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Asynchronous Online Discussion Boards as Assessment in Social Care Supervised Professional Practice

CORU, Ireland's multi-profession health regulator, has a remit to set and oversee quality standards of social care education in Irish Higher Education Institutes (CORU, 2017). Embedding this process warranted a re-examination of traditional methods of social care supervised professional practice assessment.

Digital platforms to facilitate collaborative learning are now ubiquitous across all disciplines in Higher Education Institutes. In research, the topic of online discussion boards and student learning has been investigated over the past 18 years with foci varying from participant interactions (Xia, 2013; Biasutti, 2016), moderator involvement (Wise *et al.,* 2006; Baxter and Haycock, 2014) to effective assessment (Oliver, 2001; Northover, 2002). However, the empirical research into digital technologies and social care education is scant. In 2016-2017, a pilot programme in the Institute of Technology, Carlow replaced the paper portfolio with asynchronous online discussion (AOD) assessment for the supervised professional practice module in the applied social care undergraduate programme. The literature asserts that discussion boards are reflective in nature, and compel students to think critically, cognisant of other-person perspectives, thus contributing to an enhanced learning experience (Martyn, 2005; Goggins and Xing, 2016).

The overarching objective of this study was to evaluate this piloted programme with a view to understanding the AOD board's usefulness to the development of critical thinking and reflection in social care education. This mixed methods study utilised a systematic survey with a purposive sample of third year social care students (n=49), a focus group (n=7), and tutor interviews (n=4) to explore emergent themes ranging from student engagement motivators to instructional methodologies. A priori codes developed from Henri's Content Analysis framework (1992) and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) were applied to transcripts

to subjectively measure the evidence and categories of interaction, reflection and metacognitive learning attained by participants in the discussions.

Findings indicated the practical and theoretical efficacy of AOD boards to facilitate collaborative reflection, critical thinking, peer learning and foster graduate attributes in student learners. Specific components of AOD have been identified with recommendations for effective teaching strategies to enhance the potential use of digital technologies to support face-to-face instruction.

An instructional strategy document for the effective implementation of AOD for students on professional placement has been developed as a result of this study, cognisant of the contemporary pedagogical objectives of higher education informed by current research literature. Further to this, a draft framework of coding structures to evaluate the attainment of metacognitive learning and reflective thinking is in development to contribute to a growing body of instructional literature in this field.