Syllabus Selection  Innovative Learning Activity

The Use of Weblogs for Students on an International Placement

The aim of this article is to provide readers with a snapshot look at the world of weblogs and how they can be used to support student nurses in preregistration education while on an international clinical placement.

A blog is shorthanded for a frequently updated weblog and is an online, chronological collection of personal commentary and links called posts. Blogs are useful educational tools because they facilitate social interaction in teaching and learning and enable learners to collaboratively develop their knowledge through reflection, analysis, and feedback from others.

Positive Aspects of Blogging by Students, Lecturers, and Practitioners

The University of Salford’s School of Nursing and Midwifery blog was developed to allow preregistration students on an international placement the opportunity to connect with staff and students and the course material while away from home. The rationale for its introduction was based on exploring mechanisms other than e-mail and telephone for supporting students facing personal challenges such as being alone, language barriers, and lack of confidence to manage difficult situations while away (Lee, 2004).

By using a blog, it was hoped that we could capture the students’ thoughts and comments about their learning abroad as it happened. The students’ peers could also read about the bloggers’ life experiences on an international placement, allowing them to relate to the encounters, offer support, and post ideas and suggestions.

Blog Evaluation

Evaluation comprised a focus group that included two lecturers and eight students. Thematic analysis of the narratives of the participants arose and included:

- Information technology skills should be assessed and developed accordingly, prior to use of a blog.
- Ground rules should be set for the group working on a blog to ensure the purpose of the blog is understood, that it is not for complaining, and that anonymity is maintained to ensure confidentiality.
- A contract of access should be identified because students do not appreciate nonusers having access to a blog to which they do not contribute.
- Consent to contribute ensures that users need to make a comment on every thread to give every contributor appropriate and suitable feedback. This prevents feedback comments from being given only to users whose posts may be more interesting than others.
- Level of support should be agreed on in the ground rules and adjusted as necessary throughout the duration of the blog’s existence, given that the support required to sustain a healthy blog can be time consuming.
- Rapid feedback (within 24 hours) to students on international placements was deemed necessary to prevent feelings of isolation and lack of support (Glenn, 2003).
- Inclusion of pictures of the team on the blog was suggested to emphasize the human aspect of blogging.
- A platform for debriefing was seen as a positive aspect of the blog to make sense of the significant events that happened while on clinical placement or studying.
- Group dynamic was seen as important, given that blog entries could vary in depth and frequency dependent on the cohesiveness of the group.
- Visual appearance of the blog should be vibrant and eye catching, and the key buttons should be easily visible and usable so users can add attachments, hyperlinks, and posts.
- The blog should complement action learning and not become merely a newsletter; blogs should be considered as a hive brain—a network of connective intelligence (Levy, 2001).

Conclusion

Blogging within the School of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Salford is now an integral part of academic, clinical, social, and psychological support for students who are fortunate enough to go on an international placement. However, before a blog is set up, it is useful to consider the recommendations above to aid a smooth transition into the world of blogs.

References


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