Online Continuing Professional Development: Key Factors for Successful Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In recent years social work has witnessed an increased focus on continuing professional development (CPD) for practitioners. In addition to face-to-face (F2F) formats, this focus has included collegial engagement in online, synchronous platforms such as videoconferencing, instant messaging, chat rooms, and webinars, and in asynchronous, virtual platforms such as e-mail, discussion boards, and blogs. Such environments require consideration of how learning styles influence practitioners' adaptation to e-platforms for CPD.

This conceptual paper critically examines the confluence of the experiential learning model, Gardner's multiple intelligences, Schön's critical reflection and current thinking about social work CPD in the online environment. The author suggests that these diverse elements are optimally located in asynchronous e-platforms, but that synchronous environments offer valuable relationship-building which may be scaffolded into asynchronous contexts. Key factors for successful engagement are identified and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A special edition of *Social Work Education* (27, 6) in 2008 drew attention to the "transformation" occurring between academics, students, professionals and service users through technology (Waldman & Rafferty, 2008.) The special issue drew from transnational authors whose contributions addressed critical issues associated with social relationships in this technologically influenced shift. The special edition is a useful example of how the profession is exploring the confluence of e-learning, virtual communities and social relationships in this transformation. The field has witnessed an exponential increase since earlier considerations by such pioneers as Schoech (2000) who reported on virtual education for doctoral social work students.

This paper explores how online engagement influences continuing professional development. To offer a coherent structure in which this exploration takes place, the key concepts are briefly introduced at this point for subsequent treatment. A useful starting point is located in Beddoe and Duke's (2013) survey of the status of CPD, focusing in particular on Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The literature addressing experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), Gardner's (1993) "multiple intelligences" and virtual platforms (e.g., Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007) is discussed, and Goldstein's (2001) notion of experiential learning as "apprenticeship" is investigated as a concept to integrate CPD in the online context. In addressing the interrelationships between these concepts, I make a key premise: *the online expression is the vehicle not the determinant for CPD and the educational theories identified.* The primary focus is on the nature of CPD, of which critical reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987) is seen as the most significant element. The article examines the elements needed for successful CPD in an online environment, including the notion of virtual communities of practice (Cook-Craig & Sabah, 2009; Webster, 2013).

Having set out the review of the literature, a discussion on how these elements are practically applied in the virtual environment is developed. A conclusion suggests potential research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Continuing professional development: theory and practice

Beddoe and Duke (2013) surveyed the status of CPD in the United States, Canada, Australia, England, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, Singapore and Aotearoa New Zealand, focusing in particular on Australia and New Zealand. They observe that the purpose of CPD across disciplines (including medicine, pharmacy and social work) is to add to knowledge and skills, documented through the medium of a plan. A change in practice outcomes is expected, which connects with the idea of experiential learning rather than simple knowledge building. Beddoe and Duke cite Madden and Mitchell's (1993) "comprehensive definition of CPD" which has been adopted by the New Zealand statutory body responsible for registration of social workers, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB):

The maintenance and enhancement of knowledge, expertise and competence of professionals throughout their careers according to a formulated plan with regard to the needs of the professional, the employer, the profession and society. (Beddoe & Duke, 2013, p. 38)

Beddoe and Duke developed their analysis of CPD in terms of the tensions between organisational imperatives and individual goals for professional development (2013, p. 39). They suggest that critical elements in addressing and resolving such issues include an appreciation of the needs of the practitioner, their clients and the "gaps" in the systems in which they work. The notion of gaps appears in organisational quality analysis as discrepancies, for example, between the service expected by a client or consumer and the perceived level of that service (Zeithaml & Parasuraman, 2004). Such analysis offers practical problem solving designed to resolve the tensions between the organisation and the individual professional development needs noted by Beddoe and Duke. This context provides a beginning point to address the CPD-mandated needs of the professional, the employer, the profession and society. Applying hallmark collaborative practice draws on Wenger's communities of practice thinking (see, e.g., Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). I have written elsewhere on how virtual communities of practice emerge in social work contexts (Webster, 2013).

A further consideration, and in my view the most significant element in CPD, is the need for critical reflective practice drawing from Schön's (1983, 1987) seminal thinking on the reflective practitioner. Reflective practice is located in two domains: "reflection on action" considers and analyses a situation *after* the event, building capacity for "reflection in action" which occurs *during* the event (Davys & Beddoe, 2010, p. 90). CPD is, logically, a reflection after the event, but develops the ability to critically reflect while a process is occurring. Beddoe and Duke identified this element as a systematic reflection and critical thinking approach (2013, p. 39.) In an evocative phrase, Davys and Beddoe (2010, p. 91) described reflective practice as "uncovering and understanding the intuitive wisdom which underpins practice" but observe that such "moments of knowing" need to be critiqued alongside thoughtful analysis and concrete data. In addition to professional supervision, CPD offers a context for that critique.

Critical reflective practice stands at the heart of CPD. To contextualise critical practice in the online environment, we need to understand critical thinking. Citing Gambrill (2005), Beddoe and Maidment (2009, p. 27) describe "critical reasoning" – treated here as synonymous with critical thinking – as a range of capacities. These include the ability to clarify issues, values and beliefs while also identifying similarities, differences, contradictions and inconsistencies. Critical reasoning analyses arguments, interpretations and theories and identifies unstated assumptions. It is able to distinguish relevant from irrelevant data and use sound evaluative criteria and evaluate information accuracy – thus evaluating actions, policies, interpretations and theories. Critical reasoning can transfer insights gained from analogous situations, make reasoned inferences and compare ideal models with actual practice. It has the capacity to evaluate the implications and consequences of proposed actions as well as evaluate our own reasoning. Finally, critical thinking is able to raise and follow through significant questions and make interdisciplinary connections. The place of critical thinking and reflective practice as essential constituents of CPD will be taken up in later discussion on the online environment.

What, then, is the relevance of these critical elements to CPD? Bearing in mind that this paper addresses the online environment, reflective practice as CPD's essential element requires

more thought than merely participating in face-to-face (F2F) events. I suggest that the need for mutual trust is paramount if critical thinking and reflective practice are to take place:

The notion of a safe place represents the capacity of participants to trust each other to express opinions without apprehension … that trust is formed through communication styles familiar to participants whereby members feel part of the professional community culture to which they belong. (Webster, 2013, p. 19)

If professional values and behaviours are to be changed through CPD, trust between colleagues is a non-negotiable prerequisite. Beddoe and Duke identified a point of risk where, if prescriptively applied, CPD might result in mere compliance rather than a "demonstrated change in practice" (2013, p. 38). A commitment to mutual professional collegiality is needed for that change to take place.

Beddoe and Duke (2013, p. 47) illustrated this issue by reporting on reflective practice in CPD logs examined in a 2002 study in Aotearoa New Zealand. The quality of reflective practice in the logs was unevenly distributed, ranging from "excellent" to "good evidence" to "nil or minimal reflection". It must be noted that practitioners were new to the process, and potential "compliance fatigue" (p. 47) was observed by the authors. The findings were therefore subject to limitations at the time of the project and to its dated nature. With those observations in mind, the findings indicated that the distribution was tilted towards the minimal end of the spectrum. Of a sample of 84 logs, only 6% (5) evidenced "excellent reflection"; 40% (34) evidenced "good reflection"; but 54% (45) fell into the nil/minimal category. Whilst not proceeding from a deficit perspective, questions associated with the burgeoning intrusion of the virtual world into CPD require consideration. If attendance at F2F professional development events – an environment in which practitioners typically inhabit on a day-to-day basis – resulted in the findings reported by Beddoe and Duke, online reflection may well be even less. This article seeks to make a contribution to our understanding as a profession of how to leverage experiential learning and learning styles (Goldstein, 2001; Kolb, 1984) into the virtual context for the benefit of practitioners and, ipso facto, service consumers.

The preceding paragraphs suggest that the online CPD environment requires authenticity and willingness for our practice to be evaluated by professional peers and supervisors. Considerable personal strength is needed when such an assessment occurs in the virtual environment. This is holistic practice for which the professional application of strengths approaches (Saleebey, 2006) or appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) is necessary.

Experiential learning

Fenwick (2003) traced the development of experiential learning from the thinking of seminal writers such as Dewey (1938), Knowles (1970), Kolb (1984), Schön (1983, 1987) and Mezirow (1990). These educators argued that learning cannot be confined to the classroom: people learn by a conscious process of reflecting on experiences – Schön's (1983) "reflection-on-action". Their knowledge is transformed by problem solving. Education for adults becomes "learner-centered" (Knowles, 1970), academics enable learner

discourse, and "learners exercise voice in determining the issues, goals, and applications of course materials" (Fenwick, 2003, p. 8). These educational perspectives apply to the CPD context. "Academics" become peers and professional supervisors act as the hosts and facilitators of online site discussions. "Course materials" are parallel to current issues facing the field practitioners who bring their ethical dilemmas and conundrums to the virtual environment for problem solving and critical reflection, thus "exercising voice". Such current issues are not confined to practice difficulties. Insights into innovative practice as models to celebrate success are equally appropriate.

Social work academics have published widely on e-learning, learning styles and experiential learning (e.g., Goldstein, 2001; Maidment, 2006; McGregor, Perry, & Shannon, 2006). The social work educator Goldstein (2001, p. 8) described experiential learning as incorporating the practitioner's whole being in an active process. This paper sees that active process as an integral element of CPD. Goldstein suggested that the learning in this process is not necessarily sequential. Rather, it may operate laterally as ideas introduced act as catalysts for fresh insights. Goldstein proposed that "we need to ask how adults learn, especially those entering a profession concerned with the complexities of human relations" (2001, p. 8). He saw experiential learning as facilitating reflection and explicitly connects learning and reflection with social work's "key precept": the "person in the situation" (2001, p. 64). The ecological or systems thinking articulated by Bronfenbrenner (2005) is thus integrated into learning and CPD. Similarly, this paper suggests that Jarvis's (2009) "person in society" as a practice context is a collectivist statement, an inherent element of CPD.

Experiential learning proposes that "construct[ing] understandings" occurs within a "problem solving cycle" (Jarvis, 2004, p. 125), related to Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. Kolb's cycle is depicted as a sequence of four events, in each of which a cognitive process occurs in the learner (Poon Teng Fatt, 2000): (1) concrete experience; (2) reflection and observation; (3) abstract concepts and generalisations; and (4) active experimentation. Kolb (1984) associated certain learning styles with each event. He further suggested that, because of learning style preferences, each individual is likely to enter the cycle at a particular point. The learning styles associated with each point are described in the following terms (Smith & Kolb, 1986):

- Learning through *concrete experience* – an engagement with direct experience. Associated learning styles are those of: (1) the *accommodator*, described as having a preference for active planning and experimentation in new experiences via intuition and trial and error – trying to fit a theory into the facts of the situation; and (2) the *diverger*, described as a generator of ideas.

- Learning through *critical reflection* – observing experience through different perspectives and judging experience by a variety of criteria. Associated learning styles are those of: (1) *diverger*; and (2) *assimilator*, described as excelling in inductive reasoning and assembling diverse observations into an integrated explanation.

- Learning through *abstract conceptualisation* – analysing experience to create new ideas, concepts and structures. Associated learning styles are: (1) *converger*, described as a

performing best in hypothetical–deductive reasoning for problem solving; and (2) *assimilator.*

- Learning through *active experimentation* – using these new ideas, testing theories out in practice. Associated learning styles are those of: (1) *converger* and (2) *accommodator.*

Smith and Kolb's (1986) research suggested that social workers' learning orientation favours the concrete experience and critical-reflection quadrants. They therefore tend to be accommodators, divergers and assimilators. Thinking patterns assume significance when assessing how experiential learning connects with CPD. Goldstein (2001) connects Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model (ELM) as foundational to critical reflection, discussed earlier in this paper as the most critical element of CPD.

Multiple intelligences, experiential learning and mentoring as apprenticeship
Goldstein (2001) also proposed that experiential learning, multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and mentoring together constitute "apprenticeship" (p. 74). Before considering Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, the notion of apprenticeship as an appropriate model for CPD is presented. I suggest that both apprenticeship and CPD represent work-based learning. Goldstein argued that degree courses might measure "knowing" but "cannot tell us much about performance" (2001, p. 75). Such an assertion must be tempered by an appreciation of practicum placements in social work degree programs, but exposure to a range of complex practice and organisational scenarios must wait for formal appointments to a job in the field. Goldstein's seminal thinking is expressed in the following extract, and is also applicable to CPD:

> If performance or the capability to work helpfully with clients or fulfil other *professional responsibilities* is a valid measure, then the apprenticeship model should be highly valued. Milestones can be used to gauge *professional growth in practice, collegiality, ethical responsibility and knowledge.* The apprenticeship model, or experiential learning, offers learning moments when everything comes together in a meaningful way, when "knowing" becomes internalised, owned. Theory is no longer a purely intellectual axiom nor is a skill or act purely behavioural.
> (Goldstein, 2001, p. 75, emphases added)

It is argued here that that understanding CPD as a variant of apprenticeship opens a pathway by which Gardner's intelligences can be meaningfully applied. Space considerations preclude detailed exploration of those intelligences in this paper and this awaits future treatment. Suffice to observe that, as set out by Goldstein (2001, pp. 69–72), a practitioner's unique mix of intelligences will influence his or her engagement with the experiential learning cycle. Gardner (1993) identifies the seven intelligences as interpersonal, intrapersonal, linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic and musical. Of these, interpersonal, intrapersonal and linguistic intelligences are of particular relevance to CPD in an online context. Interpersonal intelligence is the capacity to notice distinctions in others, sometimes leading to new insights or intuitions. It is expressed as the empathetic talent to engage with others in an enabling manner. Intrapersonal intelligence is the self's awareness of a range of emotions and the ability

to discriminate between them and guide social behaviour. Understanding ourselves, or self-reflection, has long been seen as informing professional practice (Davies, 1994; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000) and ipso facto, CPD. Linguistic intelligence is the extraordinary ability to communicate orally and in writing. It is self-evident that the online expression of CPD demands writing ability.

Virtual platforms and continuous professional development

The debate over learning in the virtual world has been taken up by social work academics. Ahmedani, Harold, Fitton, and Shifflet Gibson (2011, p. 841) note minimal literature examining how information technologies influence student learning styles and call for research into understanding "cyber environments". Cook-Craig and Sabah (2009, pp. 735, 736) report on the use made by Israeli social workers of virtual communities of practice (VCoP) "as a means of sharing knowledge to support practice". Such an approach is, in effect, CPD. Webster (2013) noted that, even in the three-year delivery span of a blended graduate-level course, a virtual community emerged spontaneously.

The focus of this paper on CPD in the virtual environment requires clear understanding of the online platforms in which practitioners engage. Those online environments need to be viewed as vehicles for the substantive CPD purpose, not as ends in themselves. How, then, may online platforms be understood in order to meaningfully engage in that substantive process?

Two essential modes are defined for online work: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous discussion is described as "real-time communication": it is a *conversation* (University of Wisconsin-Madison [UWM], 2014). For example, participants access a chat room and type questions, comments, and responses in real time. Asynchronous communication occurs "outside of real time" (UWM, 2014). Examples include e-mails and bulletin boards. Participants can create and respond to messages as time permits. This paper uses these two organising frames within which the relevant literature and research findings are placed.

E-learning may be conceptualised as the social interaction of learners by means of information communication technology (ICT) (Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007, p. 19). The notion of interactive learning thus connects with a social work commitment to Jarvis's (2009) concept of the person-in-society noted earlier. Constructivism as a model for learning suggests that students "construct understandings" (Hoadley, 2007, p. 144), a notion that underpins Kolb's (1984) "learning style inventory" (LSI). Goldstein's (2001) integrated social work perspective on Kolb's approach under the broad heading of "experiential learning" has already been addressed.

Andrews and Haythornthwaite (2007) usefully propose three frameworks by which we can make sense of the e-learning field: technical, sociological and pedagogical. Technology provides the means for the exchange of ideas, insights and perspectives that constitute CPD. Andrews and Haythornthwaite observe that, technically, "there now appears to be no limit to what is possible in terms of connectivity" (2007, p. 31). Sociological considerations identify "communities of enquiry" (applicable to CPD) enabling informal, distributed learning (2007, p. 32). Pedagogy considers the teacher's presence in terms

of group sustainability rather than authority: e-learning introduces the notion of the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage" (King, 1993). Bozalek and Matthews (2009) note that, where pedagogical innovation within a virtual environment is implemented, relational learning can occur – in other words, social interactions requiring collaborative skills are as applicable to virtual environments as F2F contexts. Professional supervision is not teaching, but, consistent with the guide metaphor, it provides "reflective space as crucial to effective practice" (Beddoe, 2010, p. 1279). These three frameworks offer potential for further research (to be identified in the conclusion to this paper).

With these frames and definitions in mind, I set out the schema used in this paper within which online CPD is located (Table 1). This schema focuses on the nature and quality of synchronous and asynchronous modes respectively as they relate to online CPD. Citing Bourne, Mayadas, and Campbell (2006), Hiltz, Turoff, and Harasim (2007, p. 56) define asynchronous learning networks (ALN) as:

... people networks for anytime-anywhere learning. ALN combines self-study with substantial, rapid, asynchronous interactivity with others. ALN is a "people network"; that is, ALN permits improved interaction between people.

In contrast, synchronous online platforms "require learners and instructors [in this paper, professional supervisors] to be available to communicate at the same time and are not ALN" (Hiltz et al., 2007, p. 56).

Table 1. CPD in an Online Context

Online Continuing Professional Development: Strengths and Weaknesses of Asynchronous and Synchronous Modes			
Asynchronous (continual) learning e.g. e-mail, discussion boards, blogs		**Synchronous (continuous) learning** e.g. videoconferencing, instant messaging, chat	
Contextual framework applications • Technical • Sociological • Pedagogical		**Contextual framework applications** • Technical (primarily) • Sociological (lesser extent) • Pedagogical (minimally)	
Strengths	**Weaknesses**	**Strengths**	**Weaknesses**
• Facilitates reflective practice: time to think • Addresses work/life balance issues • Collaborative discussion to share and build knowledge • Development of a learning community • Critical assessment of ideas in learning community • Shared purpose and social ties: promotes task-oriented discussion • Potential for conflict resolution • Engenders better expression of views than F2F environments	• Decreased immediacy of responses • Communication anxiety: » Message received? » Deemed unworthy of a response?	• Lends itself to presentation of straightforward concepts • Promotes social interaction; facilitates creation of relationships • Fast responses advance commitment and motivation to participate • Group processes helped	• Fails to lead to meaningful learning • Fails to lead to task-oriented discussion

Sources: Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007; Hiltz, Turoff, & Harasim, 2007; Hrastinski, 2008; Im & Lee, 2003; Locke, 2007

Both asynchronous learning networks (ALN) and synchronous modes carry application to online CPD environments. A synchronous mode enables rapid relationship building and therefore social interaction by virtue of fast responses which engender motivation to participate (Hrastinski, 2008). Hrastinski (2008) also notes that synchronous online

sharing contributes to the initiation of group processes and task planning, but in terms of reflective practice synchronous platforms are essentially limited to building social bonds (Im & Lee, 2003). In his survey, Locke (2007) contrasts synchronous with asynchronous discussion formats by drawing attention to the research-based merits of the asynchronous mode. Locke presents (p. 188) asynchronous discussion as enabling, *inter alia*, sharing of knowledge and information and the application of reflective thinking to that shared information. Citing Im and Lee (2003), Locke (2007, p. 188) comments that synchronous online delivery is unable to lead to meaningful learning and task-oriented discussion.

These observations recognise that CPD cannot be limited to synchronous platforms but, for meaningful outcomes, needs to occur in ALN environments. The strengths and weaknesses of CPD in an online context as identified in the literature are set out in Table 1. By engaging with research findings and analysis, a clear picture emerges of the decisive advantage ALN enjoys over synchronous modes by virtue of the time available for participant reflection on shared information and insights as noted in the previous paragraph. Locke (2007) identifies "critical success factors" (p. 188) of continual learning as including collaborative processes such as "deep learning" shared through written contributions. Such contributions are "free from the tyranny of the ever-present 'now' of the F2F classroom" (Markel, 2005, as cited in Locke, 2007, p. 188). In this paper it is argued that such processes and outcomes express the heart of CPD as noted by Beddoe's (2010, p. 1279) insistence on the need for "reflective space".

At this point, an integrative summary is offered of experiential learning model (ELM), Kolb's cycle, Gardner's intelligences and critical reflection as constitutive elements of CPD in an online environment. Social workers engaging in asynchronous virtual platforms in CPD activities are likely to focus on what works, in keeping with the accommodator's preference for active planning and experimentation. This is consistent with Payne's (2005) suggestion that constructing social work theory arises out of the context in which it arises. Divergent thinking will generate multiple ideas in the process of planning and experimentation and thereby engage in critical reflection as the essence of CPD. Social workers are therefore likely to enter the learning cycle at either the concrete experience or critical reflection stages, although in practice they will almost unconsciously move between the two. In so doing, an interpersonal intelligence mode of thinking will seek to empathise with colleagues and professional supervisors, while simultaneously – in keeping with intrapersonal intelligence – exercising self-awareness as emotional reactions to the challenges implicit in new learning and practice application emerge. Such reactions may include anxiety associated with the "imposter syndrome" (Mehrotra, 2006): feelings of incompetence which are typically unwarranted.

In terms of the online context, these processes are best suited to asynchronous platforms. As earlier noted (see Table 1), social work practitioners are likely to need time to think, reflect and feedback their own perspectives on the topic at hand. In this respect, assimilative thinking (the ability to reason inductively and assemble diverse observations into an integrated explanation) comes into prominence. Smith and Kolb (1986) suggested that assimilators are "less focused on people and more concerned with ideas and abstract concepts" (p. 73). Nonetheless, the capacity to create theoretical concepts and models

is an asset to the profession and in particular if the practitioner is an educator. Indeed, Smith and Kolb further note that the education field attracts assimilators in such positions as "teacher, writer and college professor" (1986, p. 73). Social work academics are therefore likely to be capable of contributing to the core CPD skill of critical reflection. Further, if a practitioner possesses Gardner's linguistic intelligence, the capacity for effective communication in understanding the issues under discussion will add value to the process.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

How then may the strands discussed to this point be drawn together? Kurt Lewin famously remarked that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Cartwright, 1951, p. 169). In that vein, what theory or theories carry practical application to understand how social workers can meaningfully engage in the virtual environment for the purposes of CPD? Ideas, cultures and perspectives have consequences (Weaver, 1984) and give rise to models. This paper suggests that certain theories and ideas must inform the debate about CPD if the profession is to avoid the risk of fractious, uninformed arguments as to the efficacy of online environments.

In assessing the theories presented in this paper, I propose that the overriding consideration is not technology, but the purpose of CPD. The medium through which professional knowledge, expertise and competence is developed is not the decisive issue; but that said, we cannot ignore the ecological or systems thinking characteristic of social work (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Jarvis, 2009) in regard to synchronous or asynchronous online contexts. Potential risks or tensions arising from those two essential modes are presented in terms of selected conceptual elements in Table 1. In addition, tensions exist between organisational imperatives, individual professional development, and critical reflective practice.

Tensions: Organisational imperatives and individual professional development

In an earlier paper, Beddoe (2009) drew attention to the complex nature of the relationship between individual professional development and the organisational context. The tensions between organisationally mandated key performance indicators (part of social work's organisational landscape since the late 1980s) and professional practice have been the subject of a growing literature (see, e.g., Aronson & Smith, 2011; Burton & Van den Broek, 2009; Carey, 2008; Webster, 2014). Tensions between professionally driven CPD and what has become known as new public management (NPM) (see, e.g., Evetts, 2009) offer intriguing glimpses of how organic thinking and complexity processes (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) might exercise significant leverage in an online context. Complexity thinking suggests that agency for change is not based on hierarchical power but can equally emanate from individual agents in diverse organisational levels.

In considering organic complexity thinking in the context of tensions between CPD and NPM, both synchronous and asynchronous media have parts to play. As noted earlier, synchronicity engenders relationship building and points towards asynchronous professional exchanges to develop shared purpose, social ties and the promotion of task-oriented discussion. Gardner's interpersonal, intrapersonal and linguistic intelligences offer potential pathways along which those developments can travel. Contributions

by practitioners engaged in CPD offer fertile opportunity to develop online networks by which NPM policy and practice may be challenged, or at least placed in the wider context of professional ethics. Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) notion of a "tipping point" may apply in this context as organic processes create critical mass.

As CPD's defining characteristic, critical thinking requires infinitely more than synchronous instant messaging and the like can offer. It demands asynchronous discussion boards, including capacity for anonymity if one's own thinking is exposed for collegial input until trust is established, as noted earlier (Webster, 2013). To engage in CPD-related online activities calls for appreciation of, and insight into, learning styles, online trust, Kolb's experiential learning model, Gardner's intelligences, and the strengths and weaknesses associated with asynchronous platforms as set out in Table 1. To understand our individual learning styles and intelligence means that we need to engage in self-reflection in order to remind ourselves that the use of self informs professional practice (Davies, 1994; Miehls & Moffatt, 2000; Schön, 1983).

Making meaningful connections for CPD in asynchronous virtual platforms is contingent on our individual capacity to apply a diverse set of knowledge, skills and attitudes – as is the case in any aspect of social work practice. Drawing from the material presented in this paper, I suggest that this set comprises:

• Technical, sociological and pedagogical considerations

• The ability to think reflectively and consequentially engage in collaborative discussion

• A willingness to contribute to a community of learners and practitioners

• The ability and willingness to critically assess one's own ideas, and those of others, within a trusting relationship while dealing with anxieties associated with potential rejection

• Engagement in task-oriented discussion and potential conflict resolution

• An understanding of how our own intelligence (Gardner, 1993) and learning style contribute to those above elements as we engage in experiential learning as "apprenticeship".

Applying CPD as a crucial element in the profession has been the purpose of this paper, while taking full cognisance and advantage of its online expression. That online expression is the vehicle and tool, not the objective.

CONCLUSION

I respond to the call from Ahmedani et al. (2011) for social work research into learning styles and cyber environments by suggesting two related streams worth exploration. The first proposes research into how Gardner's (1993) seven intelligences influence online engagement in CPD. We need to understand how the unique properties of each of those intelligences contribute to each "event" in Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Second, how

do those intelligences relate to best use of synchronous and asynchronous virtual platforms to develop online CPD? Technical, sociological and pedagogical considerations for online contexts (Andrews & Haythornthwaite, 2007) need to be integrated into this exploration.

As a systems-oriented profession, social work is well able to contribute to original research in the e-learning environment by bringing together the diverse range of thinking noted in this paper: experiential learning, multiple intelligences, critical thinking and e-learning as they relate to continuing professional development. We have much to offer.

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