

Online graduate student identity and professional skills development

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Abstract

Graduate students are assumed to develop skills in oral and written communication and collegial relationships that are complementary to formal graduate programs. However, it appears only a small number of universities provide such professional development opportunities alongside academic programs, and even fewer do so online. There appears to be an assumption in higher education that students develop professional skills by virtue of learning through required academic tasks and having proximity to other students and faculty. Skeptics of online study raise questions about whether graduate students studying online can participate fully in such graduate communities and access these informal professional skill-building opportunities. It is possible that such activities may have to be designed and delivered for online graduate students.

This paper presents preliminary qualitative findings from a project that developed, offered, and evaluated such online opportunities. Findings suggest that while online graduate students can and do develop professional skills while navigating their studies, building relationships, and participating in online learning communities, they are keen to develop such professional skills in a more deliberate way.

Résumé

On présume que les étudiants des cycles supérieurs acquièrent des habiletés en communication orale et écrite et vivent des relations de collaboration qui soient complémentaires aux programmes formels des études supérieures. Cependant, il semblerait que seul un petit nombre d'universités offre de telles

opportunit s de perfectionnement professionnel dans leurs programmes acad miques, et que ce nombre est m me inf rieur en ce qui a trait aux formations en ligne. On suppose que les  tudiants des  tudes sup rieures acqui rent des habilit s professionnelles en raison des travaux acad miques de leur formation et des relations  tablies avec leurs professeurs et d'autres  tudiants. Les sceptiques au sujet de la formation en ligne  mettent des doutes quant   la possibilit , pour les  tudiants dipl m s qui  tudient en ligne, de participer pleinement   ces communaut s universitaires et d'avoir acc s   ces occasions informelles d'acqu rir des comp tences professionnelles. Il se peut que ces activit s doivent  tre con ues puis offertes aux  tudiants de cycles sup rieurs en ligne.

L' tude qui suit pr sente les r sultats pr liminaires qualitatifs d'un projet qui a  labor , offert et  valu  de telles opportunit s en ligne. Les r sultats sugg rent que si les  tudiants de cycles sup rieurs en ligne sont en mesure d'acqu rir des habilit s professionnelles tout en poursuivant leurs  tudes,  chafaudant des relations et participant   des communaut s d'apprentissage en ligne, ils sont aussi enthousiastes de d velopper plus d lib r ment de telles habilit s professionnelles.

Developing professional skills aimed at socializing graduate students to their scholarly role, in partnership with developing disciplinary knowledge, has become an important issue in Canadian universities (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, 2008). The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) defines professional skills as "behaviors that can be learned, that can be improved with practice, that require reflection, and that benefit from ongoing coaching" (2008, p. 1). Although professional skills development is recommended by CAGS (2008), few universities have developed such workshops (Lee, 2007), and fewer still offer professional skill building workshops online (Rose, 2012).

This research explores which, if any, professional skills online graduate students seek and whether they can be developed in online, distributed environments. Findings discussed here relate to a subset of issues from a larger project identifying skill building opportunities for online graduate students delivered via online workshops. Qualitative data documented the perspectives and experiences of multidisciplinary graduate students in three professional skill building workshops. We asked:

- What benefits do online graduate students hope to obtain from attending skill building workshops? Were such benefits attained?
- What aspects of the online workshops are perceived as most effective/least effective for professional skill building?

This paper begins with background information to provide context for the ideas under discussion, followed by a description of methodological approach and preliminary findings. We conclude with a discussion of these findings and suggestions for further research. However, these preliminary findings suggest that the use of online learning environments for professional skill building may be ideally suited not only for online graduate students but for continued skill building in contemporary workplaces.

Background

Graduate students, whether learning face to face or online, encounter complex challenges. It is assumed that they begin to develop scholarly roles and professional skills from the outset of their programs; this fact is rarely stated in even the most explicit curriculum. In spite of this lack of clarity, experience suggests that online graduate students can develop intellectually, learn to balance competing demands of work, school, and personal lives, acquire knowledge and professional skill important to their scholarly roles, internalize the values of lifelong learning, and participate in a learning community.

As graduate students become familiar with what is required of them, as students and scholars, they interact and further develop that role within their new learning community (Collier, 2001). For Burke (1980), this process of student role adjustment occurs through a process of reflection and action. Individuals reflect on what is required of them in a particular role and determine the fit between those expectations and their own behaviour. As a form of expectancy theory, “motivation is determined by the outcomes that people expect to occur as a result of their actions” (Johns & Saks, 2001, p. 143). The motivation to adjust emerges as each student assesses the fit of his or her academic role performance; they reflect on and compare their role performance with that of other students and how other students respond to their performance. Analysis of expectations by measuring the “self against referent others” occurs repeatedly (Sherwood, 1965), particularly in each new situation. Individuals collect self-evaluation information as well as comparative information through observing others, and they adjust behaviours to move toward a scholarly role. During this process, students ask themselves questions like, Am I performing my graduate student scholarly role adequately? What is truly valued among graduate students, and what is important for my success? The extent to which the individual believes that he or she has or has not mastered the role and acquired the needed skills provides a sense of role identity.

In addition to role development, and knowledge and skill building, students in online graduate programs must also become technologically savvy in order to overcome challenges of time and space for learning and working (Ku, Akarasriworn, Glassmeyer, & Mendoza, 2011; Berry, 2012). Though highly specific for those studying online, technological expertise is also becoming a requirement for any graduate student. Consider the following comment from the Advisory Committee for Online Learning (2002, p. ix):

In a global society based on expanding knowledge, Canada’s health as a civil society and its economic competitiveness, as well as the success of individual Canadians, will hinge on having the best possible education and access to lifelong learning opportunities. Around the world, online learning—the use of digital networks to deliver and support learning opportunities—has emerged as a powerful and transformative means to meet these learning needs, as well as to extend and enrich traditional modes of instruction, at the post-secondary level.

Some suggest that online graduate students encounter a “hidden” curriculum that requires learning not explicit in the program descriptions or syllabi (Burke, 1980, 1991; Collier, 2001; Sams & Sams, 2011; Sherwood, 1965). For example, in addition to academic program requirements and new skills needed for performing their scholarly roles, online

graduate students interact, engage, and communicate within a technologically supported, distributed, social context (Lopata, 1995, p. 1). Online communication-rich environments can allow for both informal and formal elements as students develop their academic discipline knowledge and professional skills. However, such environments must be carefully designed to create a learning space perceived as safe, encouraging multi-layered opportunities for open and meaningful collaboration and interaction (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Students are likely to feel comfortable in a learning environment that encourages them to project themselves socially and emotionally (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012) as they acquire skills and build relationships and social norms (Kim, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). If the online environment is effectively created, social activity will unfold naturally there as it would in a face-to-face environment. If it is ineffective, students may feel isolated or out of step with other students. If we assume that “e-learning will create self-directed, lifelong learners” (Bloom & Murray, 2001, p. 5), educational institutions will need to build the effective mechanisms to support online students within their learning communities.

Educational institutions are not alone in their increasing use of communication technologies. As graduate students learn and internalize academic knowledge when studying online, they are also building professional skills suitable for information-based, complex, distributed global environments. Online professional skills workshops in areas such as teaming, negotiating, and completing projects can add to this knowledge and improve graduate student success in formal academic programs (Hurst & Thomas, 2008). Students engaging in workshops, for example, develop explicit knowledge that supports performance in courses as well as tacit understanding of important skills as they learn to collaborate, share information, think critically, manage time, and work effectively in online learning teams. Professional skills, in combination with skills derived from operating in virtual environments, are of high value for learning and working in a society characterized by the fast development of information and communication technologies that have fundamentally affected our ways of working and living. Many individuals use email and other communication technologies regularly, regardless of whether the recipient of information is down the hall or on the other side of the world. Work organizations are increasingly introducing changes that make distance and place almost irrelevant (van Weert, 2006). People work in distributed teams and may never meet a teammate face to face, communicating and collaborating, at times, entirely via technology. Like those working in distributed space, graduate students study and communicate with one another through digital media such as the Internet, using mobile devices that overcome the necessity of being in the same time and place (Westera, 2011).

In spite of this trend, there remains skepticism as to whether students studying online realize a full graduate student experience, such as having access to informal socialization opportunities and skill building, given limited or non-existent face-to-face contact. In contrast to this skepticism, others suggest that programs completed online may in fact produce deeper, longer-term learning (Brewer & Klein, 2006; Kalliath & Laiken, 2006), put students ahead with higher grades, and create better participation in discussions (Ku et al., 2011; Clarke, 2002; Thurston, 2005).

Building academic community for graduate students, online or face to face, requires activities that emphasize leadership, rules of operation, social norms, and relationship building (Cleveland-Innes & Gauvreau, 2011; Kim 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). With-

in each academic community the learning “medium reinforces its own communication codes and... modes” (Westera, 2011, p. 201) whether it is face to face or online.

Working, communicating, and learning online provide students with unique opportunities to adopt professional capabilities under real-world conditions. Students communicate and visit with peers in distributed space, each developing and supporting a shared sense of community (Offenholly, 2006). While many universities have introduced some form of online activity in their course offerings, it is unclear whether appropriate changes to teaching and learning approaches have occurred concurrently to take advantage of the online context (Santilli & Beck, 2005). It is also unclear whether the development of graduate student roles and professional skills in the online learning environment needs to be arranged or can occur spontaneously. Online graduate students have the opportunity to develop special competencies to negotiate relationships in distributed environments. In this research, a more deliberate approach for professional skills development during online academic programs provided online graduate students an additional opportunity to enhance these skills in online workshops.

Outline of Workshops

Prior to developing the workshops, the research team reviewed previous data that outlined specific development interests identified by online graduate students across the disciplines (Hawranik, 2009). Three online workshops were developed. The first workshop aimed to provide resources and skill building exercises to assist students in improving their academic writing. In this workshop, students practised:

- writing effective paragraphs,
- creating effective arguments,
- using APA appropriately,
- summarizing a text, and
- developing research skills in finding or using resources.

The second workshop concentrated on career planning and assisting students in finding desired employment after graduation. Though some graduate students were actively employed throughout their programs, many were not yet in their desired careers. This workshop provided students with resources for planning their careers, discovering new opportunities, and building e-portfolios. In this workshop, students practised:

- using tools to set clear career and life goals,
- reviewing aspects of school-to-work transition,
- practising networking tools and techniques,
- practising job search techniques and strategies, and
- developing the first stage of their e-portfolios.

The third workshop was designed to develop personal management strategies. Regardless of program or employment status, students were interested in finding a better balance for work/study/life. This workshop introduced tools to explore time spent and time management techniques. Students participated in visioning and planning exercises as a way to find a better balance for the competing demands of work/study/life. In this workshop, students practised:

- developing personal strategies for success,
- using reflective technique,

- reviewing change management concepts,
- understanding personal change journeys as part of graduate education,
- initiating connections with learning peers, and
- developing a vision and plans to move forward in work/study/life balance.

Instructional design and teaching strategy followed principles of sound online design (Smith & Ragan, 2005) and online facilitation (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2011). The research team designed an ideal workshop environment for the learning of professional skills, building of social community, and support of ongoing social interactions to complement ongoing scholarly development.

Methods

A mixed-methods research approach was used. The research team administered surveys before and after workshops to identify learner needs in the first case and learning outcomes in the second. Focus group interviews were held after all workshops were completed. This research was carried out with careful attention to possible researcher bias and a commitment to clarifying participant descriptions of experience (Philips & Burbules, 2000).

Study Group

Eligibility to participate in the research study included any university graduate students enrolled in any Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) program. Participating students needed to be able to speak, write, and understand English well, attend one or more of the workshops, complete the research instruments, and have access to a computer to utilize required synchronous meeting software. Since only those agreeing to participate in the research study were eligible to attend the workshops, the team made provisions to hold subsequent workshops for those not interested in participating in the research, thus ensuring all graduate students had access to workshop benefits.

The invitation to participate was posted on the FGS website, the graduate student portal, and the graduate student association website, and through each of the graduate program directors across the institution. Some faculties sent direct emails to students while others posted study information on a virtual bulletin board. Students knew at the outset that confidentiality was respected as their responses were kept confidential and, that they were informed that they could choose not to participate in the workshops attached to the research project. The study received approval from the university's research ethics board.

Because of a high level of initial student response, each of the three workshops was planned to be offered twice, for a total of six workshops. Workshop size was limited to 30 participants to ensure meaningful student participation in discussions. Workshops were offered on Saturday mornings.

Pre- and Post-Workshop Surveys

Pre-workshop surveys were designed ahead of time and reviewed with selected faculty and students not involved in workshops or the research. Small adjustments to survey questions were made for clarity and ease of use, where necessary.

These surveys were sent one week before the workshop to all registrants. The one-week deadline allowed the research assistant enough time to follow up with all students who indicated an interest in the workshop but who had not yet returned the pre-workshop survey. Post-workshop surveys were sent one week after the workshop. Students attending more than one workshop were asked to respond to one post-workshop survey only, in order to avoid survey fatigue. The post-workshop survey was administered after the last workshop attended by each participant.

The open-ended pre-workshop survey questions were intended to provide an understanding of students' experiences and expectations at the beginning of the workshops. Demographic information was requested, including age, gender, program enrolled in, length of time in program, and type of degree sought. The post-workshop surveys contained some repeat questions from the pre-workshop survey, with the addition of questions regarding skills and abilities achieved as a result of participating in the workshops.

Focus Group

Finally, a post-workshop focus group was held after all the workshops had been conducted. All students who had attended one or more workshops were invited to participate. Students were asked to clarify their experiences in reference to data from pre- and post-workshop surveys. This included student perceptions of the value of the workshops, the impact on their sense of learning community, and the degree to which they felt their skills were enhanced. The focus group session provided researchers an opportunity to verify any contributions to professional skills development and evaluate workshop design and delivery.

Data Analysis

A subset of the quantitative and qualitative data collected during this project was reported and analyzed; the qualitative responses were collected on both pre- and post-workshop surveys. Qualitative data were analyzed manually, with each researcher on the team performing open and axial coding (Neuman, 2009). The team met to discuss and refine the coding of key themes in the data and moved to conformational coding. Conformational codes are discussed below.

Findings

Participating Students

A total of 173 workshop registrations were collected from students initially indicated interest and registered in one of the professional skills workshops. Attrition decreased the actual number of attendees across the various workshops. Once we were able to account for those actually attending the workshops, we were left with 89 remaining registrations. Of the 89 registrations, 29 students planned to attend one workshop, 16 planned to attend two workshops, and 6 planned to attend all three workshops, for a total of 61 different participating students.

Note that, workshop participants agreed to complete pre- and post-workshop surveys as well as attend the workshop they registered in. Twenty-nine students of the final 61 (48%) completed both pre and post surveys, limiting our comparative comments.

Of the final 61 workshop participants, 77% or 47 of the students were female, with an average age of 43 years. Students came from graduate programs across the university:

- 39%, or 24 respondents, from Business;
- 23%, or 14 respondents, from Education;
- 21%, or 13 respondents, from health disciplines; and
- 16 %, or 10 respondents, from other graduate programs such as Arts and Science.

Participation in all three workshop topics was almost equal, indicating a balanced interest in all three topics.

Insights from Pre-Workshop Survey

We began our analysis by looking at how participating online graduate students viewed their progress to date. Specifically, we found online graduate students to be very positive in response to questions regarding their scholarly development at the point of workshop entry. We asked them to respond to the statement “I have the ability and motivation to complete graduate level academic work as required by my program.” Student response to this question showed 70% (43/61) strongly agreed and 20% (12/61) agreed with this statement before the workshop. Most were very interested in enhancing their academic performance further by participating in workshops.

In response to our question “What benefits do online graduate students hope to obtain from attending skill building workshops?” students noted the need to build new strategies for balancing work/study/life, managing time, gaining practical advice, developing new professional skills, and improving academic performance as well as connecting with other graduate students and finding out how the university would assist them. Data presented in Table 1 represent a summary of thematic topics highlighted by students before the workshop.

Insights from Post-Workshop Survey

The second part of our data collection addressed our interest in the following: “After attending the workshops, did students believe that they realized benefits of interest?” Students indicated positive benefits as a result of the workshop. The majority of students responding to the question about benefits, 41% (12/29) of students, believed that the workshops provided them with an opportunity to connect with and learn from other students. Thirty-four percent (11/29) of responses indicated that students shared helpful ideas and suggestions regarding work/study/life balance, visioning, priority and time management, and holding oneself accountable, in addition to helpful information for academic program success such as academic writing, resources, and other practical tools (24%, or 7/29).

Workshop 1: Academic writing. When asked what aspect of the academic writing workshop was most helpful to them as graduate students, 33% (6/18 respondents) identified critical writing skills such as developing an argument or writing a thesis. Thirty-three percent (6/18) appreciated the tools shared and practised using them. Fifty-six percent (10/18) stated they found it valuable to practise skills and listen to other students’ questions and answers, and engage in discussion: “I was able to reflect on how critical thinking and writing are related in making an argument.” “The workshop gave me information about writing skills that I NEVER had before.” Students suggested the workshop content

Table 1
Desired New Knowledge and Skill Described by Students

Desired new knowledge/skills theme	Students' descriptions used to create the themes
Building new strategies - balancing work/study/life	Students' comments indicated that they were having difficulty balancing multiple roles and responsibilities. They were interested in learning from one another to deal with challenges associated with time and stress management. They wished to acquire better ways to balance demands, manage their time, stay flexible, and succeed in their academic programs.
Practical career advice to prepare for next steps	Students attended workshops with the goal of gaining information on future employment prospects in academic and practical work settings. They wanted to learn how to adapt their new knowledge and skills in different settings, gain experience in a new industry, receive information on career-related resources, and in general expand their career options. They were seeking support to go beyond their existing comfort levels and take the next "bold" step in their career after graduation and stay informed of distance technologies.
Develop professional skills to get a new job and/or improve in current job	Students were interested in creating a number of new skills to complement their academic programs. They were interested in learning how to create and manage a skills inventory and learning to use tools and information beyond typical career planning advice. Examples of professional skills of interest included resumé writing, networking, conflict resolution, salary negotiation, communicating well, contacting potential employers, presentation skills, public speaking, managing in changing environments, and learning how to say no effectively.
Improve academic performance with new skill in various academic tasks	As with professional skills development, students were very interested in honing their academic skills. They wanted to keep up the momentum; they sought motivation for research after graduation; some wished to continue to doctoral degrees. They wanted to gain practical insights into the best ways to choose a thesis topic, to construct an argument, to design surveys, to design qualitative analysis, to gain interview skills, to write academic papers, and to get published.
Connect with other graduate students	Students wanted to learn from other students how to "succeed in balancing and/or managing time between competing demands," how to handle delicate situations, and how others felt when going beyond their comfort levels to take bold steps in their careers after graduation. They wanted to learn how others "handled situations of bias against online education and what they did to overcome that bias and promote their degrees and academic success."
Gain information on what the institution is doing to assist graduates	Related to the many issues students raised regarding career skill building were accompanying comments on how the institution could support its graduates better to help them achieve career goals. Students commented on wanting more information on how an online degree is viewed by employers, on how to improve credibility, and on what the institution is doing to help students after graduation.

should be made available to all graduate students early, as the skills learned are critical for academic success. One student said the workshop “made me realize that if I had done this ahead of time, I could have saved much angst over [my] papers.” Thirty-three percent (6/18) of students expressed gratitude for participating in the workshop with other graduate students and hearing that others shared their struggles. The workshop delivered on the academic skill building but fell short elsewhere. Students commented on the need for more student interaction during the workshop. They felt that there was “not enough interaction with other students during the writing workshop.”

Workshop 2: Career planning. Those attending the career planning workshops said they benefited from receiving access to and practice with needed resources; in particular, the e-portfolio (30%, or 6/20) and connecting with other graduate students (40%, or 8/20). Students responded very positively to the opportunity to work in the large group sessions as well as smaller groups during this workshop. They “enjoyed hearing about others’ experiences at various points in their careers and scholastic work.” Students shared their “stories” and as a result “gained valuable insights on how to access strengths.” Students also commented that they were able to connect with one another in a meaningful way and began sharing tips and insights into how to “network to find a job” and present the best self in interview situations. One of the main sentiments expressed by students after the career workshops was that they “got a sense that others were having the same problems” at the university. They felt that the online workshop contributed to their developing sense of graduate student community and that from sharing their experiences they were able to learn of some “interesting and practical content” ideas.

Workshop 3: Personal strategies for balancing work/life/study. Those attending the personal management strategy workshop began by plotting the percentage of daily time spent on work/study/life. Then, through a personal change management approach, 50% (10/20) developed a vision; they also considered how to stay accountable to deal with stresses and stay with their vision through focused exercises such as meditation. Students noted that in speaking openly to other graduate students during the workshops, they refined and practised skills such as presenting ideas, networking, and collaborating online. They were able to speak to peers from other graduate programs, present their ideas, gain additional experience in “public speaking,” and “develop self-confidence.” When asked for reactions to the workshop, students said they thought “the importance of not only setting goals but holding oneself accountable for reaching those goals” was something often missing in graduate programs. They “really liked the focus on vision” when thinking about how they spent their time now in the work/study/personal life crunch and in the discussion of where they wanted to make changes. One noted, “I think too often the accountability part is missing when we set goals.” Another mentioned that the “workshop opened my mind and improved my soft skills around setting priorities, interacting with others and hearing of experiences.”

The second and most important aspect, according to students, was the opportunity to connect with other students, hear their stories, and essentially build community (45%, or 9/20). Overall, students stated that they enjoyed “hearing of other students’ experiences” and taking part in the “networking experience.” They stated that the workshop experience gave “confidence that I am on the right path in life” and that “it was great to hear other stories that are similar to mine.” Students appeared to “welcome the opportunity to step outside daily routines to re-assess and plan ahead with a fresh perspective.”

Comments demonstrated the perceived value in relation to professional skills development. Students suggested that the workshops were “very informative, exceeded students’ expectations, contained a lot of useful information and tools for solving problems. In addition, the workshops appeared to help students develop personal approaches to deal with issues.” And, in what appeared to be a very important, recurring theme in the data collected, the workshops connected students with other graduate students in a meaningful way and as a result, realized a sense of community.

Our second research question, “What aspects of the online workshops are perceived as most effective/least effective for professional skill building?” is discussed below. To address this question, we reviewed and analyzed responses regarding the design and delivery of the workshops.

Creating the Workshop Environment: Researcher Roles

The research team consisted of three faculty members and one graduate research assistant (GRA). The GRA assisted faculty members with project recordkeeping and was present during all workshops. The GRA’s role during workshops was to observe the discussion, assist with the technology, and, in the case of career development workshops, work with faculty members as a co-presenter and co-facilitator.

Informed consent was provided directly to the research assistant. The research assistant managed pre- and post-workshop surveys, keeping identities of respondents private. Any questions that arose regarding the research participation from students was dealt with between the research assistant and the one faculty researcher who did not have direct teaching responsibilities over students. The two research team faculty members who did have teaching responsibility did not know who was participating in the study until they actually delivered the workshop. All responses to research questions were identifiable only to the GRA.

A co-facilitation workshop approach was important for conveying a supportive learning environment conducive to building trust, sharing experience, and active participation (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003). For two workshops (career development and personal management strategies), a graduate student was invited to co-facilitate. The co-led approach in both workshops was thought to create trust and direct credibility on sensitive issues. The graduate student and faculty co-facilitators shared their stories, successes, and ongoing challenges to build an open and trusting workshop learning environment.

Use of Technology

All workshops were conducted online and synchronously using web conferencing software. The first five workshops were offered via Elluminate with the final workshop delivered via Adobe Connect, due to changes in university licensing policy. With the Adobe Connect software, the facilitators were able to add video, enabling students to see each of the workshop facilitators as they delivered the content. This was not present in the workshops delivered via Elluminate. It is unclear whether video impacted the student experience to any large degree, as workshop facilitators did not perceive any differences in level of student participation when video was used. Since the two types of meeting software provided essentially the same features that enabled the sharing of documents, voice, video, and instant messaging, the change was not thought to unduly influence the research.

Students were asked if they found the learning technology effective in encouraging interaction among workshop participants. Eighty-three percent (30/36) of those who answered the question responded positively, whereas 17% (6/36) commented on challenges such as difficulties in texting and operating microphones. Among those who thought the technology was positive, several commented that from time to time some “technology glitches created some challenges to student interactions.” Students suggested that overall the technology “assisted their learning and was a super way of learning and sharing” in the workshops. In general, they appeared to take technical challenges in stride and did not feel that the technology issues negatively impacted their experience. Evidence of this is found in comments that workshops were “informative, practical and well worth the three hours spent.” For many, the “time appeared to pass very quickly” and the workshops were the first opportunity students had to interact synchronously with other graduate students across the university. Having the chance to connect with other students in a new community was mentioned more often than any of the negative challenges associated with the technical glitches. Students were very interested in finding ways to connect with other graduate students, to build a community, and to have a way to discuss issues with others.

We asked students to describe what they had learned from other graduate students as a result of the workshops. Of the 36 students who answered this open-ended question, 50% (18/36), found some form of support from other students during the workshops. Some commented that, as a result of the workshop, they “feel less alone,” found support from others, and felt that “we are all in the same boat.” Students came to realize, as a result of the workshop experience, that they were part of a graduate student community, that “other students have the same uncertainties,” that “many feel uncertain about their skills like me.” One student said, “Hearing a similar story from another online graduate student... where they were able to succeed, made me realize, that I can too.” Sharing information about their background, their academic programs, and how they are building skills seemed to help students connect. Twenty-eight percent (10/36) repeated that what they learned from other graduate students in the workshop was derived from the resources provided or tools practised. There were also some (19%, or 7/36) who said they did not benefit in this way from the workshop(s). In these cases, students answered the question with the word “nothing,” or inserted a punctuation mark. In one case a student commented that she or he “had hoped for more student-student interaction.”

Discussion

Underscoring students’ experience was the design of the workshop learning environment and how conducive the environment was to effective professional skill building. Though it is difficult to derive conclusively the effectiveness of the learning environment offered (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009), students in this study were very positive about what they experienced. A recurring theme was the students’ desire to connect informally with other graduate students. They appeared to want an opportunity to build skills that would help them with their current student roles as well as with future challenges as scholars and eventually academics (Lee, 2007). This supports the premise that learning environments that support students intellectually and socially, guided by a skilled instructor, can produce opportunities for meaningful discussions and skill building (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009).

Nonaka and Toyama (2003) suggest that individuals develop skill and knowledge as they are socialized relative to an overall culture. They uncover tacit layers of understanding regarding their organizational entity; in this case, learning culture regarding how scholarly roles are developed and experienced. The graduate students in this study appeared to have internalized tacit layers of understanding from their academic discipline regarding their scholarly roles along with what it takes to succeed in their role by observing other successful students. They also gained an informal opportunity by virtue of the workshops to observe and learn from graduate student participants across the university and graduate student co-facilitators. Nonaka and Toyama (2003) describe this development process as occurring through careful articulation of ideas, issues, and conversations occurring as facilitated through dialogue and reflection. In this sense, the graduate students' discipline, knowledge, and skill is learned, externalized, systematized, and then combined with other ideas and insights gained along the way to become explicit understanding. The combined layer of explicit and tacit understanding is then transferred and/or diffused among participating graduate students in the informal learning community, created here at various opportunities in online synchronous discussions. Students learned by observing and interacting with their referent others.

Students in this study appreciated the opportunity to develop additional professional skills, such as becoming successful researchers, presenters, communicators, and writers, and valued the chance to interact with and learn from other graduate students (Kiley & Mullins, 2005). They appreciated opportunities to get extra training and to observe other students as role models, as they demonstrated skills and abilities such as leadership, communication, project management, and/or presentations as preparation for employment (Kehm, 2005). They commented on the informal opportunity to socialize and get acquainted with other students, to learn that they shared similar challenges, and to gather ideas for overcoming challenges and moving forward. Trust was built during the workshop offerings as students supported and encouraged one another during workshop conversations.

In addition to observing graduate student co-presenters as role models communicating ideas and facilitating collaborative discussion online, students were actively encouraged to try new skills and gain practice. We interpret from the work of Nonaka and Toyama (2003) that students were sharing information regarding skills under study in an effort to transfer understanding and skill. Even if some of the techniques displayed had become tacit for the student presenters, by virtue of their demonstrations, participating students were asked to make skills development explicit in discussion. Listening, observing, and discussing techniques followed by skills practice allowed sharing of ideas to be systematized to create group understanding; ideas were shaped to create new layers of understanding and skill.

Participating graduate students discussed challenges that might be similar to those facing any graduate student, regardless of learning platform, such as the need to balance work/study/personal time and to learn to deal with the accompanying stress when integrating a graduate degree program into an already busy life. The online graduate students were interested in building professional skills to help them deal with those challenges in parallel with developing necessary discipline knowledge. Finding ways to connect with one another and build graduate student communities to support these activities was a priority.

The learning environment and resultant community encouraged open and candid conversations essential to meaningful learning conversations. Nonaka and Toyama (2003) refer to the community that supports the creation and transfer of new knowledge and skill as the *ba*. As knowledge is context specific, the *ba* created provides individuals a safe place in which to develop and transfer new knowledge and skill through social interaction (Nonaka and Toyama, 2003). This may indeed provide the insight into how an instructor might create an intellectual and social context amenable to producing opportunities for meaningful discussions and true skill building as described by Rourke & Kanuka (2009). Cultural values that emerge in a developing learning community that include a safe intellectual and social environment such as with a *ba* allow for a demonstration of what is accepted and expected behaviour when creating new knowledge, and skill. New scholars also have a safe environment to reflect upon and practice new skills related to their scholarly role identity as well as observe their peer student as referent others. The fledgling *ba* found in the workshop experience is an effective way for creating or encouraging online communities of practice and/or simply workshops to support graduate students in building professional skills.

Online graduate students in this study reported being engaged in interaction, development, and community both within their formal online programs and when interacting informally. This desire for engagement they thought should also be found among graduate students who attend in-person classes at on-site universities, suggesting that the type of learning platform may not be the main factor in engagement. Engagement must be fostered, through appropriate recognition and facilitation of *ba*, regardless of delivery platform.

This similarity of engagement across platforms is not well known; students noted that external people continue to perceive online learning negatively. Students reported challenges associated with convincing employers of the value of their online learning experience. Ironically, it is very likely that skills developed as a result of online learning offer unique capabilities that mirror contemporary workplace skills and put graduate students at an advantage when moving into the workplace. Our findings suggest that working, communicating, and learning online provides an excellent opportunity for learners to adopt professional capabilities under real-world conditions. Working and learning online requires graduate students to collaborate, build relationships, and network with peers in a distributed space without the benefit of face-to-face contact while still developing, supporting, and excelling in a shared sense of community (Offenholly, 2006). This result is not insignificant, as other researchers have suggested that traditional doctoral training ill prepares students in needed soft skills development such as those needed for teaching, leadership, communications, and collaboration; all are necessary for a complex job market (Altbach, 2004; Altbach, 2007; Kehm, 2005). Giving the increasingly distributed nature of work, this is a serious shortfall indeed.

The research team could see a budding informal community develop when discussing the challenges online graduate students face with isolation and the perception some have around online graduate study. By sharing their information and experiences, the students took a small step forward. In sum, developing professional skills in partnership with academic discipline knowledge aimed at socializing graduate students to their scholarly role (CAGS, 2008) can be accomplished online. CAGS suggests informal learning opportunities via professional development workshops are required for Canadian graduate stu-

dents. This study identifies that online graduate students are interested in such activities, and that such workshops can be successfully offered online. In fact, distance education can provide formal academic programs and informal programs that develop skills and competencies outside those programs, and in doing so, it contributes to graduate student identity and a rich graduate learning experience.

Professional skills workshops have implications far beyond graduate student development. Not only do such online workshops provide cost and time savings in the use of web-enabled, flexible, inexpensive communication tools, they also enable people to learn specific skills related to completing work beyond the barriers of time, space, and geography. This is an important learning opportunity that closely mirrors those skills needed in distributed workplaces today. Not only are these important skills developed online, but such professional skills can be developed in a way that closely mirrors those increasingly required in organizations today. Graduate students studying online appear to develop special competence to negotiate relationships in distributed environments by virtue of participating in online academic programs. Their added experience in focusing on professional skills development within a multi-disciplinary online community provides a unique opportunity for study.

In addition to potential contributions as noted, there are some limitations. It is indeed difficult to ascertain how professional skills develop, regardless of learning method. Soft skills, such as those included in leadership, do not develop overnight. Such skills require explicit learning as well as much practice and skill building over a period of time before the skills become second nature or tacit. The opportunity to observe others, to practice skills, and to receive feedback becomes a starting point in the journey.

A second challenge encountered in this project was the university's requirement to change the technology used in providing the workshops midway through the project. Though students noted some glitches and suggested that it did not impact their experience, we cannot be sure. The change of software required learning by the research team and the students. Minimal IT supports were available since it was a new learning application at the university. However, the facilitation team and students were able to resolve the technical issues and worked through the content under study. This, in itself, may have offered community building as a shared experience of technical challenges.

A third consideration is the dose effect: that is, how many workshops does it take to assist students with their scholarly development? In this case, three different workshops were offered and most students took at least one of the three. The questions remain: How many workshops are needed to actually make an impact? What is the lasting effect and for how long? How interactive do the workshops need to be in order for learning objectives to be accomplished? Finally, did students who decided to join the workshops feel more isolated than those who did not choose to attend? Or were participating individuals more interested and/or curious about cross-disciplinary contact than the full student population? Finally, how robust is the longevity of the community that began to develop during the workshop project?

Conclusions

In this paper, we presented preliminary qualitative findings from a study of online professional skills workshops delivered to online graduate students. We examined online

graduate students' responses to participating in online skills development workshops in terms of both their interest in specific professional skills and how well the workshops delivered on that goal. Findings suggest that online graduate students across multiple disciplines are keenly interested in participating in online professional skills development workshops. The graduate students in this study were most keen on the following: improving their ability to write academic papers, presenting their work, improving their ability to collaborate, making career plans, and improving their ability to balance the competing demands of study/work/life. Students actively engaged in the workshops reported valuable learning and development; they said that as a result of the workshops, their scholarly roles and informal learning communities may have been enhanced. The provision of the skills workshops appeared to also contribute to an emerging informal graduate student community. While students indicated benefits as a result of attending the workshops, they also noted serious ongoing challenges around issues of isolation, time management, and external negative perception of online learning. Future research could explore more specifically how online environments without a culturally supported base may thwart graduate student community experiences. A broader, longitudinal study that incorporates other strategies for creating a rich online graduate student experience through various workshop types and topics would validate or refute our preliminary findings. Investigation of the factors that influence graduate student scholarly role development and careful attention to providing for cognitive, teaching, and social presence in online graduate student workshop environments would be beneficial. In order to study leadership skills development more specifically, it would be beneficial to engage in a panel study over the course of a graduate program where individuals engage in both explicit disciplinary learning as well as skills development opportunities within their online community.

Finally, comparisons of issues raised in this paper across disciplines in the university, length of time students are in graduate school, and how different demographic groupings respond to workshops would also yield beneficial information. We suggest that further research is needed to support decisions made by graduate schools as to whether academic development is adequate in preparing students for post-graduation life or whether the addition of online professional skills workshops should become a standard component of graduate education.✱

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