. However, being able to help students explore further and develop the discussion at a higher level is a definite skill that some student facilitators clearly possessed. Comments such as "*our facilitator tried to draw discussions out as some people were just posting the same things*" and "*she praised good points and asked additional questions we maybe hadn't thought about*", illustrate that student facilitators recognised their responsibility to enhance discussion. They also highlight the challenge that facilitators face in the light of evidence that analytical debate online can be lacking (Miers *et al.*, 2007).

Effective facilitation involved achieving a balance between support, challenge, recognition of the need for praise and encouragement. However, perhaps most importantly, the Year 1 students appeared to greatly appreciate having some reassurance that they were doing things in the right way:

She was able to reassure us that accessing and taking part in IPLP was straightforward and not something to worry about. This was believable as she herself had taken part.

This comment illustrates how for some students simply getting onto the forums and finding courage to post even basic messages was a new and potentially anxiety-promoting experience made significantly easier by facilitators with whom they felt they could identify. A final comment, *“IPLP is a very clever tool and has brought me out of my online shell”* seemed to capture one student’s sense of achievement in this respect.

The final important theme to emerge was the sense that the student facilitators had been good at their job; they had kept discussions *“on track”*. However, they had also encouraged students to explore *“other perspectives”* reflecting attention to the interprofessional nature of the discussion triggers and moreover had been advocates of IPLP helping students engage with the complexities that it might present in practice, which is evident in the following extracts:

[the student facilitator] had a good understanding of students’ concerns and fears about becoming a professional.

[the student facilitator) opens students eyes to opportunities that arise from doing well in IPLP.

5.2 Impact of facilitating online forums on student facilitators' cognitive, personal and instrumental development

The second research objective was to gain understanding of whether the student facilitators benefitted from taking on the role of student facilitator. Questioning focused on potential cognitive, personal and instrumental gains from peer led initiatives, previously highlighted by Micari *et al.* (2006).

In terms of cognitive development the student facilitators highlighted several areas in which they had benefitted. At a basic level having to facilitate others' learning had made the student facilitators '*get the books out and revisit topics*' to develop a better understanding than they had previously had. They had developed new profession specific knowledge through the sharing of ideas that occurred in their student groups and experienced increased confidence in articulating their personal knowledge. Perhaps most importantly they had experienced a new take on IPL that had not been apparent when going through the learning process themselves as Year 1 or 2 students. They expressed increased awareness of the '*bigger picture*', which had developed because they felt the need to synthesise the differing students' perspectives instead of speaking from a uniprofessional perspective as they had done previously. This had resulted in an improved sense of what IPL was really about. One student reflected:

I can't believe I enjoyed it more than I've ever done before. I even reminded [the students] that there are no right and wrong answers, whereas for us it was like... it was a nurse's role as this and that and you'd like to know somebody else's role'.

Having such close contact and active involvement in learning with students in Years 1 and 2 highlighted to the student facilitators the extent of their own learning and development. For example,

It made you realise why you've done everything and it's interesting to see the first years and how they see things and think about how much you have gained from the first year.

It was interesting to see how we compare now in Year 3 to the Year 1's.

Having opportunity to think about the issues without necessarily having to post ideas and thinking of ways to challenge those engaged in discussion appeared to lead to deeper personal reflection for some of the student facilitators, supporting the links made by Micari et al. (2006) between facilitating learning in others and consolidating facilitators' own understanding.

One student facilitator interpreted the personal development that had resulted as a *'lesson in leadership'*. S/he highlighted development of skills in organisation, planning, diplomacy, counselling, empathy and communication. These findings support Hayler's (1999) suggestion that peer mentorship develops people management skills in mentors. Indeed, during the facilitation process, students could be seen to be modelling several interprofessional capabilities identified within the Interprofessional Capability Framework (Combined Universities Interprofessional Learning Unit, 2004). For instance, their role as facilitators involved them in promoting understanding and respect for other's cultures, values and belief systems thus ensuring ethical practice, utilising knowledge in practice, encouraging interprofessional working and engaging in reflective processes.

High levels of personal satisfaction were evident. A student facilitator identified self-fulfilment that s/he found was gained from feeling responsible and 'part of other students' learning. S/he recalled that:

"There have been some real revelations, which was really rewarding.

Several students enjoyed the success of their newly acquired facilitation skills. One recognised that s/he *"wasn't there to put everyone right but to provoke and promote discussion"* while another admitted:

I enjoyed learning how to get people to... to bring out more information'. It was ... I just sat there and went... I can't believe I can do this'.

Another student considered having had the opportunity to become a facilitator to be a 'real privilege' and 'valuable to any student' because to be trusted with the responsibility for others' learning made students feel valued and trustworthy. Facilitating Year 1 students had 'promoted confidence to challenge ideas' and to 'engage in more weaving and sparking in Year 2 discussions'.

The majority of student facilitators could envisage instrumental gains from their involvement in the student facilitator role. For instance, having been able to build on basic computing skills was considered valuable. A student reflected:

I've just been on critical care [placement] and everything is on a computer. It's no good now saying "Oh I'm not good on a computer", you have to be able to use it. Places are trying to get care plans onto the computer. Its the way the world is going. I don't think there is going to be a choice. You need to get [computer skills] now not when you're in practice.

The nursing students, in particular, were aware of an obligation to become mentors to junior colleagues once out in practice and saw the insight that had been developed as invaluable in this respect. One remarked, "it will stand me in good stead for when I qualify".

Several students felt that having the experience on their curriculum vitae might help them to secure employment once qualified and thought that the interprofessional awareness that they had developed would be perceived to be beneficial by employers. Two students suggested that they might like to teach in the longer term and one was "debating whether to do a teaching qualification". Again these findings concur with other research findings (Micari *et al.*, 2006; Solomon & Crowe, 2001).

5.3 Evaluation of a facilitation training course adapted for students

The third objective of the study was to evaluate the on-line facilitation training course, which was adapted from the "espire" facilitation course designed for and completed by

all staff IPLP facilitators. As in the original course, espire-lite aimed to develop on-line facilitation skills based on Salmon's (2004) and Berg's (1995) models. However, it put greater emphasis on specific preparation for facilitation within the local Interprofessional Learning Pathway than the original, more generic course.

The course was delivered on-line (via a Moodle virtual learning environment) over 4 weeks. It was designed to model key facilitation skills and to enable students to practice these in a supportive environment. Two experienced IPLP facilitators developed the programme and jointly facilitated its delivery. During the first two weeks students were introduced to the process and skills of facilitation. In the second two weeks, students actually facilitated their own pre registration student groups while concurrently continuing the espire-lite course. At this stage students were required to share and reflect on application of facilitation strategies. They were also encouraged to make use of the shared facilitator discussion boards within the IPLP web. These addressed technical and pedagogic support and were actively monitored by the learning technologist and the course team, thus enhanced facilitator development.

The course was evaluated through an on-line questionnaire (see Appendix V), which included quantitative questions, some ranked on a 5 point scale and free text entry qualitative question. The semi structured interviews also explored facilitator preparation (see Appendix IV). Eight of the twelve students completed the evaluation. This may be because it was administered at the end of course, so students who had completed and gone to placements may not have been able to access it easily. It is important to question whether students not completing the evaluation had different views from those who did. However, from reflections in training web itself, essays and interviews, we have no reason to think they would be less positive than others.

Students, in line with Salmon's (2004) assertions, and indeed the views of the project team considered training to be an essential prerequisite to the facilitation, as illustrated by the following comment.

I don't think I would have done it if there wasn't any training. It felt like quite a responsibility facilitating the groups, so to have the training was most valuable.

A number of themes emerged from evaluations and the content of interviews. These were:

- Developing teaching skills
- Developing interprofessional awareness /working
- Encouraging reflection
- Support :
 - technical
 - peer
 - from course team

Some overarching comments from interviews and evaluations reflected many of these themes and typified the positive view that students had of the course;

The continual online availability made [espire-lite] accessible, mirroring the IPLP itself. Students were able to practice the skills needed in a safe and supported environment.

All respondents agreed that the suggested support materials were adequate and that the assessment was appropriate. Regarding development of teaching and facilitation skills, all agreed the course was “very helpful” or “helpful”. One wrote “*It has helped me gain competence in my communication skills*”. Another suggested that “[s/he] *thought that the course was both creative in that it developed my facilitation skills in a similar way to how I would be facilitating my groups*”.

[The course] was particularly good for practicing the techniques, i.e. practice your welcome message. Really made me start to think about what I would want to say to the students and how to put it.

In response to being asked whether the course promoted students' interprofessional thinking and/or working with others, six students agreed that it did. One student commented that this was because they had already learned a lot about interprofessionalism from placement. Another student disagreed making a clear distinction between activity within the espire-lite course itself and carrying out the facilitation of students within the IPLP site:

I don't think it was interprofessional as in the IPLP scenarios are like what your profession would do, because thru espire we were ourselves, not our individual professions.

Others responses such as *"I had to think what my profession would do to give an insight to my groups"* and *"[the course] encouraged me to think of other professionals whilst in practice"* did reflect awareness of interprofessional thinking and learning resulting from the course rather than past experience.

All respondents agreed that the course encouraged them to reflect on learning, as illustrated by comments below:

"Yes, I reflected back on how I felt when I first participated in IPLP".

"Yes. Especially when the SEDA values were mentioned, it made everything make sense".

"Yes - encouraged reflection of previous years IPLP, how we learnt and what are the best things to put from a facilitators point of view to encourage discussion".

Students were asked about levels of support and the value of peers support. All responded positively, as represented in comments such as:

“Yes, it was really supportive and the feedback was nice from the teachers, as well as the other students”

“Yes, had feedback from members of staff which was useful, and everything was broken down well”

“I felt very supported by other students taking part in the course as well as by members of university staff”

In response to being questioned about technical support, seven students found it very helpful and one had no opinion. The general opinion seemed to be that *“everything you needed to know was there for you”*.

Although analysis of the second cohort of student facilitators' evaluations is not yet complete, feedback from their reflections on the course, a focus group and informal discussions suggests finding will be similar to the above. When judging the overall effectiveness of the facilitator training, the standard of facilitation students provided must also be considered. Taking the strands of the project evaluation together, it can be concluded that the espire-lite course is an appropriate and effective means of preparing facilitators.

5.4 Key factors in provision of optimal support for peer mentors

Throughout this initiative it was important for the research team to capture good practice and lessons learned so that new projects could be set up in institutions wishing to adopt similar student led approaches to online interprofessional learning.

The main messages have been captured in a new, online resource entitled 'Online Peer Facilitation Good Practice Guide', which will be freely available to other institutions as

part of the outputs to this project. It is intended as a practical resource, which will take its users through a simple, step by step process to enable them to think about what is required to utilise students as online facilitators. The main messages captured in terms of what was deemed to be essential in supporting peer mentors to do their job efficiently are documented below:

Planning

Clear recruitment processes are vital to the project in terms of attracting the right students to act as online facilitators. It had to be clear to students from the start why this type of initiative was being put into place, and was not just a way of buying in labour to cover staff. Clear guidance on the project and how students were to be recruited (in this case informal interview, reference checks with tutors and background checks into their input on previous online interprofessional discussions) were essential in ensuring there were minimal queries coming from potential facilitators.

Communication

Once students had been recruited as online facilitators, a clear support mechanism was to ensure a coherent communication strategy from induction right through the facilitation periods to feedback and evaluation stages. This was achieved through a number of ways. Firstly, ensuring every student facilitator knew each member of the project team, who they were and what particular aspect of the project they dealt with (for example, if their log-ins failed, if they had inappropriate messages posted or who to contact for pay queries). Secondly, that every facilitator had an induction and training period (espire-lite), so that they were not entering the process lacking confidence and being unfamiliar with the learning environment. This was co-ordinated by a member of the research team to provide consistency. Student facilitators were also asked along to the year one face to face meeting (before online launch), so that they could introduce themselves and meet the students they would be interacting with online.

Consistent and clear communication was provided via email, face to face meetings and telephone. However, apart from a few technological issues with the virtual learning

environment and the recruitment process, the student facilitators communication with the team was infrequent, which may be a sign of their confidence built through undertaking the espire-lite training programme.

Trust

This has been discussed within this section of the report as a key factor for success of the project. It was unexpected that this came out of the research findings as a means of supporting students, however to trust them was fundamentally a way of supporting them. As previously noted, they felt that by being given this 'big' responsibility was an opportunity to prove that they could shine as leaders and do an effective job with their student groups.

Technology

In the main, staff within UK higher education establishments are familiar with their institutional virtual learning environment. It is naive to assume that because students may be able to login and contribute to a discussion forum, that they have the technical capability to guide other students on how to post. A Learning Technologist was essential in this respect and was unexpectedly one of (if not the most) contacted member of staff throughout the process. When interviewed almost every student praised the technology support and felt they had less fear of the learning environment knowing there was someone on-hand to deal with any issues or queries that may have occurred.

The above messages may seem obvious to some, however can easily be overlooked when dealing with a significant number of student facilitators that will be interacting with an even more significant number of students, so to emphasise these key areas in providing optimal support for student facilitators is vital.

6.0 Dissemination

The project has been and continues to be disseminated through conference presentations, workshops and posters. The team have written a book chapter and have a paper in process, which we aim to submit to a peer reviewed journal in March 2010. Wherever possible, students have been involved in dissemination, contributing to presentations and workshops. This reflects the ethos of participatory action research and student leadership. It is beneficial to and valued by students themselves, their audiences and the project team. One of our major means of dissemination is through the 'Online Peer Facilitation Good Practice Guide' which is available online via the HEA website and which we anticipate being of help to anyone wishing to instigate similar projects.

Outputs achieved and pending include:

Davies, B, Broadbent, B. Roughton A, Clouder, L. (2009) Leadership online: A success story of student facilitated interprofessional learning. Presentation at the European Interprofessional Education Network (EIPEN) Conference. Oulu, Finland. September 2009.

Davies, B, Broadbent, B. Roughton A, Clouder, L. (2009) Peer facilitation of interprofessional learning: What's in it for the facilitators? Presentation at the European Interprofessional Education Network (EIPEN) conference. Oulu Finland. September 2009.

Clouder, D.L. Krumins, M. Davies, B (2010). Leadership online: student facilitated interprofessional learning. Book chapter accepted in forthcoming book: Interprofessional e-Learning and Collaborative Work: Practices and Technologies. IGI Global

Clouder, D.L. Davies, B, Krumins, M., Beckett, M. & another. Making a Student Led Online Interprofessional Learning Initiative Work: Principles of Good Practice. Workshop at the Higher Education Academy, Health Science and Practice Subject Centre, Festival of Learning, Napier University, Edinburgh, 30th- 31st March 2010.

Krumins, M. Clouder, D.L. Davies, B (2010). Online Peer Facilitation Good Practice Guide. Available online via the HEA website.

Krumins, M. Clouder, D.L. Davies, B. Martin, S. Muscroft, L (2010). Exploration of Staff and Student Experiences in Student led Online Interprofessional Education. Paper presented at All Together Better Health 2010, Sydney, Australia.

Krumins, M. Clouder, D.L. Davies, B (2010). A Good Practice Guide for Supporting Students as Online Facilitators. Poster presented at All Together Better Health 2010, Sydney, Australia.

7.0 Future Developments

Given that the student facilitator pilot project of 2008/09 was deemed a success by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences the Senior Management team were approached for their support to run it again in the 2009/10 academic year. Following presentation of an evaluation report the four Subject Heads agreed to fund twelve facilitators from Coventry University programmes, with an additional six students funded by Warwick University. This has resulted in eighteen students facilitating the Year 1 forums in November/December 2009, with the Year 2 forums scheduled to occur in April 2010. Students were recruited in exactly the same way as previously but there were forty five applicants for the eighteen places. Students had heard about the project and were approaching us for more information even before the role had been advertised. Competition for the six medical student places was particularly fierce as there is recognition that taking on this type of role is of instrumental value.

In 2008/09 the team negotiated offsetting the Year 3 interprofessional pathway assessment with the 'espire-lite' facilitator training programme assessment for student facilitators successfully completing training. This is occurring again in 2009/10. However, curriculum development of the Year 3 Leadership and Management module in which the IPLP sits in 2010, potentially opens up opportunity for leadership skills, such as are displayed in facilitating the discussion forums, to be formally recognised

within the module assessment in the future. While it is feasible that the majority of discussion forums could be student led in the future the project has highlighted the importance of students volunteering for the role of student facilitator, therefore numbers are likely to fluctuate.

Whereas the espire-lite facilitator training programme delivered in November 2008 catered for students as a discrete group, the 2009 training programme integrated students and staff. At the time of writing the evaluation of this programme is still in progress. Initial observations from staff facilitating the training course are that staff participants' discussion contributions were supportive and encouraging towards students. In previous staff only courses, the amount of engagement towards the end of the course has reduced limiting opportunity for peer interaction and support. However, the presence of student facilitators ensured a continued dynamic and constructive environment. This improved the experience, particularly for lecturers wishing to engage more fully as part of their own development. In a recent focus group, students who had experienced the shared training gave their views. All considered it to be appropriate and beneficial. Students suggested that they learned from staff sharing experiences as they had strategies and suggestions, which had not occurred to the students. Students were able to apply these ideas when facilitating their own groups.

8.0 Reflections and Conclusions

There are several key features that emerge from this project that we believe were crucial to its success and that we commend to others wishing to experiment with peer facilitation, whether it is face-to-face or online. The first is that senior management support is essential to making a project like this work, especially if, as was the case in our situation, some staff are sceptical about it. The project has challenged some assumptions about traditional boundaries, power differentials between lecturers and students and student capability and even the sceptical academics have seen the potential impact of students' leading learning. However, if things do not go according to plan it is reassuring to feel that you could call on high level support.

The next important factor is that an enthusiastic team with high levels of commitment to making it work reassures everyone and ensures that problems that emerge can be overcome. Related to this factor is the importance of technology support if using online facilitation. While it is essential backup for all facilitators, student facilitators should be able to expect prompt help if they or their online groups experience technical problems that threaten the learning experience.

We have already stressed the importance of self selection of student facilitators. We think that it is vital that students self select because this means that they are well motivated to do a good job. Finally, we strongly advocate trusting student facilitators to be responsible to take their role seriously. The suggestion that a buddy system with staff members also looking into the forums to make sure things were working properly was resisted on the grounds that it would not allow students to adopt the role fully. We stand by this decision as experience has shown us that on the whole students take this role very seriously and act responsibly as a consequence because they are trusted with it.

Reflecting on our initial expectations for the project we believe that we probably underestimated what the student facilitators would get out of it. They have been willing get involved in the research, attending conferences, writing for publication and even continuing to facilitate as graduates with full-time jobs, made possible by the online nature of the facilitation. They were remarkably enthusiastic and resilient even when unforeseen problems occurred, such as the late availability of Year 1 learning materials due to curriculum change, which meant little time for familiarisation before having to post them to the forums.

We were unable to predict the extent to which the student facilitators would be accepted by the Year 1 and 2 students. In fact, the response has been overwhelmingly positive and seems to be related to the 'added value' of mutual understanding between peers. Students were able to draw on their own experiences from IPLP and placements making them far more up-to-date than many academic staff. Prior to advertising for the

2009/10 group of student facilitators Year 2 students were approaching the team and asking to be considered for the facilitator role, which seems to be convincing evidence that they see it as a worthwhile development opportunity and a challenge.

Working through some of the issues of providing high quality facilitation with the student facilitators has highlighted lots of ideas that apply equally to staff facilitators and can feed into quality assurance mechanisms that will enhance the staff experience. For instance, staff do not generally self-select for involvement with IPLP. There is no training update currently offered and no opportunity for peer review that might prove useful. The team have greatly enjoyed working on the project, which has to some extent already become embedded in the IPLP. It has provided opportunity for development in several ways; the team including a novice researcher and several students have been involved in a live research project and in dissemination activities. We are keen to conduct a follow-up study of the facilitators most of whom are now employed as health and social care professionals to see if in retrospect involvement in the project did have the anticipated impact on their development and career prospects.

9.0 Acknowledgments

The research team would like to thank all of the students who took part in the pilot study: Ruth Adams, Stuart Bax, Nicola Bradley, Bianca Broadbent, Kevin Farquharson, Rhiannon Ions, Charlotte Lee, Gemma Miller, Jennifer Mooney, Nicola Murphy, Ali Roughton and Catherine Staniforth. We are also indebted to Conrad Webb, the Learning Technologist who so ably supported the whole project and Adrian Bromage, the research assistant, for his help with statistical analysis. Finally, we would like to thank the staff in the HEA Subject Centre who provided support, guidance and enthusiasm for the project.

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APPENDIX i Recruitment flyer

Student Facilitators Wanted (£10 per hour)

The Centre for Interprofessional e-Learning (part of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences) are looking to recruit a group of year 2 students to facilitate some on-line discussion forums for the IPLP pathway in the third year of your course. This is a new, exciting pilot venture which we wish to explore.

We will pay for your time in undertaking a short online facilitators training course during October where you will gain valuable experience to add to your portfolio. After this we would expect you to facilitate some of the student online discussion forums for first year students (initially), which will involve 10 hours work per week over a four week period starting in November 2009.

You will have access to a network of other students as well as an academic member of staff for support and guidance.

You should have an interest in e-learning, and more importantly have good interpersonal skills and be able to access a PC. If you are interested we will be arranging an informal chat over lunch. If successful, you will be expected to provide us with a short reference from your course tutor.

To register your interest, please contact
Marie Krumins, Centre Manager, edu083@coventry.ac.uk
CIPeL no later than 30th May 2009



APPENDIX ii

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Research Study

A Pilot Study of Student Facilitation of Interprofessional Online Discussion Forums

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to consider whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Purpose of the Study

Our primary purpose is to explore how effectively Year 3 students are able to facilitate online discussion forums contributing to IPL for year 1 and 2 health and social care students. We are keen to understanding year 3 students' experiences of facilitating online discussion forums and the impact on their own learning.

Why have you been chosen?

You have been invited to take part in the study as a Year 3 student on a health and social care programme, who has expressed an interest in becoming an online facilitator.

Do you have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy to keep. Further consent will be sought prior to and following an interview conducted in the closing stages of the study and prior to release of findings. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision to not take part, will not have any adverse effect on your future relationship with the University.

What happens if you take part and what you will be asked to do

If you decide to take part you will complete a training programme called 'espire-lite', which will help you develop your skills as an online facilitator. You will be allocated two Year 1 student forums (each made up of approximately fifteen students) to facilitate over a four week period commencing October 2008. You will be given a further two Year 2 forums to facilitate in February 2009. During these periods you will be able to seek support through email contact with a member of CIPeL staff, the IPL Coordinator and one another. You will be invited to a facilitators meeting at the end of each period to share experiences of facilitation and following the final facilitation session you will be invited to be interviewed. The interviews will be digitally recorded with your permission and following transcription you will be sent the transcript to check for accuracy. You will

also be sent an interim report of findings for comment prior to material being utilised for presentation or publication.

Possible disadvantages of taking part

No disadvantages are envisaged.

Possible benefits to taking part

It is possible that taking part in the research might promote students' own learning and insight into interprofessional working. Becoming a facilitator may help to develop transferable interpersonal skills, such as being able to guide a discussion in an unobtrusive way, listening skills and diplomacy.

If new information becomes available

All participants will receive transcripts of their interviews and copies of data analysis and interpretation as they become available.

What happens when the research study is complete?

If the pilot study is deemed successful and it is found that Year 3 students can successfully facilitate online forums student involvement as peer mentors may increase.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any problems with the conduct of the study please contact the Chair of Coventry University Ethics Committee for your worries to be investigated. Any complaints will be handled through Coventry University Complaints Procedure.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

In compliance with the Data Protection Act (1998) all information, which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. All information including tapes and transcripts will be coded. Electronic information will be password protected to ensure anonymity and paper copies stored in a locked filing cabinet. Digital recordings will be destroyed following transcription.

Research Findings

Findings will be disseminated through presentation at conferences and through written publication in which you will be given the opportunity to be involved. Findings will eventually inform approaches to the delivery of the interprofessional learning pathway.

Organisation and Funding of the Research

The research is being organised by Dr Lynn Clouder, Bernie Davies and Marie Krumins from the Centre for Interprofessional e-Learning. The research is funded by the Higher Education Academy, Health Science and Practice Subject Centre.

Review of the study

Coventry University Research Ethics Committee has reviewed the study.

Contact for Further Information

Should you require further information about the proposed study please contact Lynn Clouder on 02476 887841, email d.l.clouder@coventry.ac.uk or write to Lynn Clouder, James Starley Building, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB.

Many thanks for taking time to read this information sheet.
DLC 14/02/08 Version 1

APPENDIX iii

CONSENT FORM

Reference Number:

Title of Research Project
A Pilot Study of Student Facilitation of Interprofessional Online Discussion Forums

Name of Researcher

Please tick to confirm

- I have read the information sheet (Version 1 - date) for the above research study
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research study, and to discuss it
- I understand the purpose of the research study and how I will be involved
- I understand, and accept, that if I take part in the research study I will not gain any direct personal benefit from it
- I understand that all information collected in the research study will be held in confidence and that, if it is presented or published, all my personal details will be removed
- I confirm that I will be taking part in this research study of my own free will, and I understand that I may withdraw from it, at any time and for any reason

I agree to take part in the above research study

Signed _____ Date: _____

Signed (person taking consent) _____ Date: _____

Researcher (if different to above) _____ Date: _____

*1 copy for participant, 1 copy for researcher,
Version 1

APPENDIX iv

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule - Student Facilitators

Preparation for Online Facilitation

To what extent did you feel that completing the espire-lite programme prepared you for the online facilitation role?

What aspects of the programme were most helpful?

What aspects of the programme were least helpful?

Is there anything else that could have been done to help you to prepare you for your role as an online facilitator?

Experiences of Facilitation

Was there anything that interfered with your ability to facilitate the online discussions?

Did you feel confident in knowing when to intervene in discussions?

In what circumstances did you post messages?

What sorts of messages did you post? (supportive, challenging, questioning, inviting further comment, providing knowledge etc)

What sort of knowledge did you draw on when posting messages?

How would you describe your relationship with the students in your online group? How might they describe you?

Reflections on potential benefits of online facilitation for facilitators

Did your online facilitation experience help to develop any different perspectives to IPL than those you had developed as a student?

Did your online facilitation experience help to develop you intellectual, personal or interpersonal skills?

What did you enjoy most about facilitating online discussions?

What did you like least about facilitating online discussions?

Having reflected on your experience of facilitation is there anything you would do differently next time?

Reflections on Support Mechanisms

Did you feel there was adequate support for you as an online facilitator?

Was there adequate opportunity to share ideas with other facilitators?

Would you encourage other students to take on a facilitator's role?

What advice would you give to future student facilitators?

Given the opportunity would you be interested in facilitating the IPLP forums again once you have qualified?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX v

Facilitator Training Course Evaluation Form

1. Where did you access espire-lite?

- Home
- University
- Placement
- Internet Cafe
- Other

2. Did you experience any technical difficulties accessing the site?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Frequently

3. What did you think about the length of the course?

- Too short
- Too long
- About right

4. How many hours did you spend on line for espire-lite?

- 0-2 2-4 4+ hours
- Week 1
- Week 2
- Week 3
- Week 4

5. To what extent did the course help you to manage the online IPLP environment from a technical perspective?

- Not at all
- To some extent
- No opinion
- Fairly helpful

Very helpful

6. Please comment on the above

7. To what extent did the e-tivities help you to develop the skills and competencies to effectively facilitate online learning?

Not at all

To some extent

No opinion

Fairly helpful

Very helpful

8. To what extent did the e-tivities help you to develop the skills and competencies to effectively facilitate interprofessional learning online?

Not at all

To some extent

No opinion

Fairly helpful

Very helpful

9. Please comment on the above.

10. Did the course provide a creative and supportive environment in which you felt you developed key online skills? Please comment.

11. How useful was peer-to-peer support during the course and running into the facilitation period? Please comment.

12. Did the course encourage reflection on your own learning processes? Please comment.

13. Did the course promote your own interprofessional thinking and/or working with others? Please comment.

14. Were suggested support materials adequate?

Yes

No

15. Was the assessment task appropriate?

Yes
No

16. Are there any other comments that you would like to make?

Many thanks for completing this evaluation questionnaire.

APPENDIX vi

Evaluation questions taken from overall IPLP evaluation

1. My facilitator answered questions and responded to our discussions in a timely and helpful manner

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. Please make some comments on the effectiveness, or not, of the **facilitation** in your group. Did your facilitator give your group the required level of help and cajoling to encourage meaningful discussion?

3. This question is for those students who were facilitated by a student facilitator;
Do you think having a student facilitator was a good or bad idea?

Please comment on why you think it's a good idea/ bad idea to have a student online facilitator