

# Supporting students through social networking

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**Summary:** This paper reports on the use of web-based social networking to support social work students on placement. The online group developed into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and a flavour of the interaction on the social network is offered in support of the argument for it being a community of practice. The possible reasons for its success are explored in relation to some literature on the criteria for positive outcomes of online groups. This piece of practice is shared in the hope that other practice teachers might use similar web-based resources to enhance the practice learning of students and to offer support to those who might be isolated in their student role. It was fun to manage and the peer support it provided was greatly valued by the students.

**Keywords:** social networking; practice teaching; student peer support; Ning; web-based support; online community of practice

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## Introduction

With increasing pressure on social work agencies to meet new targets and consequent constraints on flexibility in relation to staff time, managers find it more and more difficult to facilitate staff to offer student placements in their workplace. At the same time the demand for practice learning days as part of social work training has increased with the advent of new requirements for social work education in the UK. A key way of reconciling this tension is the use of off-site practice teachers<sup>1</sup>, who may be based in the university or an agency or who may work independently to provide the formal assessment of students' work. It is increasingly likely that agencies can only offer to take one student at a time and for that student to be assessed by an external, off-site, practice teacher, thereby creating the possibility of isolation for the student who is not part of a student group in the agency and whose practice teacher is not part of the agency staff team.

With the advent of the new Practice Learning Qualifications for those who supervise and assess social work students in the UK, it is hoped that more agency-based staff will be qualified to support students on-site but it is likely that there will continue to be a role for off-site practice teachers, to support staff - if not directly to assess students. Furthermore it seems likely that the situation of being the lone student in an agency will continue as will the potential for such students to be quite isolated from their peers while on placement. This sense of isolation can exist for the student in spite of good relationships with and support from their colleagues in the agency and their practice teacher. They may miss the camaraderie of the student group or of their own workplace, if they are employment-based students. Distance learning students can be particularly affected because they may not have been able to establish an identity within their student group prior to going out on placement. This can also be a factor for students with caring responsibilities who are unable to participate in the social side of student life and so miss out on the sense of belonging which can be a powerful support for their learning.

In the spirit of sharing experiences of trying something different in a practice learning context, this paper outlines the way I used web-based social networking to reduce the isolation of my social work students in the UK and to enhance my communication with them and their communication with and support of each other. What started as a

peer support group became, I will argue, a community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998; 2000). That concept of community of practice provides a framework for reflections on the process and analysis of the outcomes of this short-term online group. The success of this project exceeded my expectations, but I have, to date, been unable to replicate it. I will suggest reasons for that success by reference to some of the literature on online groups but I suspect that it might be related to some 'magic ingredient' in the particular mix of students involved. I suggest that social networking tools can also be used to support students in more low-key ways which would add value to their placement experience even without the development of a community of practice, which was such a bonus in the work reported here.

It is hoped that the ideas here, together with sufficient technical detail, will inspire colleagues to experiment with ways in which Web 2.0 tools can be used in the support of students' practice learning across disciplines.

## **Setting up the social network**

A social network is a network of contacts which is web-based; it is a hugely popular Web 2.0 development, especially among young people, as it enables one to stay in touch with a lot of people simultaneously. Facebook and Bebo are among the best known social networks and on these sites, which are largely used for personal interaction, it is common that members share personal details, often to a degree that might be considered unwise. Members use their social networking pages in a variety of ways – to share photographs, to keep family and friends in touch with their lives, especially if they are travelling, and to promote events or a particular perspective. Facebook offers the facility to establish groups and these are increasingly being used by students as informal study support, but not, to my knowledge, by social work students.

Because membership of Facebook is increasingly common, I considered setting up a group there. However, those invited onto a Facebook group must be 'friends' and, because of the way in which many people share intimate details of their lives on Facebook, this online relationship would be inappropriate between practice teachers

and students. So, while using Ning ([www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)) requires an additional login, its management and facilities match the needs of this kind of online student group. We used Ning because of the ease of setting it up and the clarity of boundaries in that it was established as a work-related social network from the beginning. One can establish a closed community/social network on Ning, which is vital for the purposes of learning or support groups in an educational context. The network was password protected and only available to invited people.

## **Rationale**

This social network was established by me as a response to my identification of the need for my three students, each placed in different agencies, to have access to peer support of a fairly informal nature. I felt that the students were quite isolated on placement, each being the only student in their setting. This was also their first placement and they were distance learning students so the placement experience was uncharted territory for them. Their sense of themselves as competent workers was being challenged by the newness of both the setting and their role as students on placement.

My aims for this innovation were to enhance communication and to provide a mechanism for peer support. I thought it would help us with communication – among the students themselves and between the student group and me. I also hoped that I could use it to convey information about useful resources to all of them with one message. The main feature of this network was discussion threads, similar to threads on conferencing forums<sup>2</sup> on university websites. Other features can be added to the basic network site. At the request of my students I added an instant messaging ‘widget’<sup>3</sup> – they could ‘talk’ to each other in real time and enjoyed that, especially as it came with a range of smileys<sup>4</sup>. That facility is now standard on Ning, as on other social networking sites.

A social networking site is informal and may encourage more peer contact than course-based online forums because many of the students are likely to be regular users of other social networking sites such as Facebook. It is a familiar medium and one which they are used to using informally. The intention behind the ‘Ning Group’ was to provide a channel for peer support but in a short time it developed

into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in that the participants shared knowledge, tried out ideas, applied new understandings and learnt from each other.

## **Communities of practice**

Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice illuminates the processes involved in the social learning (Bandura, 1977) that results from the interplay between our personal experience and the social context of that learning. For Wenger, learning is a process of social participation and happens most effectively in communities of practice which are defined as

communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning. (Wenger, 2000, p. 229)

According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice defines itself along three dimensions (pp. 73-85) which are directly related to practice; they are mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Communities of practice happen around people who are mutually engaged in common actions or ideas and that group or community keeps their learning processes central to their activities. The members of such a community are engaged in a constantly renegotiated joint enterprise which can go beyond the mission statement and objectives of their wider organisation and which creates mutual accountability among participants. The shared repertoire is the combination of the routines, language, shared history, symbols, gestures and actions – all those ways of being and doing which develop over the life of a community.

Although the group discussed in this article is arguably more a 'subcommunity' (Wenger, 2000, p 243) within the wider community of practice that is social work education, or the even wider one of the social work profession, the theory of communities of practice can help to analyse the reasons for the success of that group. It was an informal group and a key idea in Wenger's theory is that informal processes are more successful than formal ones in supporting communities of practice and creating knowledge therein (p. 244), regardless of their size.

The theories of social learning and communities of practice originated

in situations where people worked and learnt together in the same physical space and time. The development of online communication and learning provides a whole new area where those theories can be applied; the processes are similar - it is just the context which has changed.

## **Online communication**

In online communication, a key element is whether it is synchronous (happening at the same time) or asynchronous (different elements happening at different times). Although new forms of synchronous video and voice based interaction are possible, the main means of communication in online environments is still asynchronous text-based messaging, where one member leaves a message and another member replies at a different time. The posting on Ning is asynchronous but the 'chat' was synchronous. McAteer et al. (2002) identify the advantages of asynchronous communication as:

- Time and place independence
- No need to travel to the place of learning
- Time between messages allows for reflection
- All participants have a voice without the need to fight for 'airtime', as in a face-to-face situation
- The lack of visual cues provides participants with a more equal footing
- Many to many interaction may enhance peer learning
- Answers to questions can be seen by all
- Discussion is potentially richer than in a face-to-face setting
- Messages are archived centrally providing a database of interactions
- Process of learning more visible to all

They suggest that the disadvantages of asynchronous communication might include:

- Clues as to a speakers' intentions are not available, except through combinations of keystrokes (emoticons) or the use of typeface emphasis (italics, bold, capital letters)
- 'Time shift' in exchanges may affect the pace and rhythm of

communications

- Participants may not know who or how many people they may be addressing
- Context and reference of messages may be unclear so more misunderstandings may occur
- The normal repair strategies of synchronous communication are not available and misunderstandings may be harder to overcome

There is a growing literature on the factors which enable or encourage engagement in online communication and Tolmie and Boyle (2000) offer criteria for success which are helpful in analysing the success of this group.

- *Size of the group.* It must be large enough to have a sense of live engagement. This group started as three students but grew, at their request, to seven, six of whom were active participants and one who registered but did not participate. That student had access to sufficient peer support.
- *Knowledge of other participants.* All the students knew each other in advance of communicating in this way; indeed they already had a sense of identity as a sub group within their wider class group because they came from the same city. This did seem to be a factor in the success of the group.
- *Student experience of online working.* Online groups work best when the participants are comfortable with the medium. These students had experience of accessing their academic materials online but were not particularly confident online communicators so I put in quite a bit of support at the initial stages; in particular I helped to iron out issues with logging on or understanding how the discussion threads worked.
- *Clarity about the task.* I posted<sup>5</sup> my view of the purpose of the network and reinforced that to my own three students face-to-face.
- *Ownership of the process.* It took a short time for the students to 'own' the process. Initially they signed on because they were at the start of their placement, anxious to please and not clear if this was compulsory or optional
- *Usability of the system.* Ning is user-friendly and how to use most of the features is easy to grasp.

This student group was a 'small group' as defined by Macdonald (2008, p. 78); it was composed of individuals known to each other and, through my students, known to me. While Tolmie and Boyle (2000) consider that online participation is easier in a smaller group, Macdonald comments that it is often difficult to maintain participation in groups with smaller numbers; students need the encouragement of recent postings to give a sense of engagement and, in small groups, this relies on those few people being active in the forum. While this group worked well, this need for more immediacy came through some of the postings, such as

*Hi, Has everyone died or emigrated? Everyone is a bit quiet! I am just starting the Practice Analysis as I won't be finishing the placement until [date deleted to preserve anonymity] and I am wayyyyyyyy behind. I'm struggling a bit but suppose I will get there. I am just rewriting the books in the forms of notes at the moment! How did everyone else get on (I'm not looking for answers you suspicious people!).*

*Hey is anyone out there??? if you lot want to hook up for agency visits,...*

Notwithstanding this preference for recent postings, there is some evidence to support Tolmie and Boyle's perspective on group size in the postings about meeting for drinks. Four discussion threads (out of a total of 46) were about finding dates and times to meet in person to socialise. This would not have been possible or appropriate with a larger group. While this focus on alcohol can be seen as an indicator of group cohesion, it is important to appreciate that it might also be a cultural barrier – not all students use alcohol as a way of bonding and its centrality in the informal student experience can be excluding (Harrison & Peacock, 2008).

## **Online community of practice**

An online community of practice is unlikely to happen without thought and planning on the facilitator's part. Sclater and Dunn (2007) suggest some ways in which one can assist the process from online grouping to community of practice. They argue that it is essential to ensure that



there is a range of activities in which the participants could engage. Following this advice I ensured that there were posts about different topics and I uploaded links to a podcast and to external websites. The students developed the range of activities by posting different kinds of discussion threads; one was light-heartedly entitled 'The Sunday Sermon' and was a series of thoughts on a topic unrelated to any work but more about 'the meaning of life'.

Sclater and Dunn further advise guiding the participants in the initial stages so that they are clear about the structure and tone expected. As in face-to-face group work, I modelled how students might use the site by starting discussions on different topics and trying to keep them separate to facilitate navigation of the site. Careful timing is another aspect of successful online engagement and I introduced this network to the students early in the placement, when they were still at the 'anxious to please' stage. They acknowledged that perspective when we reviewed the work. While it was an optional activity they were engaged in it before they fully realised that they could have refused. Appropriate facilitation is important; I watched the activity online but only ever intervened with a light touch, encouraging but trying not to stifle discussion.

## **How students used it**

Almost as soon as it was established my three students asked if their student colleagues could be invited to join our network as they were all feeling isolated. Following a face-to-face meeting with my own students to establish boundaries, five other students were invited, four of whom joined and three of whom then contributed regularly. One remained a silent member; that student had access to a face-to-face peer support group throughout the placement so presumably did not feel as isolated as the other members of the network. The boundaries agreed were that all the students were at the same stage of learning<sup>6</sup>, on placement at the same time and were already part of an informal grouping within the wider year group. I informed their practice teachers of the invitation and explained its informal support purpose. So the community of practice which developed was six students and me; I was practice teacher to three of them.

The students uploaded profile photographs and some added other

photos to the site; from a very early stage they were making their mark and taking ownership. The network was not used once the placement finished; interaction ran for 20 weeks. Over that period, 209 messages were posted, on 46 discussion threads. Of those threads, 18 were started by me. Ten of these got no reply – but those were usually points of information, or unpopular communication about points of grammar. In one post I copied a spoof piece about Kant seeking a partner in a ‘matchmaking’ format. Sadly, the students’ grasp of Kantian philosophy was not sufficient for them to appreciate the joke!

There was considerable instant messaging, most of which was very light-hearted banter. That interaction was one of the aspects of the group which students reported as having been most supportive; they appreciated the immediacy of it and the sense of community it engendered. That the instant messaging usually took place late at night added to the sense of camaraderie.

An analysis of the posts reveals that

- ‘essay’ turned up 41 times – about 20%, supporting the assertion that they used it as a place of learning, a community of practice;
- 5 discussions were overtly about alcohol; and
- there were (at least) 14 other contributions about alcohol – 10% of messages in total were about alcohol or about meeting around alcohol.

The emphasis on alcohol indicates the students’ need for informal peer support; there was more talk about alcohol than actual drinking of it! Social networks can also be used for ‘ranting’ or ‘sounding off’ or ‘ventilating’ and this seemed to be useful to the students. Such activity can be fun, can encourage a feeling of being connected or can just act as a distraction. This was sometimes perceptive and analytical, as in the following post:

*I’ve had a horrible weekend trying to get my head around the elusiveness of social work values. I found this essay quite a difficult one to structure. I’m probably the only person who has to hand it in on Monday so all you lovely people can experience this next weekend.*

*I seem to follow a pattern when writing my essays essay:*

*Avoidance (take notes in between reading the Scotsman sports section on line / doing anything else I can possibly do – even the hoovering. All those jobs that have been waiting around the house need doing now)*

*Stress (aaaaah I'm an idiot, how do you write a sentence, I'll never make the word count)*

*Continued stress (this is a pile of dog poo and now I've written too much)*

*Exhaustion (I can't take this anymore..... I'll just trim it down nobody will notice)*

*Exasperation (why is referencing so nippy - I've wasted 3 hrs doing this \*\*\*\*\* and it's sunny outside. What if I died now and this was the last 3 hours of my life – I should quit the course and travel the world)*

*Past caring (well I can't be bothered changing it now).....*

*Happiness (it's in the post I don't care anymore)*

*I'm currently at the past caring stage. I've only written this to avoid reading my essay again. Anyone else want to reply to avoid writing their essay?*

## **Evaluation of the project in relation to its aims**

My aims were met reasonably well in relation to sharing information about training opportunities and providing a repository of resources relevant to the students' practice learning. The posting of one resource about ethics led to a sharing of information about their understandings of ethics in relation to social work. The communication seemed to work less well when I posted other kinds of messages; I started some discussion threads about grammatical points, including apostrophes, and this thread was not taken up by anyone else. This is not as negative as it may sound as many of them were akin to announcements about training events or conferences or (the unpopular) comments about grammar. The students were equally reluctant to engage in any face-to-face discussion of those points.

I had hoped that the students might use the group to support each other in their work and this expectation was exceeded in that they also used the group to 'play with' the ideas introduced on their course and on placement. The following post followed work we did as a group on gender:

*Is anyone else watching the apprentice? I clearly can't spot a leader as I thought that Simon might do well.*

*To make this post a bit more topical isn't it funny how the women always make better baddies - what's that all about then. Do we like to demonise powerful women or do we just expect a more compassionate stance from women?*

This post led to several comments exploring the idea of gendered images on television – all highly relevant to their practice learning.

All of the students reported that they felt supported by this online group. This post-placement comment is paradigmatic of the evaluative views expressed,

*I found the Ning experience very positive. It was fun - I liked the idea we put photos on and as I was more remote than the other students it helped me tremendously just to feel part of a larger whole and to see comments from other students helped trigger thoughts or ideas - or just put me on the right track! Things were so busy on placement that without Ning I may not also have had the chance to contact the others. The contact through Ning was helpful on a personal and professional level and certainly helped me pass the placement.*

## **Defining success**

The aim of the group was to provide peer support to the students. At the end of the placement, all of the students who engaged with it reported that it had been an important support to them. While they all acknowledged that they used the Ning group to feel connected to and supported by their peers, one student felt that it had an additional role:

*I have decided that this 'ning' thing is my 'process' to getting me into study mode... It seems to prepare me well for reading!*

This student reported that she started her study about 9 pm and needed to connect to the others - her community of practice - before she could move from being a mother to being a student – logging on and seeing what others were up to and leaving some messages or exchanging texts allowed her to make that role transition. She then got on with her ‘real’ work.

Another major element of the success of this group was the high level of engagement, as detailed in the section above. While a peer-support resource which is not much used could be helpful in just being available, the success of this group is reflected in the active engagement of the students in supporting each other through the site.

One unexpected outcome was the level of learning, rather than just moral support, that went on in the exchanges. Students shared feelings and ideas about their settings and their work but also engaged in more wide-ranging debates about, for example, treatment of animals, within the frameworks of ethics, gender, inter-agency working, managing boundaries, study skills and the role of social work in the community. That exploration of ideas was likened by one student to a ‘traditional’ student pub session where ‘general discussion about your study and the course was woven into general chit-chat.’

It was when I realised that this learning was a feature of the group that I explored the connections to Wenger’s (1998) three dimensions of communities of practice - mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. The high level of interaction on the site, in particular the student-to-student postings and ‘chat’, is a measurable reflection of their mutual engagement in this community. Their involvement centred on the common theme of practice learning and the joint enterprise was to maximise their learning and achieve a successful course outcome. They came to realise that by sharing their perspectives everyone’s learning was enriched, thereby taking their activities in this group beyond the strict requirements of the placement or course into the realm of deep learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976a, 1976b) - the exploration of new ideas and the application of those ideas to their settings. They also created a shared repertoire, Wenger’s third dimension. Some elements of an in-language emerged, for example ‘the Sunday Sermon’ which was a tongue-in-cheek name for a stream of consciousness in a posting.

## **Possible issues for practice teachers**

Confidentiality was addressed by making the group a closed one – access was by invitation and by password only. Students had to register for Ning. In order to avoid requiring students to have one more login and password, one could use other platforms but the issues of using sites to which the students already belonged are discussed above.

Some colleagues felt that this kind of student support should be part of the university system and this would certainly have the advantage that it could be managed within the teaching team and IT support might be available for any technical problems. There are two problems with this solution. Firstly, it is not normally possible for practice teachers to set up and manage a university-based forum, although some universities are working closely with practice teachers as part of the teaching team and would be technically possible for this service to be set up within the university virtual learning environment (VLE). Secondly, the students reported that one reason why they felt so comfortable with this group was because it was small and they all knew each other in advance. Standard chat forums within university courses cater for the whole class and these students reported that they would not have used a whole class discussion board for peer-support purposes.

There was no overt discussion about codes of behaviour within the group. The students knew that I was ‘watching’ but felt that it was their own group – they had already posted photos and chat about themselves. In discussion about this after the placement, they confirmed that they would not have liked to have had any rules about behaviour. They did not use the group to discuss direct work and, if they had, I would have ensured that clients or colleagues were not identified. The students behaved professionally throughout and confidentiality was never an issue.

Because the group was set up by me, the practice teacher, I had group ‘owner’ rights and so could delete or amend posts if necessary. This moderating role sits slightly uncomfortably with the idea of this group belonging to the students as a peer support group but the students reported that they did not feel constrained by my presence. It could be viewed as a benefit in that I encouraged and supported the students in their engagement with the group. The presence of a practice teacher on the group may have contributed to the learning focus of some of the discussions as discussed above in terms of this group operating as a community of practice.

The time commitment required to manage this kind of online facility might be a concern. It was not a problem for me; I logged in most days and felt that it kept me in touch with my students. I only posted messages or comments when I felt it would be helpful; operating on a light-touch principle, I generally allowed the discussion to develop without me. The messages on the discussion threads, and particularly on the instant messaging system, were always interesting and usually entertaining so it did not feel like a burden to stay in touch with the group.

I have tried to recreate this experience with other student groups. They have been happy to use a Ning group to share information but no group of students has engaged in it to the same extent as the one reported here and so none has developed into a community of practice. I have analysed this particular success against the published literature but have come to the conclusion that there was something particular in this group which is not easily replicated. This does not mean that a Ning group cannot serve the purpose of facilitating communication and peer support, but it might not always be as successful as this one. One cannot plan a community of practice since, by Wenger's definition, such a community emerges from informality and so cannot be deliberately constructed. One can create the conditions where it might happen and perhaps more work needs to be done on how one might nurture such a community between practice learning students.

## **Conclusion**

This paper reports on the establishment of an online peer support group for students which developed into a community of practice (Wenger 1998), a site of learning as well as support for that learning. In order to facilitate communication and to offer a mechanism for peer support to a group of three students on separate placements, I established an online group using Ning ([www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)). The students liked it so much that they quickly asked if the other members of their student group could join so we had an active group of six students for the duration of their placement. I used it to convey practical and academic information which was relevant to them all and the students used it primarily for peer support. Out of that informality a community of practice emerged and that theory (Wenger 1998 and 2000) is outlined within the context of the way this group was

used by the students. In an attempt to explore why this group/community of practice was so successful, its development and outcomes are analysed in the light of work on success factors for online communication (Tolmie and Boyle, 2000; McAteer et al, 2002; Sclater and Dunn, 2007; Macdonald 2008). These students were not experienced online communicators, but the success of the group is measured by the active participation of all but one member and the positive feedback from the students on its helpfulness in terms of support and feeling connected.

Although practice teachers tend to be concerned about confidentiality, these students considered that this was not a problem – they were adult learners and they used this facility as their own space. As ‘owner’ of the group, I would have been able to intervene and delete messages had I felt that they breached my expectations of anonymity or respect. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the relaxed nature of the discussions and texts, confidentiality was never an issue. The time taken to manage and monitor the group was balanced by my greater sense of connection to the students, which is helpful to me given that I always work off-site and have very little informal contact with the students.

The technical skill required of the practice teacher is a little more than that required of the students and the setting up and running of such a group would be manageable to those who already use the internet for email and other online communications. The rewards easily compensated for any additional effort required.

## Notes

- 1 This paper will use the term ‘practice teacher’ to mean those who formally assess students’ practice.
- 2 While the ‘correct’ plural of forum is ‘fora’, ‘forums’ is generally used in this context.
- 3 A ‘widget’ is an online ‘gadget’ – an object on the screen that allows further interaction.
- 4 A ‘smiley’ or emoticon is a symbol or combination of symbols used to convey emotional content in online messages. They give context to the words and act like non-verbal or body language does in a face-to-face situation. The word ‘emoticon’ is a combination of ‘emotion’ and ‘icon’ - ‘smiley’ is used because these emoticons often include symbols which represent smiles.



- 5 A 'post' or 'a posting' is a message posted to an online forum or blog. This social networking site is a 'forum', a space for discussion and sharing.
- 6 It is widely accepted that group supervision in social work is most effective when the students are all at the same stage of learning (Lindsay 2003) and this factor helped the peer support process in this online group.

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