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How Virtual Communities of Practice via Social Media might enhance Nurse Education

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Abstract

Nurse education in the United Kingdom is undergoing its biggest transformation in decades. Changes to educational standards mean that future nurses, will require a wider range of skills; proficiency in those skills; and a breadth of knowledge to support practice. Meanwhile, widening participation initiatives have increased the numbers of Nursing Students from a wider range of backgrounds with more diverse academic abilities. Potential challenges for Higher Education Institutions, may therefore arise from increased numbers entering programmes and the tensions between Learners' prior educational experience and the demands and expectations of new curricula.

Whilst Social Media is already widely used by Academics for the purposes of research, debate and self-promotion, its use as an education tool varies from institution to institution. Social Media platforms such as Twitter, promote active connections with peers, and have the potential to encourage a shared discourse with expert Clinicians and Academics alike. If harnessed correctly, Social Media may be used to develop Virtual Learning Communities which may address these emerging challenges in Nurse Education, supporting a wide-scale exchange of knowledge, reflection and the development of academic skills such as writing and critical thinking.

This paper considers the benefits of Social Media, specifically Twitter, and how it can be used to support the education of Nursing Students. A recent student-led conference is used to illustrate how Twitter has the potential to increase student's social capital whilst contributing to the development of professional identity. This paper argues that both Students and Academics alike, may benefit from the innovative use of Social Media and that further research is needed to establish how it can be incorporated into new pre-registration Nursing programmes.

Keywords

Social Media, Nurse Education, Community of Practice, Twitter, Nursing Students

Introduction

Nurse education in the UK is undergoing its biggest transformation in decades. In response to unprecedented changes to the health and social care landscape and increasing complexity in patient groups (NHS England, 2014), all Nursing Students following a pre-registration nursing programme in the UK from 2020, are required at the point of entry to the register, to have a wider range of knowledge and skills and will have to demonstrate proficiency rather than competency (Nursing and Midwifery Council [NMC] 2018a). Furthermore, the abolition of the student bursary and the lift of the cap on student numbers, along with widening participation initiatives (Willis, 2012; Health Education England, 2015) have resulted in an increase in the numbers of Students entering undergraduate Nursing programmes from a diverse range of socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. For Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) delivering Nurse education, challenges exist both in increased teaching workloads and in supporting students from more diverse backgrounds, to become independent, self-motivated learners and critical thinkers. New and innovative ways of delivering Nurse education must therefore be explored (NMC, 2018b).

Social Media is a term that encompasses a range of online platforms where Users create content (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), where information is speedily disseminated, and debate is enabled (Booth, 2015). Social Media platforms in the very least are beneficial as a medium by which up-to-date knowledge is easily accessed, free of charge (Ricoy and Feliz, 2015; Price, et al, 2018) and so can become powerful tools for professional development. Key benefits of using Social Media in Higher Education, therefore, go beyond marketing and self-promotion if harnessed effectively. As a way of engaging Students, Social Media is increasing in popularity (Manca and Ranieri, 2016) and supports a diverse range of learning styles (Whitty and Anane, 2014). Despite its potential for innovative ways of working with Students, however, its use within Nurse education is still in its infancy (Price, et al, 2018) and published examples of how Social Media is currently used in Nurse education are limited (Smith and Lambert, 2014).

This limited use may be, in some respects, attributed to caution around the use of Social Media in Nursing. Whilst used by organizations such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Royal College of Nursing (RCN) (Moorley and Chin, 2014), not all content available via Social Media is regulated. Furthermore, there is the risk of professional images being tarnished by personal stories and images of unprofessional behaviour, or by expressing dissatisfaction with practices at work (Levati, 2014). These have even resulted in some NHS Trusts restricting the use of social media from workplace computers (Ferguson, 2013). The NMC, however, recognise the value of, and encourage the use of, Social Media and have released guidance (NMC, 2019) to support Users. Nursing Students must therefore exercise caution when attempting to integrate their personal and professional identities online and must respect personal boundaries (Westrick, 2016).

For Nursing Students, the benefits of Social Media go beyond the enhancement of engagement, communication and writing skills (Jackson et al, 2018) as Student Nurses are also exposed to contemporary issues in healthcare (Ramage and Moorley, 2019) allowing them to participate in, and to drive the discourse around these issues. Furthermore, Social Media, may also present networking opportunities, thus expanding the prospects of future employment (Daigle, 2019).

Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs)

Lave and Wenger (1991) described a social model of learning through which professional development occurs. “Communities of Practice” (CoPs) are a useful theoretical framework that describe how being immersed in the social and cultural practices of a community, contribute to learning. This model provides a context for understanding how professional identity develops; a dynamic and social process, where the self is negotiated and created. Lave and Wenger’s earlier work (Lave and Wenger, 1991) focused upon Novices and their interactions with Experts in the workplace, however later works focused more upon personal growth linked to the individuals’ level of participation in the social practices of groups who share common interests (Wenger, 1998). Whilst the concept of CoPs within Healthcare are well-documented and have been thoroughly explored (Roland, et al, 2017), different interpretations and definitions of CoPs has resulted in a variation of structure and difficulties in terms of their application to practice (Li, et al, 2009).

Where a creation of networked virtual communities via Social Media encourage a scholarly knowledge creation and exchange (Kassens-Noor, 2012; Lewis & Rush, 2013), social interactions through Social Media may also serve to strengthen connections to the Higher Education Institution and its wider community (Gray, et al. 2013), facilitating collegiality through supportive networks (Jackson et al, 2018). The argument for whether these virtual communities can be classed as Learning communities, however, depends upon whether the conditions discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) are met. Rosell-Aguilar (2018) argues that virtual environments may be considered CoPs if they 1) Involve active members whom are ‘experts’ in their domain of interest; 2) Involve a community of members who participate in learning within this domain through mutual engagement and 3) That knowledge is shared and meaning negotiated within an appropriate context through interactions and discourse. Arguably, for Nursing Students, virtual settings transpose both practice and academic environments (Sinclair, et al, 2015) and so it is possible that Nursing Students may become members of multiple VCoPs.

Increasingly undergraduate Nursing Students are engaging with VCoPs (Jackson et al, 2018) contributing to the dissemination of good practice through active engagement and a shared discourse. Opportunities for ‘real time’ feedback supports strategies for self-reflection which are also crucial to the development of professional identities and the socialisation of Student Nurses into the nursing role. Where VCoPs are successful, therefore, an interactive and dynamic learning experience is possible, supporting a shift from passive recipients of information, to active participants who both contribute to, and drive the changing discourse around, nursing issues (Price, et al, 2018).

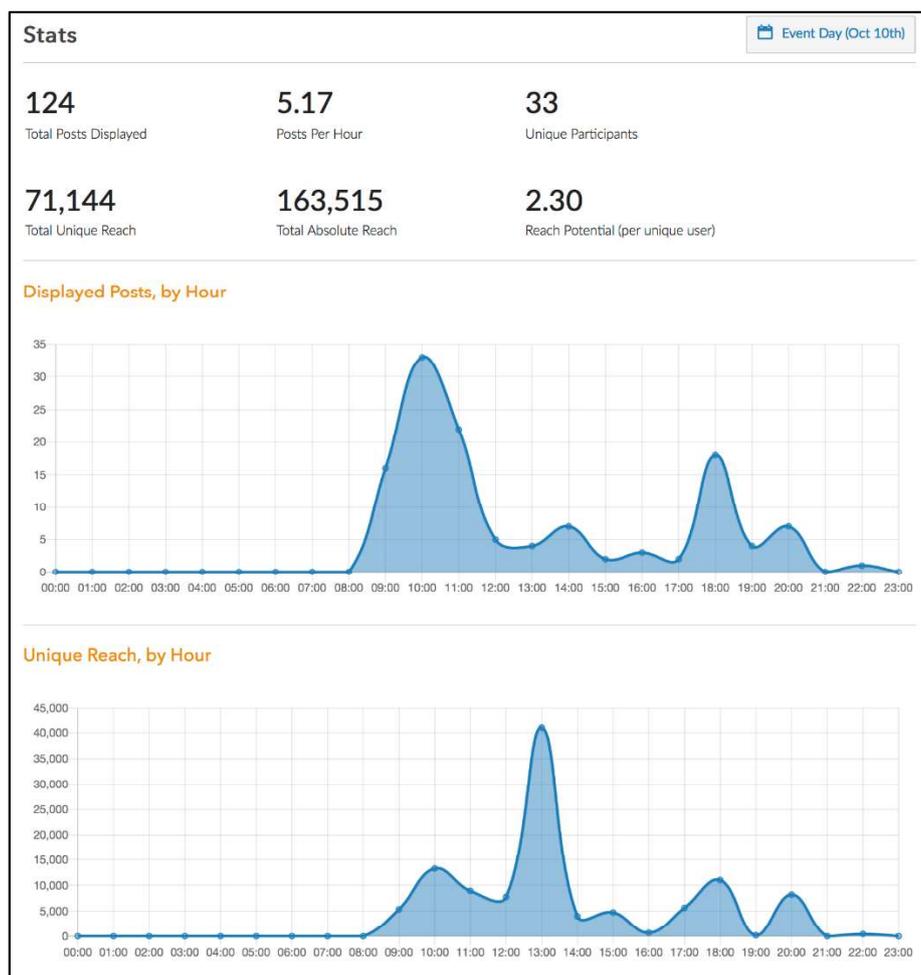
Twitter as an VCoP

The use of pre-determined shared hashtags on Twitter foster engagement and facilitate debate around specific topics. They may also be used, however (as in the cases of #WeNurses and #WeStNurses) to organise group discussions, allowing Nurses and Nursing students to cross both temporal and geographical boundaries and to engage directly with others through both synchronous and asynchronous interactions (Sinclair et al. 2015; Jackson et al, 2018). It is through active participation with hashtags, that virtual communities, are formed, facilitating engagement in a shared discourse and informal learning.

Unlike other social media platforms however, a unique aspect of Twitter, is that it also permits the crossing of traditional hierarchical boundaries (Daigle, 2019), allowing Users to engage directly with ‘expert’ senior clinicians and Academics within their domain of interest, without both the barriers of group membership and friend requests. It is for these reasons therefore that Twitter may be identified as an VCoP, satisfying the criteria set out by Lave and Wenger (1991).

The potential value of VCoPs developed through Twitter can be illustrated through a Student-led conference at a university in the north of England. The facilitation of this conference allowed health Students across the broader faculty to learn from senior clinicians and experts in the field. This event was unique, however, in that it was almost entirely led by a core group of Nursing Students and that it was almost exclusively arranged and promoted via Twitter. Many of the conference Speakers were senior clinicians and researchers known to Students on Twitter beforehand as part of existing VCoPs, and as such, were considered by the Students to be experts in their domains of practice. Despite their perceived expert position within those VCoPs, Twitter’s lack of barriers and its flattened hierarchy (Daigle, 2019) increased the accessibility to these senior clinicians and researchers, allowing Nursing Students to approach them directly online and ask them to present. Where Clinicians were unable to present, however, they often suggested alternative Speakers, supporting the Students to make new connections and further enhancing their professional networks.

Figure.1: Use of the Hashtag #WMHDEHU19



An increase in interactions on Twitter preceding, during and following the conference was noted, with many of the interactions focused around a unique hashtag to the conference (#WMHDEHU19). The numbers of unique participants using this hashtag were limited (n=33), relative to the size of the conference. On the day of the conference, however, this hashtag on Twitter alone, reached a post count of 124, with a total unique reach of 71,000. These posts included reflections on the sessions, thanking speakers and retweets throughout the day (please see Figure.1).

Feedback obtained via an Online Survey following the event was that benefits for Students had gone beyond just developing a greater awareness of resources available and an understanding of the issues discussed. It was also reported that the conference had presented physical networking opportunities with key Stakeholders and Practice Partners, thus increasing the Students' social capital. Furthermore, continued engagement in discourse beyond the conference via Twitter with peers, Academics and Speakers, might be considered an informal learning activity, providing further opportunities to reflect upon the topics discussed and challenging preconceived ideas and perceptions. The reach of these Twitter posts showcased widely, the work of these students involved with organising the conference, enhancing their professional reputations whilst also exposing others in their VCoPs to discussions around best practice.

Implications and recommendations

Whilst Social Media is used increasingly by Nurses to create and foster network connections, research into its usefulness as a learning tool in Higher Education is limited (Price, et al, 2018). Face-to-face teaching is generally perceived to be pedagogically more effective than online teaching (Manca and Ranieri, 2016), although supplementing traditional teaching methods with online teaching, may resolve some of the issues around the delivery of Nurse education to increasing numbers of Students. Social Media has a potential to support a blended learning approach, promoting a new breed of independent and self-motivated learner, who is an active participant in their own learning, in line with the new NMC standards (NMC, 2018a). Instant feedback from those engaged in Social Media, promotes reflection whilst critical analytical skills are improved through information selection (Ricoy and Feliz, 2015) as well as debate and discussion (Price, et al. 2018). Using Social Media to develop VCoPs, support the socialisation of Nursing Students into their professional nursing role through the modelling of online behaviour by senior Clinicians and Academics.

The success of VCoPs however depend both upon the 'buy in' to Social Media from both Academics and Students and consideration of the Students' preferred platform, to ensure that this is 'meaningful' (Duke, et al, 2017). During and following the conference, those Students' who regularly engaged with Twitter increased their use, although not all Students involved in the conference were users of Twitter. Potential barriers to Twitter use include the lack of privacy, the time needed to master using Twitter and the potential for information available to become overwhelming (Gualtieri, et al. 2012).

Furthermore, for some Academics, there may be concerns that the use of Social Media in general leads to the erosion of traditional Lecturer-Student relationships, presenting challenges, such as increased accessibility outside of the classroom and a potential blurring of boundaries and of professional relationships (Daigle, 2019). Lecturers may also struggle with the informal nature of Social Media discussions, perceiving that an online presence with a social aspect may impact upon the credibility of an Academic.

Additionally, Academics must have a working knowledge themselves of these platforms and feel comfortable with them to ensure that they exploit the educational potential of these. Engaging Students in this way, however, may positively contribute to positive Lecturer-Student relationships (Matzat and Vrieling, 2016), providing that professional judgement is exercised around professional boundaries.

Further research is needed around the pedagogical basis for building Social Media into Nurse education and to encourage its appropriate use amongst Nursing Students. It may be that Social Media is introduced to Students and incorporated into their Nursing programme and then its use contextualised through online activities or engagement in conferences (Jackson et al, 2018). Links to useful Twitter handles may be provided via course reading lists, whilst the use of shared hashtags on Twitter, (possibly organising them around module identification codes), may be used to foster engagement, signpost Students to relevant information and to facilitate debate around specific topics.

Conclusion

Increased teaching workloads and increased numbers of students from more diverse backgrounds, present challenges to HEIs delivering Nurse education who, due to changes in NMC standards, require Learners to become independent, self-motivated and critical thinkers. Dependent upon the level of student engagement, the use of Social Media for Nursing Students may go some way to address these challenges, having the potential to facilitate real-time opportunities for active learning and reflection, contributing to the development of Academic and Nursing skills. It is argued that Communities of Practice exist already in Virtual settings and for Nursing Students, have the potential to support the development of professional identities and networks. This paper has considered how in the current climate, Virtual Communities of Practice via Social Media platforms such as Twitter, might be employed to support Learning. Long-term, both Students and Academics may benefit from the innovative use of Social Media, providing its integration in learning and teaching processes are not made randomly and without pedagogical basis.

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