### Advantages and Limitations of E-Learning in Master’s Level Healthcare Education: A Reflective Discussion Paper

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**Abstract**

The current paper is a reflective discussion report that describes the advantages and limitations of online teaching and learning at master’s level healthcare education from the teachers’ point of view. The aim is to open dialogue between nursing educators and healthcare providers on how exclusively online education can ensure the development of healthcare professionals who master the requirements of today’s working life and contribute to innovations in healthcare.

This paper addresses specifically how to strengthen master students’ interprofessional communication skills and improve their multicultural competence by developing a well-designed assignment in e-Learning environment. Perceptions and views are based on seven years of experience on online education in cooperation with two educators from different countries.

**Keywords**: e-Learning; Online learning; Online teaching; Master’s level education; Master’s degree; Healthcare professional; Interprofessional skills; Multicultural competence

**Introduction**

Higher education institutions should ensure the development of professionals who master the requirements of today’s working world, contribute innovations and remain in the labour market, especially in the healthcare sector, which is suffering from a shortage of skilled workers [1]. In addition, healthcare systems urgently need new innovations to increase productivity and improve competitiveness in a global economy. Master’s students of healthcare are at the forefront of the rapidly changing healthcare system, filling numerous roles in organizations where they are expected to provide high-quality and cost-effective care. They are entering an ever more complex world of practice. After graduation, they contribute to quality improvement in the care for their patients and patients’ family members. They have to translate state of the art knowledge and research evidence into practice. In order to become leaders in the field and the spearheads of development masters’ students themselves have to become more proactive [2-6]. Despite these demands, traditional pedagogy has created methods in which healthcare professionals in various master’s programs operate in isolation from each other [7]. Although online education in healthcare context has been studied a lot [8,9], transition from face-to-face teaching to e-Learning needs a paradigm shift. Particularly the educators of adult students will need to adjust their way of thinking to reap the benefits of modern e-Learning methods. Hence, the future of e-Learning depends on how exclusively online education with the designed assignments can ensure the development of professionals who master the requirements of today’s working life and contribute to innovations in healthcare. This paper is part of a curriculum evaluation process where we specifically focus on the advantages and limitations of e-Learning at the master’s level with an interprofessional and international group of adult learners. The views presented here are based on seven years’ experience in cooperation with two teachers from different countries.

**Interprofessional Communication Skills**

The focus in healthcare has shifted towards a more patient-centeredness approach, using interprofessional collaboration to achieve optimal patient outcomes [7]. Therefore, professionals in different settings of healthcare are increasingly working together in multidisciplinary community-teams. Despite this, different professions have different professional standards, and there is often conflict about what constitutes good care [12]. As Engel and Prentice [13] note, even when every member of a multidisciplinary team might agree with the central notion of patient centeredness, which calls back to an ethical narrative that is created by both the professional and the patient, competition arises because each individual on the interprofessional team brings different viewpoints that influence the co-creation of this narrative. According to Banks [14] interprofessional cooperation calls for an approach that takes into account the complexity, contradictions, multiple accountabilities and particularities of specific situations. Particularly master’s students, who are being educated to become developers of innovations and leaders in their professions, must learn to see many different professional perspectives and to understand why there are different views on what might be good for a patient. A master’s level education requires that students learn to recognize and respect different perspectives of their fellow-colleagues for better understanding of the practice in which they operate.

The rationale for interprofessional education is simple: learning together enhances future working together [15]. It occurs when students of different healthcare professions engage in learning with, from and about each other to improve collaboration and the delivery of care. Working together does not always require face-to-face settings, and...
Instructions and guidelines for discussion assignment.

1: To start the discussion, describe an ethical dilemma based on your own professional experiences. You can choose the one that you have already written in your presentation (assignment 1) or describe another dilemma. The dilemma could be small or big, and it is often a practical one by its nature.

2: After every group member has described her/his dilemma, the whole group decides which dilemma to choose for further discussion. Make the decision quickly so you have time to reflect and discuss the chosen dilemma in the following weeks. Start to discuss, and exchange your views on the chosen dilemma.

3: Take enough time to be able to respond to each other and to think about what you hear and see from your colleagues. During the last week, each group-member must describe the most important new perspective she/he got from the discussion. Write it down on the platform to share it within the group.

Give only necessary information about the case, do not reveal any personal information about the persons involved or any details of the workplace.

Please remember to read the discussion guidelines before and during the ongoing discussion.

Read through the eight questions which are obligatory to reflect while you are discussing the dilemma within your group. You should also refer to relevant literature when posting your comments. You can also refer links from documentaries, films and other media.

Table 1: Instructions and guidelines for discussion assignment.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruction for Discussion on Ethical Dilemmas</th>
<th>Guidelines for Conducting Group Discussion Online</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1</strong>: To start the discussion, describe an ethical dilemma based on your own professional experiences. You can choose the one that you have already written in your presentation (assignment 1) or describe another dilemma. The dilemma could be small or big, and it is often a practical one by its nature.</td>
<td>Give only necessary information about the case, do not reveal any personal information about the persons involved or any details of the workplace.</td>
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<td><strong>Step 2</strong>: After every group member has described her/his dilemma, the whole group decides which dilemma to choose for further discussion. Make the decision quickly so you have time to reflect and discuss the chosen dilemma in the following weeks. Start to discuss, and exchange your views on the chosen dilemma.</td>
<td>Please remember to read the discussion guidelines before and during the ongoing discussion.</td>
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<td><strong>Step 3</strong>: Take enough time to be able to respond to each other and to think about what you hear and see from your colleagues. During the last week, each group-member must describe the most important new perspective she/he got from the discussion. Write it down on the platform to share it within the group.</td>
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Table 2: Questions to support reflective discussion and examples of students' comments in the end of discussion.

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<tr>
<th>Questions to Support Discussion</th>
<th>Comments on New Perspectives Expressed by the Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Why is this a moral dilemma? What is the conflict?</td>
<td>“This assignment mademe even more convinced that we always should see things in different perspectives before we form our opinions.”</td>
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<td>2. Whose interests are at stake in the dilemma-situation?</td>
<td>“This conversation was an important lesson for me to understand of how complex and multi-level ethics dilemma can be!”</td>
</tr>
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<td>3. Which values and ethical principles are important concerning the dilemma under discussion? Why?</td>
<td>“Ethical discussion is an important part of our work and I noticed that it has been too long since I have really thought these ethical issues with profound insight.”</td>
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<td>4. Did everyone involved see the situation or case as an ethical or moral dilemma, or did they think that it is, for example, solely a clinical problem? What is your opinion? Is it an ethical dilemma or something else?</td>
<td>“My new perspective is not just separate information about ethics but it is the way of thinking nursing from ethical point of view, and how to improve myself to guide and care patients in their decision-making process.”</td>
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<td>5. Were there professionals who have placed themselves in a position of authority and whose moral beliefs are black and white, more or less? Did they use this position to enforce their moral standards on other healthcare professionals? Who opened the discussion about the case? How did the other people respond?</td>
<td>“This debate has shown how challenging situations nurses encounter at work.”</td>
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<td>6. Were there any healthcare professionals involved in the case who did not question the behaviour or the methods used by other members? These persons are called group players, and for them, the sense of belonging in the group is far more important than anything else. Are you a group player?</td>
<td>“By discussing a case I learned the value of seeing the case as an ethical dilemma.”</td>
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<td>7. Some professionals are convinced that they are right, and they do not consider feelings of their patients, patients’ relatives or their colleagues. Do you agree? Does this apply to your dilemma?</td>
<td>“I found myself giving more and more attention to my own ethical actions when I meet my patients. I have also taken different ethical points of view into account in conversations with my workmates. This has certainly been an interesting discussion.”</td>
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<td>8. It is obvious that healthcare professionals sometimes disagree on their values and beliefs towards patients, patients’ relatives, students, and other healthcare professionals or situations. The reasoning can vary from one situation to another. Is this the reason why the dilemma occurred in the first place? Were there different opinions among colleagues?</td>
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In addition to power relation language, communication is also: understanding emotions and intentions behind the information.

The e-Learning method discussed here also offers a possibility to apply to continuing education for teachers as we have realized in the present case. Therefore, our interprofessional communication skills may have developed over the course of recent years of cooperation with each other and with the students.

### Multicultural Competence

Knowledge in professional fields such as nursing and physiotherapy is not restricted to a specific country: exchange of ideas, theories and methods cross borders. Thus, international and multicultural competence has become an important issue in the competence-based curriculum of master’s level healthcare education during recent years [18]. However, adult students who study while working have few opportunities to enhance their international competence in an authentic environment during their master’s studies [19]. Online courses offer an opportunity to communicate with people from abroad, which in turn can cause stress to adult students. In this present online course, students participated from two different countries so they had to communicate in English which is not their mother tongue. Based on our experiences, master students’ level of English vocabulary and ability to express themselves were not always at a sufficient level. The language barrier obviously was a limitation to effective communication with other health providers about complex topics. However, master’s level students are trained to read and write in English. We have observed that some students take part voluntarily in an English course before the start of the Professional Ethics course, trying to improve their English skills in order to interact effectively with other students during the e-Learning course. The English courses are being provided by a number of adult education centers and open universities in both countries, Finland and the Netherlands. The above-mentioned organizations are usually subsidized by the government so the course fees are considerably low. Another option to practice English would be to include the English course as an optional study for the master degree program with no extra cost to the students. Some students use this option to prepare themselves for the online courses conducted in English.

The e-Learning method discussed here also offers a possibility to increase master students’ abilities to work with people from different 

Digital tools can also keep master students up with technology in the function as a social campus surrounding the online course [24]. These allow students to do collaborative learning assignments and share study materials. Programmes (e.g., Padlet, Wordcloud) during the course to make their online learning environment was too limited. They introduced new call programs and they have limited ability to find relevant, evidence-based guidelines. Nevertheless, exclusively online courses might be suitable online environment which includes finding the assignments and online discussion forum to share them with their participant-colleagues. This request was based on students’ feedback on study materials.

Online international courses may help professionals deliver quality care to foreign patients. In the near future, more internationally skilled workforce in healthcare is needed because, based on directives on Cross-Border Health Care [21], patients are entitled to receive treatment in another EU member state on the same basis that they would receive comparable treatment in their own country. This directive probably will increase the mobility of patients within European countries. Foreign professionals of healthcare working together, even just in an online course, may reduce prejudice and can promote a genuine appreciation of diversity. This is one of the reasons why multicultural competence in master’s level education has been a key feature both in The Netherlands and in Finland.

Some Limitations

One limitation of the online course is that students and teachers do not meet each other face-to-face. Therefore, some pedagogical methods (e.g., interactive teaching and working with teachers as role-models) cannot be used and on the spot responses (e.g., when students have specific questions or when a problem arises within one of the groups) are impossible. This could be resolved by adding elements of blended learning and by organizing regular meetings with the local student-groups at their own universities.

Another limitation is that not all students are equally skilled in using e-technology. Highly educated professionals should be knowledgeable users of health information technology (e.g., patient portals, mobile applications) to ensure high-quality, efficient care. However, many healthcare providers remain uncertain about what health information technology means for their patients and their practice [22]. Hancock [23] states that an online discussion platform is not so simple for adult students who are new to learning online. We agree with Hancock; students must learn to navigate in a new, online environment which includes finding the assignments and course material, and responding to running discussions based on given guidelines. Nevertheless, exclusively online courses might be suitable to improve adult students’ digital skills. We have observed our master students during the courses and discovered that some of them had quite poor digital skills at the start: they have never used any video call programs and they have limited ability to find relevant, evidence-based information online. On the other hand, there were also students who possessed more digital knowledge than the teachers and claimed the online learning environment was too limited. They introduced new programmes (e.g., Padlet, Wordcloud) during the course to make their online studies more effective and fluent.

We, as online teachers, view social networks such as Padlet, Facebook and Cloud storages as part of the digital world adult students live in and use them as an extension of the online course. Students can use digital applications, programs and techniques as a platform to do collaborative learning assignments and share study materials. New tools used by the students can provide an informal space that function as a social campus surrounding the online course [24]. These digital tools can also keep master students’ up with technology in the workplaces while enhancing their IT skills at the same time.

Overall, the e-Learning environments must become more open to incorporate digital applications and social media tools. We observed that adult students are increasingly expecting to be allowed to try alternative tools in the online courses. Furthermore, educators wish to create some relatively customized online platform to meet the needs of their students. Despite these demands, technology simply provides a means to transfer ideas and content, but learning is and will always be a very human activity. Because our educational system has to prepare master students for work of the future, we have to adjust to new possibilities continually.

Conclusion

For students, the benefit of an online course is that it is completed in a short period of time, while the content and learning methods are comprehensive and versatile. Although e-Learning offers flexibility in terms of access to learning and study time, one should pay attention to the quality and efficacy of online courses offered at master’s level. We ensured quality in two ways. First, we discussed the content with colleagues, nurses, as well as ethicists, both from Finland and Holland. The most discussed subjects among colleague educators and ethicists were students’ level of critical thinking and their understanding of how they make ethical decisions and choices, both as an individual professional and as part of an interdisciplinary team. We, for example, modified the reflective discussion questions (Table 2) several times to help students to discern whether a problem at work they described has an ethical or moral component. Second, all students evaluate the course: the results of these evaluations lead to readjustments in the content and assignments of the course every year. For instance, students were not satisfied with the number of participants in discussion groups so we decreased it to deepen their level of reflection discussion about ethics at work. In addition, we have encouraged students to add more online source materials (e.g., e-books, e-journals, websites, blogs, videos) to the online discussion forum to share them with their participant-colleagues.

The development of the educational case presented here has increased the degree of transparency and compatibility between two higher education institutions. In addition, ongoing cooperation with teachers enabled them to deepen their knowledge and share perspectives of online adult pedagogy and gain experience of how e-Learning courses can be effectively realized regularly. It is obvious, that the roles of the nursing educators change in digital learning environment and the participatory culture of online teaching demands new skills that challenge the existing pedagogy [25]. We have come to the conclusion that teachers’ active online participation and engagement with students are critical factors to the success of online courses. Through self-reflection, online teachers can identify values and beliefs as educators and apply these criteria to their online strategies. This case here could be elaborated further, possibly in cooperation with teachers from universities of applied sciences in other countries so that this type of online course can be modified and developed for an increasing number of master’s students around Europe.

A master’s level education should enable healthcare professionals to expand their knowledge base and expertise in healthcare so that their practice exceeds those of professionals with a bachelor’s degree. Therefore, it is important that teachers are enabled to place significant effort on online pedagogical methods, online teacher training, and particularly on development of each assignment given during online courses.

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References


