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Medical Education @ Cardiff

Collaborate Online as a Small Group

Sarah Al-Amodi, Suzanna Mathew, Judith Fox, Ramsey Sabit, Anna Patricolo

Team work is central to all of our work as medical professionals. Increasingly we are called to be part of national and international teams to complete tasks such as planning educational interventions, service design, guideline development and research.

Online technologies offer the potential to overcome barriers to these collaborative tasks, but there are a bewildering array of options available. Online collaborative technologies range from single function tools such as Prezi to multifunction platforms such as Wiggio which allow you to share documents, set tasks and participate in online meetings. Tools can allow synchronous or asynchronous collaboration, can include varying numbers of participants and may be free or require a subscription.

As a group of medical educators from across the United Kingdom, we were required to collaborate to design an educational programme. In this document we will share what we have learnt about the benefits and challenges of collaborating online and offer some tips to get the most out of online collaborative tools.

Benefits

Convenience

Participation in an online group is not dependent on travelling to a particular place at a particular time and is therefore more convenient. You can contribute to your group's work from home, the train or in another country and at any time of the day or night. On multifunction suites you can use lots of different functions such as email, document sharing, polling and meetings on one website, rather than using separate tools for each task. If you are sharing documents, you can store all of your team's work in a single place online and therefore sharing access to useful documents can be more effective than using email. You can set up notifications to keep informed of events in your group so that you don't need to login regularly.

Engagement

Used effectively, online collaborative tools can encourage active engagement from all members of your group. You can allocate tasks clearly for each participant and track their contributions to the group. Quieter group members may find it easier to share their views than they would in a face-to-face situation.

Documentation

Most collaborative tools keep track of your group's work, either by archiving text discussions, recording meetings or changes to documents. This is particularly useful if group members cannot take part in a particular meeting or cannot contribute to the group for several weeks.

Democratisation

By working online, there can be clearer group ownership of the task and decisions can be taken jointly. Some tools have polling functions, where group members can express their opinions on important questions. People's views can be commented on and ideas can potentially be further developed.

Social interaction

There are opportunities to get to know your team members better through the process of collaborating online. You can potentially interact more frequently than if you only meet face-to-face, resulting in a less isolating experience.

Challenges

Direction

It is very easy to be seduced by new technology and lose sight of your purpose in collaborating online. You need to carefully consider why you have chosen this medium to collaborate. Working together online has all the same challenges as face-to-face teamwork, including issues with team dynamics and time management. You need to agree goals, tasks and deadlines in the same way as if you were working together in person. If you are meeting online, you will need an agenda, a clear time limit and to allocate a team member to chair the meeting. You may need to choose a leader to help provide direction, monitor progress and facilitate your collaborative efforts.

Technology

One of the biggest initial problems with any new online tool is trying to work out how to use it. And if you are trying to collaborate effectively with others in your small group then everyone has to be able to use the software. Some people may be less computer literate than others and need extra help. If you do manage to get everything up and running, there is always the risk that an aspect of the software will not work, or not work as well as you hoped for a particular task. Whilst some software have online manuals or even support services, some of the cheaper products do not offer much extra help and you need to consider this when choosing which program to use.

Evolution

New online technologies have a novelty value but no sooner have you got to grips with one tool, another tool is being proclaimed as the next best thing. As long as the tool you are using is working, don't feel obliged to upgrade. Be aware that the site you are using may be taken offline by its producers. This is part of the 'survival of the fittest' environment of the internet. Hopefully you will be given due warning, but this possibility may lead you to use more established sites rather than smaller new tools.

Professionalism

Following a number of fitness-to-practice cases involving the online behaviours of doctors, there is a growing recognition of the professionalism challenges posed by working online. The boundaries between your professional and personal life are less clear cut in the digital world and maintaining professional standards requires conscious consideration. When you post online, you are effectively publishing and you may have to account for what you've written in the future. Depending on your group, you may want to consider setting ground rules or deciding how to moderate comments, to ensure that everyone feels safe interacting online (Sandars 2006). Obviously, confidentiality for both patients and staff is as important in the online sphere as it is in the real world. If you are discussing confidential information you may need to encrypt your online meetings or investigate the security features of your tool. If in doubt, discuss with your Trust's IT department.

Issues to consider

1. **What do you need to achieve through online collaboration?**
Knowing your goals from the start will help you choose the most appropriate tools.
2. **What technologies are needed?** Do you need to collaborate synchronously, asynchronously or a mixture of both? Don't try to use tools that are more complex than necessary – for example do you really need videoconferencing or will teleconferencing do?

3. **Investigate the limitations of your tools - how many people can edit a document at one time?** Is the functionality offered by your tool better than just editing documents on your computer and uploading them for your group? Is your technology appropriate for the number of participants you want to include? Some tools allow a certain number of participants before the service stops being free.
4. **How will participants be informed of events in your group?** Some tools incorporate automatic email notifications, but some don't. Don't rely on everyone logging into the tool regularly.
5. **Before a synchronous online meeting, ensure that the agenda is set and a time limit is decided upon for the meeting.** Some tools facilitate scheduling online meetings including allowing participants to state their availability.
6. **Always have a back-up plan in case the technology fails inexplicably!** Headphones are a must to avoid feedback if teleconferencing via a computer.

Conclusions

Completion of tasks using online collaboration offers many advantages, but there are also many challenges. It is important for potential online collaborators to be mindful of these and be aware of the plethora of online collaborative tools each with their different attributes and limitations.

Useful online collaborative tools

Tools	Online meetings	Task management	Documents	Cost
Adobe Connect	Teleconferencing (TC) Videoconferencing (VC) Breakout rooms	No	Document sharing	Free as a trial then various pricing options depending on your needs.
Wiggio	TC and VC	Schedule meetings To-do-lists Group calendar	Document editing and sharing	Free
Zoho	TC	To-do-lists Group calendar	Document sharing and editing Wiki creation	Limited free version, but need to subscribe for more functionality/users.
Skype	TC and VC	No	Document sharing	Free
Google+	TC and VC (Google Hangouts)	Calendar sharing	Document editing and sharing	Free
Prezi	Online presentation	No	Presentation sharing and editing	Free but need to subscribe for more storage or private presentations
Genius Wiki	No	No	Wiki creation and editing	Free

Further Information

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Sarah Al Amodi is a Medical Laboratory Technologist.

Suzanna Mathew, Judith Fox, Ramsey Sabit & Anna Patricolo are all Clinicians. This work was undertaken as a student project for the MSc in the Medical Education programme at Cardiff.

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Series Editor: Dr Lesley Pugsley, Medical Education, School of Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education, Cardiff University.

Wales Deanery

Cardiff University, 9th Floor, Neuadd Meirionydd,
Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4YS
Tel: +44 (0)29 2068 7451 Fax: +44 (0)29 2068 7455
E-mail: medicaleducation@cardiff.ac.uk

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