Using blogs for facilitating and connecting nurse educator candidates

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media includes blog applications, which can be used as online journals or diaries that encourages interaction and collaboration within an online community. The aim of this study was to explore and describe the use of blog writing as learning journals during a short course for nurse educator candidates about social media.
Method: A qualitative descriptive design was used. The participants were nurses, Bachelor, Master's and Doctoral students who intended to follow a career in education ($N = 24$, female $n = 21$, male $n = 3$, Mean age 37) from four different countries of the European Union. The blogs written during the course were used as a data collection method and the data was analyzed with qualitative content analysis.
Results: A total of 260 blogger posts and 372 peer comments were analyzed. Four main categories emerged from the analysis: 1) Course content, new knowledge, and changed views, 2) Reflection and critical thinking, 3) Encouraging and peer support and 4) Expressing feelings, experiences, and expectations.
Conclusion: Blogs are potential learning spaces in short courses in nurse educator education, especially in sharing feelings and experiences, enhancing an encouraging atmosphere, critical thinking, and reflection.

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1. Introduction

One of the challenges of the traditional teaching paradigm in nursing education today is to adapt to the demands and needs of a new generation of learners. Learning expectations and characteristics of the so-called Net Generation and the faculty, who mostly use a lecture-based model of education, differ greatly (Skiba and Barton, 2006). Despite their familiarity with digital technology, this generation needs the intellectual skills to think critically and promote meaningful learning (Green et al., 2014). Therefore, strategies are needed that address social networking, which allow learners to connect and interact outside of the traditional classroom and provides more collaborative interaction between the student and teacher. Wikis and blogs are Web-based tools favored by the Net-generation, because they engage people in knowledge sharing, reflection and debate, and they are also highly accepted in academia (Garrity et al., 2014).

Blogs are social media applications that are increasingly popular in education, used as a tool for reflective and collaborative learning.

Blogs are defined as online journals or diaries, and they can have different meanings depending on how blogging is instructed and used. Social media is a general term including more than thirty definitions (Cohen, 2011), but broadly speaking it is an emerging technology platform, a cultural term and "a method of communication that is changing the way individuals and organizations throughout the world transmit and receive information" (Schmitt et al., 2012). According to Price (2010), blogs are normally used in two ways. The first way is like a personal diary, and the blogging community develops around personal life experiences and events. The second way is more professional, centering on a specific subject, where ideas and recommendations are all discussed and experience is explored for clear purposes. Another dimension of blogging in nursing education, proposed by Taylor (2012), is that it can develop social capital through the creation of networks and communities with shared norms and trusting relationships and creates student connections.

In nursing education, social media is a platform that encourages collaboration (Grassley and Bartoletti, 2009) and can be used as a tool by the educators for teaching students about communication, healthcare policies, and ethics. (Schmitt et al., 2012). As nurses are responsible for information and knowledge in dealing with the healthcare system and the people within the system, it makes sense that nurse educators investigate different ways to utilize social media in the nursing curricula. (Schmitt et al., 2012).

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Although the perception of social media trends in nursing education is increasing, studies regarding the adoption of blogging in nurse educator education are still limited. Knowledge for the usefulness of blogging in nurse educator education in Europe is also lacking, and there are disparities as to the nurse educator education and the competencies required to prepare a university-level nurse (European Federation of Nurse Educators, FINE, 2016). The aim of this international study is to explore and describe the use of blog writing as learning journals during a short course for nurse educator candidates about social media.

2. Background

Social media studies is proliferating in health care research, but blogging is an emerging theme in nursing literature and has been developed either as a resource for patients or as a tool for nursing education. For example, cancer patient blog users benefited from blogging in many ways, such as finding friends going through the same things, getting support from people, and being able to express their feelings (Kim and Chung, 2007). The blog also allowed for documentation of the family members' illness process, created structure in everyday life, facilitated a normal grief process, and preserved memories of events and of the loved one (Andersson et al., 2013).

Perceptions of social media in nursing education is increasing, and this is supported by the research evidence from studies focusing on the use of social media in general (Kohtz et al., 2012; Tuckett and Turner, 2015; Salminen et al., 2016), with the use of Facebook as a tool to support studying (Tower et al., 2014, 2015), Twitter discussions (Booth, 2015; Richardson et al., 2016), Whatsapp use for primary health care education improvement (Willemse, 2015), using mobile phones to support education (Chipps et al., 2015), and social media as related to unethical behavior (Smith and Knudson, 2015).

In the case of blogging, there is a widespread popular perception that this is a form of personal diary writing shared by individuals (Price, 2010; Lin et al., 2013). This means that blogging goes a step further than journal entries. As it is argued by Garrity et al. (2014) in their integrative review, blogs contribute to learning through dialog and collaboration involving challenging opportunities that stimulate learner engagement and learning as a social process. Blogging as a teaching and learning method is seen to present social constructivism in practice, since it enhances the learners' active roles and interactions between learners and teacher (Garrity et al., 2014).

Roland et al. (2011) studied blogging as an "educational enhancement tool for improved student performance in undergraduate nursing education". They found that the students benefited from the support received from each other in such areas as knowledge sharing, drug calculation, communication, preparing for exams, and focusing on specific tasks. Blogging also encourages self-reflection, which leads to many benefits, such as self-appreciation, improved writing skills, self-confidence, and increased empowerment (Roland et al., 2011). Blogs have also been described as a tool for nursing educators (Grassley and Bartoletti, 2009) that promotes interactive learning and interaction with learners. Within the clinical settings, it is also possible that the use of blogs promotes inter-professional collaboration, facilitates peer support, and assists in project management (Billings, 2009). Furthermore, the effect of using blogs was studied on meta-cognitive skills and the clinical reasoning of physiotherapy students in a fieldwork education program (Tan et al., 2010). Many clinical-reasoning typologies were found, such as ethical, interactive and procedural reasoning along with evidence of metacognition. Blogging proved to be a good way to promote clinical reasoning and metacognition in practical training.

Previous literature on blogging has concentrated on analyzing the effectiveness of blogs and were studied using surveys or tests (Jalalat and Wagner, 2014; Hanson, 2011; Wetmore et al., 2010) or in different settings than ours, i.e. in health care (Levine, 2014) or nursing education (Roland et al., 2011). The limitations of using blogs have also been

discussed, including "managing techno stress" of faculty not fluent with the technology (Saichaie et al., 2014). However, less research has been done with retrospective blog analysis. Only a few studies have had a qualitative perspective in blog writings (Kang et al., 2011; Williams and Chinn, 2009; Roland et al., 2011; Reed, 2012), of which only two are from the nursing field (Roland et al., 2011; Reed, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, there is no other study describing blog contents in nurse educators' education. Previous review suggests that empirical data from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives are needed to provide knowledge for the usefulness and effectiveness of blogging in education (Garrity et al., 2014). The goal of the current paper is to contribute to better understanding of blogging and its ability to enhance the reflective learning process as it explores blog writing from the perspective of future nurse educators.

3. Research Method

3.1. Objectives

Blog writing was a part of the course of social media called "XXXX" (XXXX). The aim of this study was to explore and describe the use of blog writing as learning journals during a short course for nurse educator candidates about social media.

The research questions were: What do students write in their blogs and how do they use their blog writing during the short course?

3.2. Design

The study design is a qualitative descriptive study (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2010). The report follows the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines for qualitative research. SRQR guideline items are considered to be essential for complete and transparent reporting of qualitative research (O'Brien et al., 2014).

3.3. Settings

The data was collected from a two-week short course within a XXXX, the XXXX. The purpose of the XXXX was to bring together university students and staff from different countries to ensure high-quality nurse educator education by learning evidence-based teaching in terms of emerging social networking resources (such as blogs) that facilitate learning communities and support student learning.

3.4. Data Collection

The blogs students wrote were used as a source of data, thus, blogging was used as a data collection method. The data was collected in 2013 during the XXXX (XXXX) short course. The context of the study was a European Union-funded project under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) that was designed to enable people at any stage of their life to take part in stimulating learning experiences as well as developing education and training across Europe (European Commission, 2016). Blogging was used both as a learning tool and as research material. In XXXX, blogs were used as a discussion forum to facilitate participants' engagement in meaningful dialog about the use of social media in nursing education. The aim of blogging was to improve their commitment with the project content with one another and to stimulate students in utilizing social media tools in teaching and learning in their future appointment as nurse educators. The goal was also to help the participants to share knowledge and to practice their English writing skills. The instructions for blog writing in the XXXX are presented in Table 1.

The XXXX host institution organized and offered an environment on the Internet where the participant nurse teacher students could write and save the blogs. Blogs were written in the Moodle e-learning