Improving the Student Learning and Placement Experience through Virtual Action Learning Sets (vALS)

Pat Colliety and Lee-Ann Sequeira
30th June, 2010

Pat Colliety is the tutor on the module, Conceptual Analysis of Child and Family Health. Lee-Ann Sequeira is the former E-learning Facilitator for the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences.

Introduction

The impetus for the project came from the experiences of a group of Pre-registration Child branch nursing degree students. Within each module, the students spend half their time at University and half their time in practice. When undertaking the third-year module 'Conceptual Analysis of Child and Family Health' (CACFH) in 2009, the students would be in University for four weeks and then out in practice for eight weeks, returning to the University for the final two weeks. The students have to complete an essay, a portfolio of practice learning which comprises a set of competencies they have to achieve and two pieces of written work that involves them using their theoretical learning to reflect on practice.

The structure of the module meant that the students had very little time to discuss the requirements of the portfolio before they went into practice. This would mean that they would be working on their academic and practice assignments with limited access to tutorial support for the bulk of the module. As the students are spread across a wide geographical area, there are also limited opportunities for them to discuss their work with each other. The feedback from the students was that they felt disadvantaged by this situation as a number felt that they had not been able to work on their portfolios until they returned to the University.
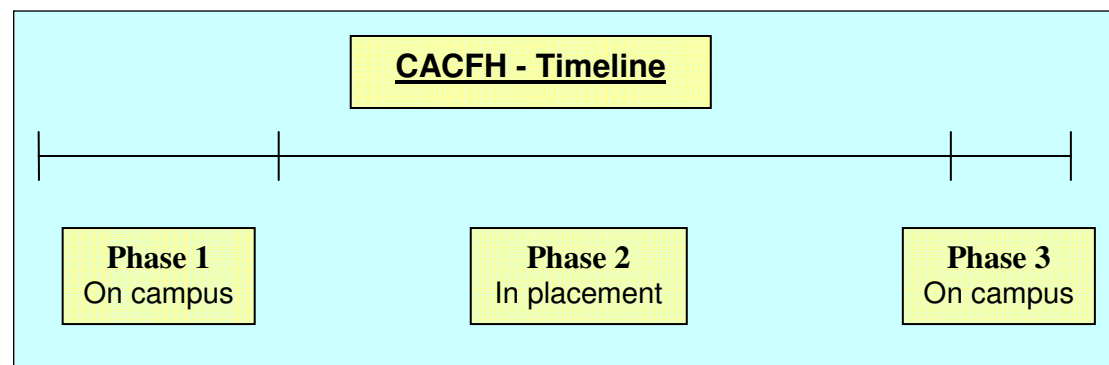

Figure 1: CACFH Timeline

There is also an issue of isolation from peers as the students tend to be in different placements and even when on the same placement, often on different shifts.

The main aim of the project was to improve the placement experience for students by:

- Facilitating the integration of theory and practice and maintain the dynamic of learning whilst the students were in practice, and
- Increasing and improving the level of tutor and peer interaction while on placement

Virtual Action Learning Sets (vALS)

We decided to look at the possibility of using online learning technologies to support the students and to maintain regular and effective communication whilst the students were on placement. We decided to use the concept of Action Learning Sets to reinforce concepts and help the students learn through collaboration and reflection. As we were using online technology to keep in contact and maintain the dynamic and pace of learning, we named this technique vALS – virtual Action Learning Sets.

> "The project itself was an integrated rather than an iterative process, with the students being exposed to several different ways of learning at the same time; all of which led to a holistic experience for the students."
> - Pat

Students were assigned to four vALS: Freud, Piaget, and Erickson. Through their vALS they participated in wikis, online group discussions, and virtual surgeries. Concepts were reinforced in their vALS where students filled the gaps in their knowledge and practice through meaningful interactions with their peers and the tutor. In this way, a range of online learning technologies was used to keep in touch (with peers and the tutor) and support each other and continue their learning while on placement integrating theory in practice.

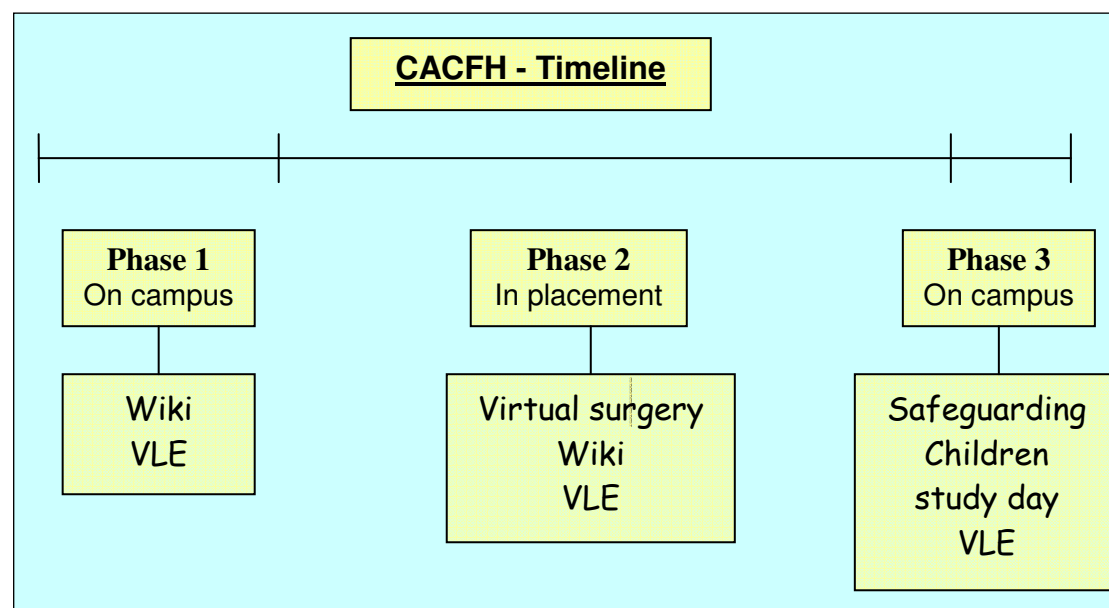## Project Phases

The project had three phases.

Figure 2: Three Phases

Phase One

While the students were in the University, sessions were timetabled in the computer lab where we all practiced using the virtual classroom, developing a wiki and revisiting using ULearn, Surrey's virtual learning environment (VLE). There were five sessions timetabled and all the

> "In fact, we probably didn't need as many introductory lessons as everyone appeared to be comfortable with the technology."
> - A student

> "Took me a while to become competent with the new technology"
> - A student

students participated. The students had specific tasks to complete within ULearn and the wiki which supported their learning and the completion of the module assignment. In this way, they were being familiarised with the pattern of learning that would continue when they were on placement.
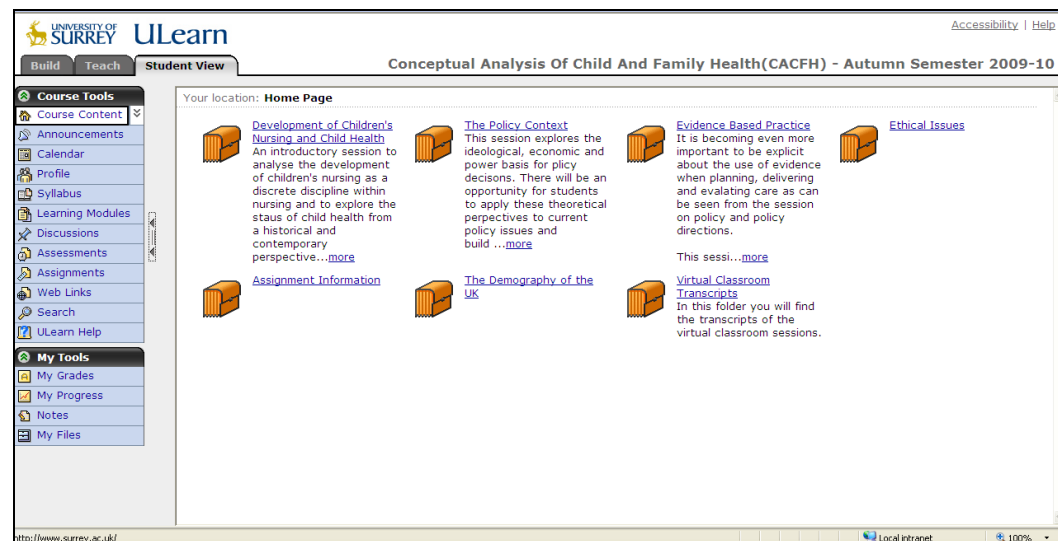

Figure 3: CACFH on ULearn, Surrey's VLE

Phase Two
While the students were on placement, they were asked to contribute to the wiki once a week for six weeks. During this time, each vALS was asked to book an hour-long slot with the tutor for a virtual surgery. This would take the form of a small-group tutorial where the students could interact with each other and broach any issues with the tutor and the others about their project, essay, and placement experience. The learning hours for the online activities were calculated at seven hours, and this time was given back to the students as a day they did not have to attend university.

> "Integrating the wiki, VLE, and virtual surgeries into the structure and time-table enabled the online activities to be perceived as part of the module and not as something additional. In this way, Pat introduced online activities without adding to the students' and her workload."
> - Lee-Ann

The wiki filled an important need in that it helped the students communicate with each other and the tutor asynchronously, which fit in well with their (students') different shift patterns. The students also appeared to enjoy the process of constructing content in the wiki. Pat logged on to the wiki each week and answered any queries and commented on the posts that had been made.
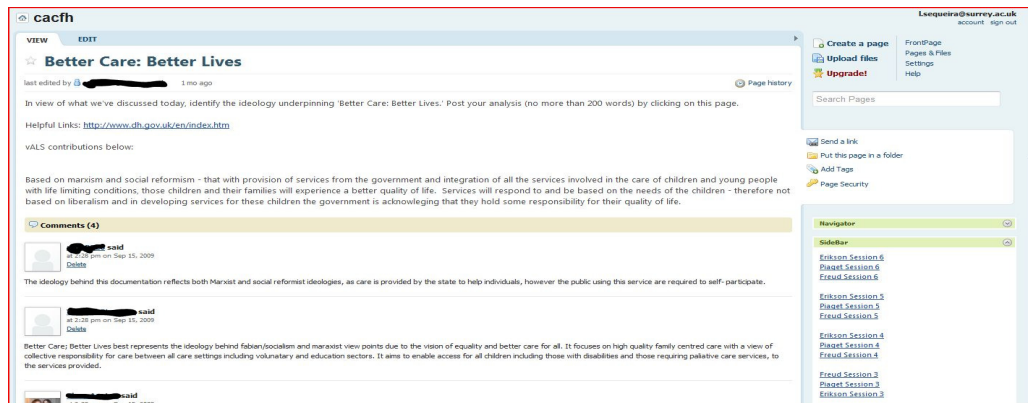
Figure 4: CACFH wiki

The virtual surgeries were held at negotiated times and tended to be in the evenings with the tutor and the students logging on remotely. The tutor held two small group tutorials with each vALS. The virtual surgeries were directed by the students with the tutor responding to their comments and questions. There were some technical teething problems, but these issues were soon resolved. The first session overran by 30 minutes as the students wanted to continue with the discussion. The second group also overran and the third group requested a further session.
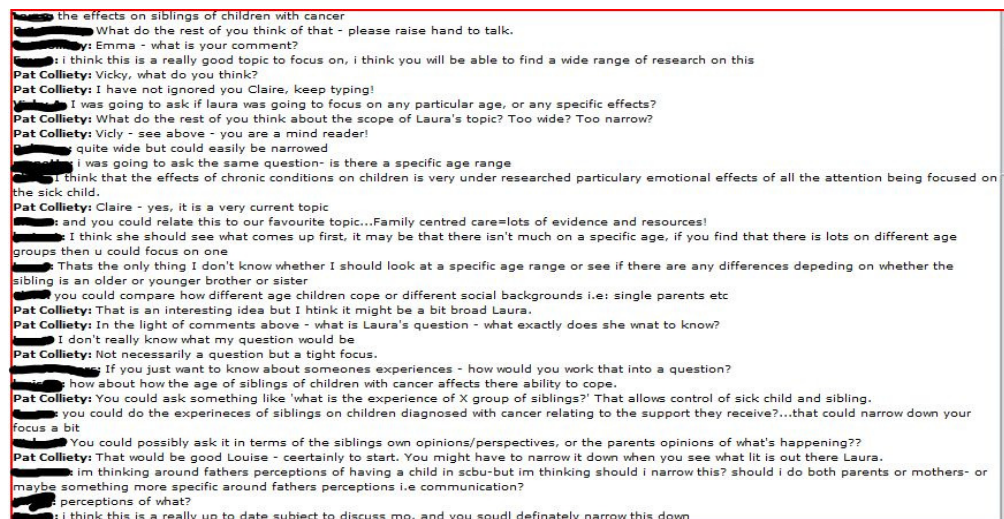

Figure 5: A Virtual Surgery

ULearn was used as an information repository for lectures notes and chat transcripts primarily. A transcript of all the virtual surgery discussions was posted on U Learn and the students commented that this to was very valuable.

Phase Three
In the final two weeks of the module, when the students had returned to university, a study day focusing on Safeguarding Children was organised. This was intended to be a collaborative learning experience that would be a culmination of the module. The students worked in their vALS. Two groups were assigned a child death enquiry case study each and the third vALS was assigned the analysis of the media coverage of those cases. Each group was asked to present its findings as a timeline with a critique of the actions of the professionals involved.

"Collaborative study day on safeguarding – interesting, good way to learn …"
- A student

"Collaborative seminar - would be good to do this … for other subjects/modules"
- A student

The students were able to draw the two time-lines in parallel with each other, identify the critical decision points and identify what could have been done differently. A number of students commented that they knew some of the issues, but seeing how the events leading to the two child deaths evolved, made the situation much clearer.

There was palpable energy and synergy in this approach to learning and this was commented on by the students and visitors to the session. Students enjoyed a new way of working together and the opportunities to view things in a different way. In all, it was a powerful learning experience.

At the end of this event, the students completed an online questionnaire about their learning experience in the module as a whole (in addition to the Module Evaluation Questionnaire that is administered by the University of Surrey).

Pic: Sceptre: writing on the walls

Discussion
The project allowed both the tutor and the students to explore different ways of learning using different media and resources. The original aim, to maintain contact between the students themselves and the students and tutor was met. The feedback from the students in the Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) administered by the University and the evaluation administered by the project fellows both show that the new learning activities that were introduced improved the student learning experience in placement and on campus. Students valued the peer and tutor support that the project facilitated in the academic and social contexts. While all the measures introduced were received favourably, the students were unanimous about the efficacy of the virtual surgeries, group work and the Safeguarding Children study day.
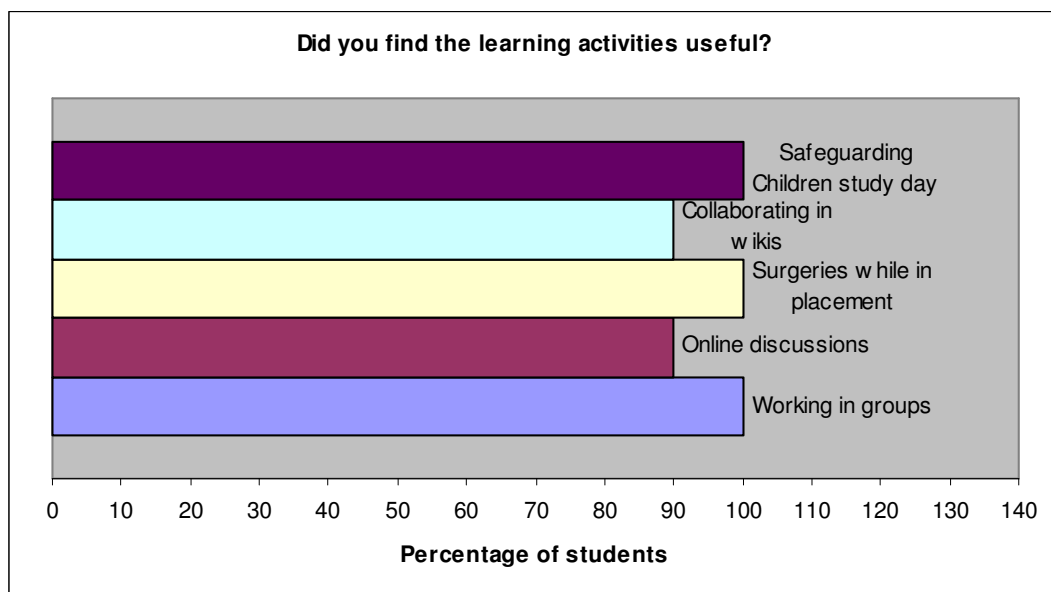

Figure 6: Useful Learning Activities

Responsive Planning

There was a lot of planning and scheduling done in advance – what would be covered in the wikis, virtual surgeries, ULearn discussions; how to structure them, how long they would take, etc. While the importance of planning cannot be emphasised enough, it is also important to be flexible and responsive to the students' changing needs: how do the aims and objectives of the learning activities mesh with the potential benefits to the students? Originally the Safeguarding Children study day was conceived as an on-line conference with some students contributing remotely, as we thought it would save them commuting time. However, as the module progressed, it became clear that the students wanted more face time with each other and the tutor. So a face-to-face collaborative seminar was designed where the students worked in vALS, an expert on child safety was invited to speak, and the students wrote on the walls! For the students it was a learning experience that pushed the limits – it was innovative, creative, insightful, and empowering.

> "Having a whole day for one aspect was beneficial, did not seemed rushed"
>
> "Writing on the walls!!!!"
>
> "Day in Sceptre – enjoyable, different learning"
>
> "… more days like this would be good."
>
> *(Comments from students)*

> "Having to log an hour a week for each session made you feel slightly pressured with everything else we had to do whilst on placement however i think the positives out wighed (sic) the negatives …"
> - A student

Time

A common pitfall is that e-learning can increase the workload of the students and the tutor, if it's designed as an extra or additional activity. The tutor was particularly mindful not to increase the student's workload especially while they were in placement. So in lieu of the seven hours of online contact, the students were given back one day of university attendance. This time commitment was explained to them well in advance and they all signed up to it. All the students fulfilled the time requirements and all participated in all elements of the project.

By participating regularly and positively in the online activities, the tutor modelled the appropriate behaviour which set a good example for the students. However, scheduling virtual surgery hours with the vALS was particularly challenging given the students' different shift timings. The tutor was extremely flexible and held virtual surgeries in the evenings to accommodate the students.
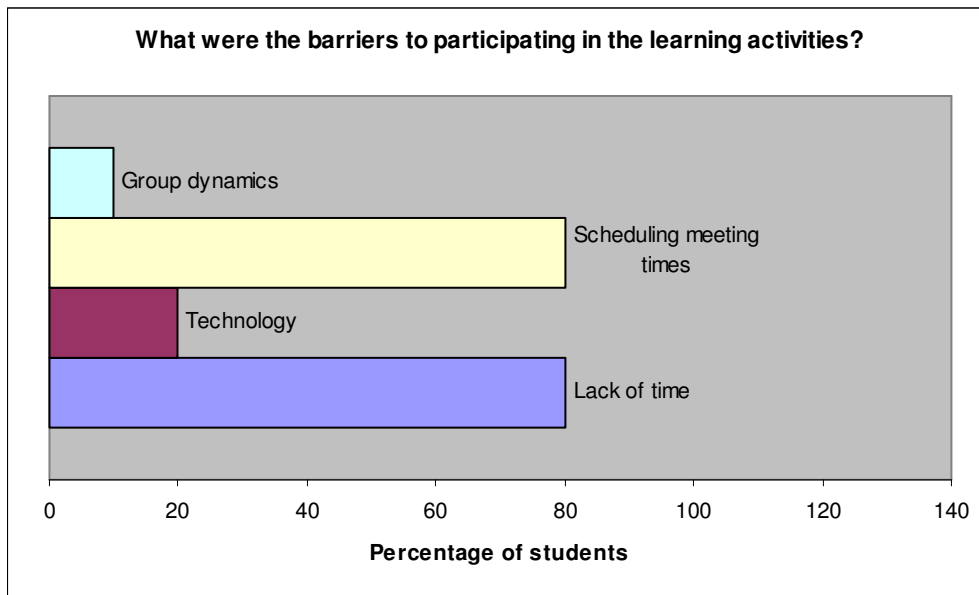
What were the barriers to participating in the learning activities?

Group dynamics

Scheduling meeting times

Technology

Lack of time

0   20   40   60   80   100   120   140

Percentage of students

Figure 7: Barriers to Participation in Online Learning Activities

Technology

The module, as is evident from Figure X, used a fair bit of online technology – the VLE, wikis, and the virtual classroom. However, the technology was used judiciously and always subject to the pedagogical and end-user needs. For example, the virtual classroom software had the video and audio functionality, which would have made the virtual surgeries a richer experience, but we decided against using it as all the students did not have headphones and a webcam. Several opportunities were provided to the students to familiarise themselves with the technology in face-to-face settings before using it in placement.

"The students took the lead in determining how the technology was used. They showed a preference for carrying on discussions in the wiki instead of the VLE. Monitoring and tracking their participation (which we could do in the VLE) seemed less important than letting the group dynamic evolve (which is what was happening in the wiki discussion)."
- Lee-Ann

Resources

The tutor's commitment to her students and the project was quite remarkable. She drew up a completely new lesson plan and spent considerable time learning the new technologies – the wiki and the virtual classroom. When it came to scheduling the virtual surgeries, she was flexible and even offered evening slots to her students. The project also relied heavily on the Faculty e-learning facilitator to guide and advise on the use the online technologies.

There was strong support from SCEPTrE in terms of encouragement, facilities and technical expertise. The room in SCEPTrE with the writable walls certainly encouraged creativity, innovation, and enthusiasm among the students. SCEPTrE's media team was also helpful in capturing footage of the Safeguarding Children study day. The fellowship itself, and the encouragement and recognition received from SCEPTrE kept motivation levels high, and thus the project on track.

Student Participation

The impact on the student group can be seen from the questionnaire responses (bar charts and the quotes) and their interviews <mark>(link)</mark>. They valued the support (academic and social) and new learning opportunities and also valued feeling special and being part of such an innovative project.

Did you find being supported in placement useful?

In the academic context

In the social context

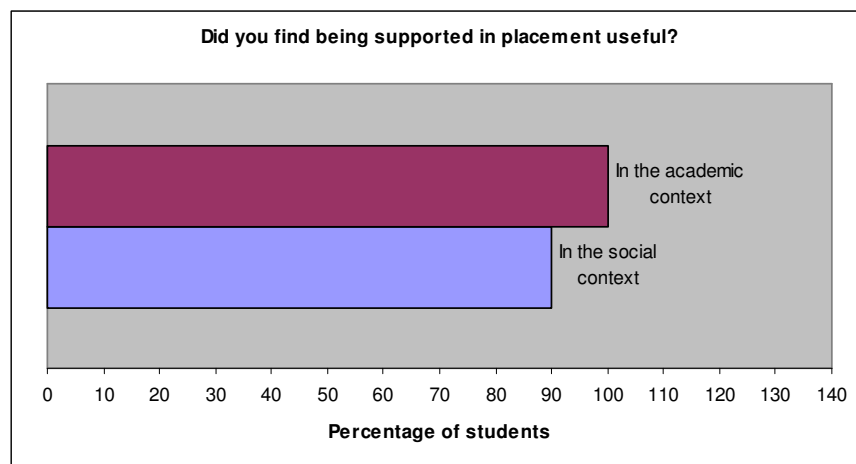| 0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 | 80 | 90 | 100 | 110 | 120 | 130 | 140 |

Percentage of students

Figure 8: Support in Placement

A key factor that determined the level of student participation and contributed to the overall support received by students was the group work. Underpinning this approach was the vALS philosophy, where students learn from and with each other and reflect on their work. The students worked in their small groups in every activity from constructing content in the wiki, to bouncing ideas off each other in the virtual surgeries, and then analysing a case study in the study day. At the same time working in groups also posed challenges such as scheduling surgeries and dealing with the lag between posting and receiving feedback.

"Not familiar with the people you are necessarily working with so you might not feel comfortable debating work with them."

"(The wiki) helped you feel supported whilst out on placement however it was difficult when not everyone posted comments and replies."

"It gave me the opportunity to discuss with others and know that the decisions I had made of academic work were correct."

(Comments from students)

Signs of Success
In addition to the overwhelmingly positive feedback received from the students, there were other indications that showed we had succeeded in improving the placement experience for nursing students in CACFH:

- Full attendance in all phases
  All 10 students attended every online session as well as the Safeguarding Children study day. This is despite the fact that when in placement they work 37 hours a week for eight weeks. A cynical reading would imply that (academic) support for their project/essay was so crucial that they chose peer and tutor support over doing it on their own. In the authors' opinion, the fact that the students chose to attend and participate in every online activity has to do with learning in a different medium. Discussing project/essay ideas or placement issues in a wiki

"Using the virtual classroom – made it more fun and enabled us to bounce ideas off each other and the tutor."
- A student

or a virtual meeting is akin to how a number of students unwind after a long day – instant messaging friends or logging into Facebook. In this way, the online or virtual environment could be seen as a facilitator of the learning process where students could communicate about their projects and placements in a social, informal way.

- Repeated requests for longer and more virtual surgeries

All the virtual surgeries over-ran their allotted time of an hour. In addition, there were requests for additional virtual surgeries (which were scheduled). The students found it very useful to be able to keep in touch with each other over a long placement period (eight weeks) and discuss issues relating to their academic work.

> "… this was a very useful method of discussing theory whilst in placement, it really added to the support we received in placement so would be useful if it continued."
> - A student

- The number of e-mails to the tutor decreased

The tutor's perception is that the students e-mailed her less frequently than the students last year, possibly because they were receiving support and the answers to their queries through the online activities.

Dissemination

We are currently discussing how we can disseminate this learning in other learning situations, especially given that nursing students across all modules spend at least half their time in placement. We plan to present at conferences and publish as well as ensuring that our experiences can be shared with colleagues within the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, for example at the forthcoming Faculty Day and the wider University community.

Analysis.

The chart below gives an analysis of the elements of the project.

Element	Benefits	Challenges	Recommendations for Practice
vALS (group work)	Peer support and increased interaction Students learn to solicit, provide, and receive feedback constructively	New approach to learning, where tutor takes a step back to play the role of a facilitator and guide Some members in the vALS will not pull their weight	Adopt a more flexible approach to teaching The tutor should model appropriate behaviour and be on hand to provide support where peers cannot.
Wiki	Asynchronous – therefore gives students more flexibility over their schedules and participation Structured topics for discussion and activities Encouraged group and teamwork	Finding time to contribute each week and remembering to contribute each week (for students and tutor) Tutor needs to contribute on a regular basis in order to maintain the dynamic The focus of the discussion was on the essay the students had to write. However, they had to complete a portfolio first and were more focused on the work required for that	Schedule it like an appointment in your diary Ensure that the focus of the sessions meets the students' learning needs
ULearn, the University	Information repository for lecture notes, handbooks, virtual surgery	Even though it was used infrequently, it still needed to be updated regularly	Ensure that the students know that it is there as a repository. Remind them

VLE	transcripts, etc.	The discussion forum was not used much	of this periodically If it does not have a significant impact, let the students choose how and where they would like to learn – in a wiki, in ULearn …
Virtual surgery	Synchronous	Students appreciated this, but finding a mutually convenient time was difficult. For a group of 12 students this was feasible, but would be more difficult to organise for a larger group	Staff and students need to be flexible when scheduling these sessions
	Discussing issues relating to the project/essay and the placement Peer learning, support and interaction The tutor's presence and guidance helped	It can be difficult to offer /get constructive feedback from your peers at times	Model desirable behaviour, offer guidance, and even feedback rubrics to students
	Encouraged group work and teamwork The session was recorded and the transcript of the discussion was posted on ULearn	The discussions could get complicated – not knowing who is replying to whom	Establish basic protocols such as prefacing every comment with the name of the person to whom it's addressed Record virtual classroom sessions and make recordings/transcripts available to students for future reference
Safeguarding Children study day	Writing on the walls puts the students in charge of creating knowledge and presenting it – empowering and innovative	Some staff may be hesitant about altering the power equation in the classroom Bigger groups would need more staff	A session in the SCEPTrE learning spaces needs to be planned – pedagogy, structure, and logistics

		support	Book the room early!
	The physical learning environment allowed the students to view the same issues in a new way Structured as a hands-on seminar, where the students were assigned a task with very few instructions Participation of an external expert Encouraged group work and teamwork Positive learning dynamic The event was perceived as an innovative, creative, empowering learning experience which made the students feel they and their contributions were valued and respected	Using the SCEPTrE space may call for a complete revision of the existing lesson plan Aligning the pedagogical aims with the learning activities	
Technology	Allowed the students and tutor to communicate with each other remotely	It was not always easy for the tutor to access the IT equipment necessary for the project. Not letting the technology lead you Steep learning curve for tutor, possibly less so for students as they are familiar with systems such as MSN	Ensure that the IT equipment is fit for purpose. Ensure that all students have equal access to the ICT equipment

| Module structure – online activities were timetabled into the module | Online activities are seen as an integral part of the module

Does not add to the students' and tutor's workloads | Scheduling synchronous online activities for remote users | Ensure that staff incorporate online activities into the module structure and time-table
Explain the proposed structure to students and manage expectations to get them to sign up to it.

Staff need to be credited with the time they spend online |