



# Using social media as a strategy to address 'sophomore slump' in second year nursing students: A qualitative study



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## SUMMARY

**Introduction:** An important contributing factor to the shortfall in the nursing workforce is the high attrition rate of students from nursing programmes. Recently, researchers have begun to examine the 'sophomore slump' phenomenon, related to students' sense of low self-efficacy associated with learning in their second year of study, that may be related to attrition.

**Background:** Academic success is heavily influenced by self-efficacy, or a student's belief in their ability to be successful. Strategies that enhance self-efficacy include peer learning, which increases students' engagement and reinforces self-regulated learning. Social networking sites such as Facebook provide students the opportunity to take part in peer learning and may promote students' self-efficacy.

**Aim:** The aim of the study was to develop a Facebook forum that utilised peer learning, to build self-efficacy related to learning, of students commencing into the second year of a three year nursing programme.

**Methods:** Students commencing into year two of a Bachelor of Nursing programme were invited to join a Facebook forum to support their study. One hundred and ninety-eight students accepted the invitation. Data was collected over a twelve-week period. Text from the Facebook forum was downloaded and analysed thematically.

**Findings:** Analysis suggests that Facebook forums may be a useful peer learning strategy to build students' self-efficacy related to study in the second year of nursing study. Students shared mastery experiences, provided modelling experiences, and used verbal persuasion to reframe problems which suggested that it helped build students' self-efficacy, and alleviated some of the physiological response associated with stress.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that social media platforms are important tools by which students can engage in peer learning to build self-efficacy around their nursing studies. This may in part help address the 'sophomore slump' phenomenon, enhance students' learning experiences more widely, and impact on students' decisions to remain in nursing programmes.

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## Introduction

There are significant challenges for the nursing profession to ensure the development of a workforce that is sufficient in size to deliver health care into the future (Cameron et al., 2011; Jeffreys, 2007; Urwin et al., 2010). Shortfalls in the number of nurses are predicted to reach approximately 30% in the United States (US), Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) by 2016 (Buchan and Seccombe, 2010; Little, 2007; Unruh and Fottler, 2005).

An important challenge is the high attrition rate of students from nursing programmes. It is estimated that between 20% and up to 50% of students will not finish their nursing programmes (Turner et al., 2006; Canadian Nurses' Association, 2009; Buchan and Seccombe, 2010; Fraher et al., 2010). It is therefore imperative that nursing programmes focus on issues associated with recruiting and retaining students in order to help address projected workforce shortfalls and ensure workforce sustainability (Cameron et al., 2011).

## Background

To date, efforts to retain students in nursing programmes have focussed on enhancing students' 'first year experience' of study, by developing measures to ensure positive and successful experiences (for example, developing academic capacity) (Andrew et al., 2008; Tinto, 2006–2007). However success has been limited. More recently, researchers have begun to examine students' experiences in their

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second year of study, and a body of literature regarding the phenomenon termed 'sophomore slump'<sup>5</sup> is emerging.

The sophomore slump occurs as a period of self-reflection and confusion as students seek to demonstrate academic competence, self-direction and autonomy and setting their individual pathway towards achieving personal and professional goals (Gahagan and Stuart Hunter, 2008). The literature suggests that students in the second year of study, who have been previously supported in a structured and targeted way, may be expected to be more able to self-navigate their study in the absence of unique interventions, for example first year academic coordinators, associated with supporting first year students. This can result in tension between students' expectations and the reality of the educational experience, and requires renegotiation of relationships with peers and academics if previous support mechanisms are less intensive (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Wang and Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). As a result, students question their self-efficacy related to study and professional practice and may leave their study (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008).

In the second year of study, the development of academic self-efficacy is threatened as workload demands increase and content complexity becomes more rigorous and students are faced with the challenge of achieving competence at a higher intellectual and developmental level (Gahagan and Stuart Hunter, 2008; Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008). For nursing students, psychomotor skill development, theory integration and clinical decision-making become increasingly complex as they attempt to develop professional attributes and be successful in their study and in their practice (Prymachuk et al., 2009).

Educational research is replete with evidence that academic success is heavily influenced by self-efficacy, or a self-belief in the ability to master a task (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, engaging with strategies that encourage development of self-efficacy amongst second year nursing students may be an important consideration in addressing the 'sophomore slump' phenomenon. Bandura (1977) describes four sources of self-efficacy; mastery, where self-efficacy is enhanced by successfully performing a task; social modelling, whereby self-efficacy is enhanced by watching others successfully complete a task; social persuasion, where positive feedback enhances the perception of capability to succeed and psychological responses, whereby personal responses and emotional reactions affect self-efficacy.

Strategies such as peer learning have long been recognised as effective in encouraging meaningful learning by encouraging students to work together, develop critical thinking skills, articulate knowledge and develop learning strategies (Boud et al., 2001). Importantly, in peer learning students take responsibility for their own learning by giving feedback to, and receiving feedback from, other students (Keppel et al., 2006). For nursing, peer learning is an important tool to develop skills transferrable to practice, for example, teamwork. Additionally, peer learning is believed to promote life-long learning (Tan, 2003) and may be useful in helping students build self-efficacy.

Social networking sites such as Facebook provide students the opportunity to take part in peer learning, where students can autonomously direct and control their learning. Enhancing autonomy not only increases students' engagement, but simultaneously reinforces self-regulated learning strategies and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Bowers-Campbell, 2008). When students are invited to take part in peer learning through social networking they can self-monitor, self-evaluate and self-reinforce behaviours that support learning (Kuiper et al., 2009). Importantly, using social media platforms such as Facebook opens up learning by engaging with students in a way that is routine for current generations (Hamid et al., 2010; McMillan and Morrisson, 2006).

The use of social media can potentially afford a learning space in which self-efficacy can be built. Communication and feedback via Facebook is not initiated by the academic or educator (whose roles on such sites serve only to supervise appropriateness of content), but from peers, and this serves to strengthen a sense of mastery and model an effective learning strategy (Bandura, 1977; Bowers-Campbell, 2008). The nature of personal interactions increases student motivation (Mazer et al., 2007) and persuades students that they have the skills to succeed (Bandura, 1977).

## Methods

The aim of the project was to provide an online forum in which social media (Facebook) could be used to build self-efficacy related to learning, of students commencing into the second year of a nursing programme.

### Theoretical framework

The project was underpinned by a constructionist epistemology. Applying this lens, meaning is constructed, rather than created, through normal interactions between people and their everyday worlds (Crotty, 1998). Accordingly, the project did not set out to provide an objective truth, but rather provide the reader with multiple subjective meanings, accepted as "multiple knowledges" (Crotty, 1998; Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 13).

### Sample

A convenience sample of students commencing into year two of a three year, on campus Bachelor of Nursing (BN) programme ( $n = 236$ ), were invited by email to join a Facebook group. The invitation advised that the group was open to all second year students, for the purpose of supporting their study, and they were welcome to post any information related to their study. One hundred and ninety-eight students accepted the invitation (84% of the student cohort). Participation was voluntary and non-participating students were made aware that key information would also be available on subject websites (this was to ensure that students without reliable internet access were not disadvantaged). Students were informed that the forum would be closed at the end of week fifteen.

The forum was monitored daily by project staff. This was important to ensure that all the participants maintained appropriate etiquette, and also to ensure students were sharing correct information. When there were concerns about accuracy of information being shared, the monitoring project member posted to guide students towards where to find correct information.

### Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Prior to opening the Facebook page students were notified of professional guidelines with regard to posting information and maintaining confidentiality.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The Facebook forum started with a post from an academic asking how students were going with their study and if they had any questions about the course assessment. Subsequent posts were student initiated. Data were collected over a thirteen-week period and analysed thematically, informed by Elo and Kyngas (2008) (from week 3 of the academic semester until the end of week 15). Usage of the forum increased from fifteen student posts in week three to numerous posts per day by the end of week fifteen. At the

<sup>5</sup> A sophomore student refers to a student who is in the second year of tertiary study.

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