Supporting student nurses in practice with additional online communication tools

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ABSTRACT

Student nurses' potential isolation and difficulties of learning on placement have been well documented and, despite attempts to make placement learning more effective, evidence indicates the continuing schism between formal learning at university and situated learning on placement. First year student nurses, entering placement for the first time, are particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of practice.

During 2012 two first year student nurse seminar groups (52 students) were voluntarily recruited for a mixed method study to determine the usage of additional online communication support mechanisms (Facebook, wiki, an email group and traditional methods of support using individual email or phone) while undertaking their first five week clinical placement. The study explores the possibility of strengthening clinical learning and support by promoting the use of Web 2.0 support groups for student nurses. Results indicate a high level of interactivity in both peer and academic support in the use of Facebook and a high level of interactivity in one wiki group. Students' qualitative comments voice an appreciation of being able to access university and peer support whilst working individually on placement.

Recommendations from the study challenge universities to use online communication tools already familiar to students to complement the support mechanisms that exist for practice learning. This is tempered by recognition of the responsibility of academics to ensure their students are aware of safe and effective online communication.

Introduction

The advent of Web 2.0 technologies, such as wikis and blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook, has heralded a revolutionary approach to computer users' interaction with online materials. When using these types of tools in education students no longer sit passively by their computers but are encouraged to interact with course materials and each other in order to further their understanding (Table 1).

Co production is key to Web 2.0 tools (Grover and Stewart, 2010) and knowledge is co constructed through collaborative effort (Fountain, 2005; Mejias, 2006). In particular Web 2.0 tools have spawned "Learning 2.0" (Grover and Stewart, 2010) which builds on the traditional social constructivism view of education that learning is not solely about the individual learning in isolation but increasingly about the individual's learning being influenced as part of their group or the environment that surrounds them (Dewey, 1938). This learning is particularly pertinent to practice where student nurses are being guided by more experienced colleagues in the imprecise world of professional practice (Schon, 1983; Benner, 1984; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008).

As well as promoting the co production of knowledge Web 2.0 has the potential to contribute significantly to emotional or pastoral support. Ossiansson (2010) and DeAndrea et al. (2012) focus on the influence of social networking sites on social capital or the "social resources that people accrue through their relationships with others" (DeAndrea et al., 2012: 16). Facebook can be influential in promoting socialisation to the college setting (DeAndrea et al., 2012; Junco, 2012) and, by learning through peers, students experience an increased connection and affiliation to their academic institution. A reduction in the uncertainty of a new college environment by online interaction focussing on positive and realistic expectations can assist student transition (DeAndrea et al., 2012) and provide them with a valuable formative experience to start their academic careers. As Ossiansson (2010: 124) found, whilst working with masters students on Facebook, "a feeling of being valued, committed, seen, important and part of a group".

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Table 1
Definition of elearning terms.

elearning terms	Features
elearning	Learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology
Facebook	A social networking website that allows individuals to set up an online profile, add other users as friends and exchange messages. Users can post personal information, upload photographs, describe their interests, and link to other profiles and pages. The choice to create a profile in a network means that those connected to that network can view that profile. Users can search for friends by name, location, email and institution.
Netiquette	The correct or acceptable way of using the Internet
Web 2.0 tools (And web 1.0 tools)	The second stage of development of the Internet, characterised especially by the change from static web pages (web 1.0) to dynamic or user-generated content eg wikis and the growth of social networking e.g. Facebook
Wiki	An editable tool for working with others that has a trackable history of changes (Wikipedia is the most popular example). Much like a blog, its strength is that can be used to share multimedia resource.

Adapted from JISC websites and Oxford online Dictionary accessed 23/08/12.

Although research into the use of the collaborative potential of both learning and peer support through online tools in academic institutions is increasing its potential to enhance student learning and support in practice education remains untested. From research by Melia (1987) through to the present day common problems are highlighted in the situated learning that student nurses experience in practice. Student nurses experience difficulties applying their theoretical learning to the practice setting as well as facing helplessness, dependency (Spouse, 2001; Chesser-Smyth, 2005) and even personal abuse (Thrysoe et al., 2010). The reliance on a mentoring support structure is seen as highly significant to the success of student learning (Myall et al., 2007; Gray and Smith, 2000) yet this relationship also has its difficulties. Research indicates that the mentors' clinical workload and lack of clarity of their mentoring role can have an effect on their support of students (Myall et al., 2007; Gray and Smith, 2000; Taylor, 1997).

"Belongingness" in a clinical setting is a concept found to be influential to student nurses' situated learning (Levett-Jones and Lathlean 2008). Levett-Jones et al. (2007) conclude that the third year students in their study were dependent on a sense of belonging to their practice setting in order to experience positive clinical learning. Belongingness in a clinical setting is synonymous with personal involvement in a system or environment and characteristics of being valued and socialised to the group (Levett-Jones et al., 2007). This has many parallels with feelings generated by online groups and social networking sites (Ossiansson, 2010; DeAndrea et al., 2012) that have been identified as a source of social capital and motivation.

Particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of practice learning are first year student nurses who are entering practice placement for the first time "knowing a little and feeling useless" (Chesser-Smyth, 2005: 323). A sense of belongingness is particular significant for first year student nurses starting out on their professional trajectory where they can be at their most vulnerable and disorientated.

This mixed method study, whilst acknowledging the high significance of good mentor support to students' clinical learning, questions the practicalities and now established tradition that the mentorship model is often the sole source of support for student nurses on placement. The study explores the possibility of strengthening clinical learning and support by promoting the use of Web 2.0 support groups for student nurses drawn from established peer and academic networks as they make the transition from their academic to their practice learning on placement.

Background to the study

The aims of the study sits against the current national usage of Web 2.0 tools by students and the barriers that may exist to the implementation of Web 2.0 tools in education. Both are influential variables on the successful implementation of Web 2.0 tools in practice from one university locality.

Web 2.0 usage and attitude within the student population

Despite identified pedagogical advantages a two year study of first year students across five UK universities found significant variations in their use of new technologies including Facebook (Jones et al., 2010). Most Web 2.0 technologies attract minimal use if driven by the students themselves with the clear exception being the use of social networking sites such as Facebook (Judd and Kennedy, 2010). Student use of Web 2.0 tools demonstrated little homogeneity; a commonality was that Facebook increased significantly in traditional university courses once students had started Higher Education (Jones et al., 2010).

The impact of this trend can be seen through the beginnings of the migration of students away from institutional email towards social networking tools (Judd and Kennedy, 2010.) Judd (2010) found in a study of undergraduate biomedical students use of webmail and social networking between 2005 and 2009 that the use of email had declined and social networking sites had now gained parity with email usage. By 2009 students were more likely to be involved in social networking sites alone than combining this medium with email. Although Judd (2010) does not suggest email is being ignored, his study indicates this medium is being accessed less frequently and concurs with the author's own anecdotal experience that Facebook communication reaches a greater number of students more effectively.

Opportunities to communicate with academics on social networking sites again does not present a homogenous picture as to students' preferences to academics joining them in their online spaces previously reserved for social interaction (Baran, 2010; Junco, 2012).

The application of wikis at Bournemouth University found first year students, typically comfortable with presenting multiple aspects of their lives in an online context, appear more concerned with the purpose and quality of the educational use of Web 2.0 tools and the immediate social presence that is afforded (Morley, 2012). Students actively criticise social media provided by universities that are inferior to the accessibility and usability of the online tools that they already use. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2012) believe that institutional learning management systems do not effectively address learner control and personalisation. They do not provide students with enough opportunity to manage their own learning as well as the all important connection to their peers. Certainly as students compare the ease of accessibility and professional interface of social networking sites such as Facebook it is questionable whether a university site could ever match the student experience.

Barriers to using Web 2.0 tools

Although academics recognise the potential of using online communication tools already popular and established within the student body, barriers exist in translating this awareness into