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## **EXTENDING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ONLINE PEER-TO-PEER COUNSELLING IN PROFESSIONAL DEGREE PROGRAMS OF SOCIAL WORK**

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### **Introduction**

There has been a lot of discussion about the role of digital media in higher education. Principal advantages of incorporating educational technologies into higher education teaching are generally conceived to manifest themselves at three different levels (HEFCE, 2009): (a) *efficiency* can increase as regards cost-effectivity, time-effectivity, sustainability or scalability, (b) *enhancement* of both the learning and teaching experience can occur by multimedia, more international and authentic learning resources, (c) *transformation* may be achieved with substantial qualitative change in learning and teaching processes or radically new processes.

This paper will deal with a transformative change in *learning environments* in higher education by digital media: The method and the accompanying platform that will be investigated are not substitutes of traditional learning environments but actually merge different learning environments into one – the classic higher education learning environment and the more professionally oriented learning environment with actual real life professional challenges. Key to such merging learning environments is the method of *online peer-to-peer counselling* and a special web-based platform *kokom.net* (<https://www.kokom.net>) to support such innovative and collaborative learning experiences. The method *online peer-to-peer counselling* and the accompanying platform *kokom.net* is used within a Bachelor degree program in Social Work that targets professionals in the social work sector who lack an academic degree and are looking for an opportunity to study alongside their jobs. The purpose of using online peer-to-peer counselling is twofold: Firstly, in our digitized society online counselling constitutes an important field of social work practice and students need an opportunity to experience an online counselling setting themselves to actually grasp the potentials as well as the drawbacks of such a setting. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, by practicing online peer-to-peer counselling with the support of the specialized platform *kokom.net*, students acquire a method that is well established in social work practice and they get to know a platform beyond the confines of higher education as *kokom.net* is a well-established platform in the social work sector.

This paper describes and analyses the use of the *online peer-to-peer counselling* method and platform within the study program as part of a comprehensive case study. With this case study I aim to unpack the special effects that such an extension of learning environments has in

detail. I will focus here on three different areas: (a) the perspective of learners, (b) the perspective of teachers, and (c) knowledge transfer from the university to the social work sector. Methodologically, the case study will draw on evaluation data from surveys, document analysis of student generated reflective e-portfolios and notes from teacher discussions by means of participatory observation.

## **Online Peer-to-Peer Counselling as Part of Online Counselling**

### ***Online Counselling – a Social Work Practice of Growing Importance***

Digital media are nowadays deeply embedded in the professional and private lives of a great part of the population in Germany. Thus digital media are also part of the lived-in world of many users of social support services and therefore it does not come as a surprise that many established providers of counselling added online facilities for counselling to their regular face-to-face services (Hintenberger & Kühne, 2009). In this paper I use the term *counselling* as opposed to *psychotherapy* as the provision of consultation or advice for challenging (professional) life situations. With this distinction, the paper adopts the German (and Dutch) usage of the term as opposed to for example the British usage that regards counselling and psychotherapy as synonyms (cf. Weitz, 2015; pp.105-106).

Advantages of online counselling services are generally seen in (a) their flexibility regarding time and location, (b) a low threshold of accessing them as well as (c) the possibility to obtain counselling anonymously (Barak & Grohol, 2011; Brunner, 2009; Thiery, 2011). Occasionally, the primarily written character of online counselling is regarded as an extra intrinsic value (Vogt, 2007). Dodier and Knatz (2003) argue that the process of writing as such is beneficial for the soul. However, this is a highly disputed issue. Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general produced a more differentiated view on advantages and disadvantages of the dominant written character in CMC (Döring, 2003; Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). According to CMC research the written character of CMC is a special one. It can be regarded as a new genre of literality that incorporates features of oral communication and is thus often referred to as *oral literality*.

Early research on CMC emphasized the reduction of communication channels in CMC. The lack of nonverbal clues such as facial expression or intonation and social clues as to age or physical appearance of the communication partner seemed to make CMC inferior in comparison to face-to-face communication. On the other hand, it was observed that a unique written notation developed to make up for this potential deficit such as emoticons and acronyms and that CMC, at least in longer lasting communication set-ups, could compensate for the deficits mentioned (Walther, 1992). In addition, channel reduction can foster concentration on content and the lack of social clues can make the communication more egalitarian as well as help to overcome social inhibitions. Empirical research regarding these effects of CMC produced contradictory results. It became evident that the actual context of CMC seems to be as important as the mediated communication situation as such.

## **Extending Learning Environments in Higher Education: Online Peer-to-Peer Counselling in Professional Degree Programs of Social Work**

Patricia Arnold

The reduction of social inhibitions, on the other hand, could be an asset in counselling situations as clients might open up more easily to a conversation regarding potentially shameful issues. Another result of research on CMC for online counselling showed that the tendency of projection and imagination in counselling situations is reinforced in online settings (Brunner, 2009) and should thus be reflected upon carefully. On the other hand, the written character can make the counselling process more sustainable as all people involved can read and reflect the automatically documented process. At the same time, being able to stay anonymous in a counselling situation can be an important advantage for people looking for advice. Also, clients using CMC in many aspects of their professional or private lives often just do not want to change their way of communicating when in need of a consultation (Hintenberger & Kühne, 2009). Evaluation studies on online counselling generally showed good results of effectivity and confirmed that the settings reached clients that would not have otherwise used a counselling service (Kordy et al., 2006).

Barak and Grohol (2011) developed a typology for internet-based interventions in the field of mental health that can be transferred to online counselling settings as well. They differentiate the following types:

1. Informative websites;
2. Interactive self-help tutorials;
3. Web-based professional online counselling;
4. Online self-help groups and peer-to-peer counselling;
5. Other informal forms of obtaining help and advice.

In the case investigated in this paper online peer-to-peer counselling (type four) is the key method employed to extend learning environments in higher education, therefore it is described in more detail in the section below.

### **Online Peer-to-Peer Counselling**

*Peer-to-peer counselling*, also known as *peer group supervision* (Tietze, 2008) is an established counselling method that works without an external counsellor, leader, supervisor or expert (Linderkamp, 2011). Groups of 5-7 colleagues or peers get together to discuss and resolve professional personal issues and challenges, in a clearly structured, neatly scripted procedure, in addition to or as a substitute for clinical supervision. The method is also used outside the social work area, for example among teachers (Jordaan et al., 2016) or top management executives (Gloger, 2013).

Different models exist for the structuring of the counselling process itself. The *Lüneburg model* comprises nine actual steps, the tenth is about archiving the process itself (Jordaan et al., 2016). The *Heilsbronn model* uses the following ten steps for the actual counselling process:

Table 1: Ten-step Heilsbronn Model of Peer-to-Peer counselling (Spangler, 2012)

Step No.	Who?	What
1	all	Assign group roles (case presenter, facilitator, consultant)
2	case presenter	Presents case
3	consultants	Ask questions for better understanding the case
4	consultants	Brainstorming associations, sensations and fantasies
5	case presenter	Feedback to the collection brainstormed
6	consultants	Collect ideas for solutions
7	case presenter	Feedback to ideas for solutions
8	all	Discussion of solutions and possible implementation
9	consultants, facilitator	Bring in own experience in similar cases
10	all	Debriefing: reflect what was helpful, what could be improved

This procedure, initially developed for face-to-face meetings, has been transferred to the virtual realm and an online platform *kokom.net* (<https://www.kokom.net/>) has been developed that guides people through the ten steps of the counselling process (Spangler, 2012). For the Lüneburg model a platform is still under development that is targeted at teachers only (Jordaan et al., 2016). Thus it will not be considered in this article any further. It uses a room metaphor for the virtual counselling spaces and it provides a *virtual conference and counselling house* where different organizations can use different *floors* that provide private counselling spaces with corporate identity of the organization. The most important feature of the platform is that it provides absolute privacy and secure communication, abides by German data law protection and thus reaches a completely different level of data protection than other social media communication services in the internet. *Kokom.net* works with a freemium model as far as costs are concerned. The basic usage is free for anybody interested in it for non-commercial purposes. Premium services such as the corporate identity for separate *floors* in this virtual collaboration *house* are available for a monthly or annual fee. The platform is used by professionals in the social field where funds for external supervision are often not available or cannot be organized quickly enough. The online platform, however, can be used instantly and flexibly as communication here is asynchronous and supports geographically dispersed teams.

## **Online Peer-to-Peer Counselling in a BA Social Work Degree Program**

### **Context**

The study program *basa-online* is a degree program offered by Munich University of Applied Sciences, Germany. Professionals in the social work realm who have relevant work experience in the social work sector (at least 3 years) but lack a formal degree may enrol in the program, study alongside their jobs, in a combination of online modules at the learning management system OLAT (75% of the study time) and face-to-face instruction (25% of the study time) and obtain a bachelor degree in social work. As an overall design feature, the work experience of the students is used as a starting point to explore social work theories. Generally, the

program design aims at interweaving professional experience and academic knowledge closely.

### ***Extending Learning Environments in Module “Scientific Theory-Practice Transfer”***

The online module *Scientific Theory-Practice Transfer* takes four semesters and is especially designed to give students ample opportunity to reflect on their professional experience under the light of newly acquired theoretical knowledge and to accompany students’ personal learning trajectory. The module starts with a face-to-face seminar that gives students an overview of the module’s aims, general structure, activities and technologies used. The rest of the module is delivered entirely online. Assessment takes place via an e-portfolio that students build up over the four semesters, with the e-portfolio software Mahara. The method of peer-to-peer counselling is integrated into the module to end the classic “compartmentalization” of knowledge that often appears in students’ mindsets: knowledge is considered to either pertain to the higher education (learning) environment or to the workplace (learning) environment. Peer-to-peer counselling using the platform kokom.net seems to have the potential of transgressing traditional organizational borders: Within the higher education framework real life cases from the working environment are discussed, supported by a platform that is used in both sectors. Thus the module is structured with peer counselling processes at its core and the platform *kokom.net* playing a key part in the module’s extended learning environment. Table 2 shows the module’s educational design:

Table 2: Educational Design of Module Scientific Theory and Practice Transfer

Sem. No.	Task	Technology
1	Peer-counselling on real life cases	OLAT & kokom.net
2	Creating guidelines on key theoretical concepts	OLAT
3	Peer-counselling on professional identity	OLAT & kokom.net
4	Creating e-portfolio on learning trajectory	OLAT, kokom.net & Mahara

The two peer-counselling processes consist of (a) discussing a challenging case from students’ professional practice, and (b) a role conflict at the work place, stemming from students’ own higher education learning trajectory. Students should benefit from this design on three different levels: (a) results of the counselling process, (b) coming to know a tool that is used in the professional community and will be available to them beyond the time of the study program, (c) already mixing with the professional community at the time of the study program as students are free to choose group composition beyond the student community.

## **Evaluation and Critical Assessment**

### ***Student Perspective***

Evaluation data showed that students regarded the method of online peer-to-peer counselling mostly as helpful for their work situation, often the peer-to-peer counselling (PTPC) process led to entirely innovative ideas and generally the experience was perceived as more beneficial than was initially expected:

Table 3: Level of Agreement (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *rather not*, 3 = *do not know*, 4 = *rather yes*, 5 = *very much*), cohorts 1-3

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
PTPC was helpful for my work situation						
Cohort 1 n = 15			1	06	8	4.47
Cohort 1 n = 23		2	1	11	9	4.17
Cohort 1 n = 27	2	3	2	14	6	3.7
PTPC provided entirely innovative solutions						
Cohort 1 n = 15				07	8	4.53
Cohort 1 n = 23		3	1	15	4	3.87
Cohort 1 n = 27	2	5	5	13	2	3.30
PTPC was more beneficial than expected						
Cohort 1 n = 15			2	03	10	4.53
Cohort 1 n = 23		1	2	12	08	4.17
Cohort 1 n = 27	1	-	6	09	11	4.07

In open commentaries, many described that their initial attitude ranged from being sceptical to being very doubtful that such a method could be applied online successfully and that case presenters would actually assess the process as useful to solve their real life cases. This was mainly due to the students' assessment of the channel reduction in CMC. Before they had actually experienced the method and the platform, they seemed to not be able to believe that such a *thin communication* could be effective for authentic, serious challenges and problems. However, the case presenters unanimously agreed that the suggestions for solutions elaborated during the peer-to-peer counselling process *did contribute* to their own efforts to solve the problem. In addition, the consultants and the facilitators in the various counselling processes also experienced the overall process as *target-oriented* and *successful*. Students in all roles highlighted the importance of the strict *built-in scripting process* by which the platform *kokom.net* guides participants through the ten steps of the Heilsbronn model of peer-to-peer consulting. Several students stated that they felt their professional experience was valued within the counselling process and yet at the same time they were gaining new insights, thus acknowledgement of their professional experience seemed to be combined with further learning.

## **Extending Learning Environments in Higher Education: Online Peer-to-Peer Counselling in Professional Degree Programs of Social Work**

Patricia Arnold

In general, students appreciated the privacy features of *kokom.net*. In particular the fact that every user can individually decide how much of their identity is shown to others was regarded as important to very important (Scale of importance with 1 = *entirely unimportant*, 2 = *unimportant*, 3 = *do not know*, 4 = *important*, 5 = *very important*: Means: Cohort 1 – 4.67, Cohort 2 – 4.52, Cohort 3 – 4.15). Even higher importance was given on average to the feature that only room members can read the contributions and nobody else (Same scale; Means: Cohort 1 – 4.87, Cohort 2 – 4.61, Cohort 3 – 4.74).

Usability issues arose out of the notification system of *kokom.net*: Many students regarded the e-mail notifications about updates as obtrusive and preferred a system with finer granularity of choice in notification.

### **Teacher Perspective**

Content analysis of teacher communication during the module revealed that the main issue for the teachers was the *shift of control*: The peer counselling processes of the student peer teams take place in private, protected *counselling rooms*. As a consequence, with flourishing counselling processes on the way as well as with processes that do not take off, instructors have no means to judge the situation. The early e-learning motto *from the sage on the stage to the guide at the side* is implemented here at its best. For instructors, initially, this can be a strange experience and feels at times like a *loss* of control rather than a *shift* of control.

In order to get students' feedback whether peer-to-peer counselling processes are taking place and to be available in case questions arise or guidance should be needed, the *plenary conference room* on *kokom.net* gains importance: For improved transparency for all participants, students as well as lecturers, it proved useful to establish a meta discourse in the *plenary conference room*, with some simple rules stated upfront.

### **Knowledge Transfer from University into the Social Work Sector**

An unintentional result was a knowledge transfer from university to the social work sector. In each of the five student cohorts that have finished the full cycle of the module, there were 2-5 students who found the peer-to-peer counselling process so useful that they immediately started to introduce it to their workplace organisations that had not used the method and platform before, most not having even heard about it.

Regarding the three cohorts surveyed, within Cohort 1 (n = 15) that already graduated, 5 students already used *kokom.net* again within 3 months after they left university, 6 did not have the opportunity but stated they intend to do so in the near future. In the other cohorts (Cohort 2, n = 23, Cohort 3, n = 27) 17 respectively 20 were considering using the method and platform after their studies or even definitively plan to do so. Even if these numbers regarding intentional future use have to be interpreted carefully, using the peer-to-peer method on *kokom.net* during the study program seemed to generate a positive knowledge transfer from university into the social work sector which is regarded as an overall gain, even if not intended initially at the start of implementing this educational design.

## Conclusions

In this paper a case was presented in which the classic higher education learning environment merged with the workplace environment by using the method of peer-to-peer counselling and a specialized online platform that supports these new collaborative learning experiences across organizational borders. The method and platform, embedded in a comprehensive educational design, seem to be of great benefit to students and, by means of knowledge transfer from university to the social work sector, also to social organizations. In particular, the highly structured procedure for the peer counselling process was regarded as useful. Usability issues were reported with the e-mail notification system. Further refinement of the educational design should look at the question of how to grant a shift of control to students but still provide transparency for all participants about what is going on.

In sum, the extension of learning environments across organisational borders, from higher education to the social work sector, seems to be a good step to stop the *compartmentalization* of knowledge often encountered in academic programs that aim to prepare for the labour market.

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## **Extending Learning Environments in Higher Education: Online Peer-to-Peer Counselling in Professional Degree Programs of Social Work**

Patricia Arnold

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