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Using Facebook to enhance commencing student confidence in clinical skill development: A phenomenological hermeneutic study

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Highlights

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engagement with Facebook stimulated active and collaborative approaches to learning for clinical skill development

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students' sense of confidence in clinical skills was increased through engagement with a Facebook page

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An unexpected outcome was professional socialisation, which improves connectedness and perseverance (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2011)

Summary

Aim

The purpose of this study was to explore commencing nursing students' experience of Facebook as an adjunct to on-campus course delivery to determine its impact as a learning strategy for improving confidence in clinical skill development.

Background

Approaches supporting nursing students in the development of clinical skills have relied on 'real-life' clinical placements and simulated on-campus clinical laboratories. However students continue to report a lack of confidence in their clinical skills for practice. Social networking sites including Facebook are being used as a learning strategy to stimulate active and collaborative learning approaches.

Design

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to provide an understanding of the experience of confidence in clinical skills development for nursing students.

Methods

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with commencing students about their experience as learners using Facebook and their perceptions of the impact on their clinical skill development.

Settings and Participants: Ten first-year student nurses at one university in south-east Queensland, Australia.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data including: 'We're all in this together'; 'I can do this'; 'This is about my future goals and success'; and, 'Real time is not fast enough!'. These themes provide new meaningful insights demonstrating students' sense of confidence in clinical skills was increased through engagement with a dedicated Facebook page.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have relevance to academics in the design of learning strategies for clinical courses to further support student confidence and engagement through peer collaboration and active learning processes.

Keywords

Facebook

Clinical skills development

Hermeneutic phenomenology

Student nurses

Introduction

This exploratory qualitative study aims to provide a preliminary understanding of the impact of an adjunct learning strategy (Facebook) on nursing students' sense of confidence in clinical skill development. Ensuring competent clinical skill development in undergraduate nurses is an integral component of all nursing curricula. Approaches to support and develop nursing students' skills have in the main relied on traditional education delivery through 'real-life' industry based clinical placements and simulated on-campus clinical laboratories. The expectation is that these established approaches will have an enduring impact on the developing student nurse's confidence and capacity to deliver safe and effective patient care. However students continue to report lack of self-confidence when attending clinical placement (Chesser-Smyth and Long, 2013, Panduragan et al., 2011), while the health care sector voices concern that students are not adequately prepared for clinical placements (Cooke et al., 2010) and graduates are not work ready (Wolff et al., 2010).

Social networking sites (SNS) including Facebook are designed for online communication to facilitate peer interaction and collaboration in a defined virtual community. While academics become increasingly aware of the versatility of social media tools, particularly SNS for student learning, much of the literature has focussed on the social and community building aspect of these tools (Arnold and Paulus, 2010, Jenkins et al., 2012). A small number of studies have demonstrated social media's usefulness for engaging students with content, increasing motivation and improving knowledge retention (Barczyk and Duncan, 2013, Madge et al., 2009), however to date no studies have explored the impact of SNS on student confidence in clinical skill development.

This current study has adopted Lundberg's (2008) definition of self-confidence, which derives from Bandura's (1977) construct of self-efficacy, whereby the individual holds the belief that they have the capability to complete a task successfully. The nursing literature is replete with this same notion of self-confidence (Panduragan et al., 2011, Thomas and Mackey, 2012), and the concept is identified as a key component for effective clinical performance. Hence, confident students are more

likely to be effective nurses. Self-confidence provides a foundation for knowledge acquisition and application and its pervasive influence impacts on the individual's ability to view tasks optimistically, to persevere through adversity and to ultimately accomplish that which they set out to do (Lundberg, 2008).

Study Design

Study Aim

This purpose of this study was to reveal the experience of nursing students using Facebook as an adjunct to on-campus course delivery to determine its impact as a learning strategy for improving confidence in clinical skill development. Access to the Facebook site was restricted to registered students. Ethics approval was granted by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Students who indicated an interest in the study were provided an information sheet and signed an informed consent document, indicating awareness of their rights both during the research process. Verbatim accounts were designated by pseudonym rather than participant name to provide confidentiality and anonymity.

Setting and Participants

The setting was a large metropolitan university in Southeast Queensland. Commencing students complete a foundation nursing skills course—*Clinical Health Assessment*—with learning outcomes oriented to achieving competency in basic physical examination and health assessment prior to the first clinical placement. An Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) to assess skill and theory integration was a final assessment item, comprising 45% of the overall marks for the course. The researcher was course lecturer during the project, and had weekly face-to-face contact with students in laboratory classes. At the completion of the teaching term, a post on the SNS page invited students to share their experiences of using the course Facebook site.

Learning Strategy

The learning strategy was a closed Facebook group to support clinical skill and knowledge development for the course *Clinical Health Assessment*. All enrolled students were eligible for membership. Participation in the group was voluntary, and not regulated by explicit rules beyond a reminder of social networking etiquette. The Facebook page was monitored daily by the academic/researcher. It was anticipated that robust support for clinical skill development would be achieved through SNS discussion about course content. Knowles' six assumptions of adult learning informed the design and implementation of this strategy (Knowles, 1973). Table 1 illustrates the content and processes used for the learning strategy as they align with Knowles six assumptions of adult learning (Knowles, 1980).

Table 1. Examples of content and processes used in the learning strategy integrated with Knowles, 1980, Knowles, 1984, Knowles, 1989 assumptions of adult learners.

Components of Knowles' theory	Content	Processes
Need to know	Components of OSCE provided ahead of time and included: key clinical skills; theory underpinning practice; cultural	5 weeks prior to OSCE, Facebook site displayed diverse activities prompting interaction with course content, for

Components of Knowles' theory	Content	Processes
	considerations, safe handling and infection control principles.	<p>example:</p> <p>-</p> <p>YouTube skills demonstrations; National Heart Foundation resources; case scenarios with questions; guided reflection activity complementing laboratory class</p>
Responsibility for own learning	<p>Links to learning resources:</p> <p>-</p> <p>YouTube videos including "Physical assessment for nursing students" Linares (2012)</p> <p>-</p> <p>Websites illustrating concepts: heart circulation, auscultation sounds; circulatory assessment.</p>	<p>Weblinks were added to the Facebook News Feed</p> <p>-</p> <p>notifications prompted immediate access.</p> <p>-</p> <p>Facebook posts and facilitated discussion explored clinical skill techniques.</p>
Prior experience	<p>Patient case examples that aligned with the content of the course.</p> <p>Guided reflective exercises linked to weekly course topics and OSCE criteria.</p>	<p>Case studies posted on Facebook</p> <p>-</p> <p>promoted deep learning by applying skills and knowledge developed in classes/past life situations.</p> <p>Weekly post-laboratory activity added to News Feed with guided questions to prompt reflective practice. Examples included: "Consider the strengths of your performance of the Glasgow Coma Scale in laboratory class"</p> <p>-</p>

Components of Knowles' theory	Content	Processes
		<p>“What was the feedback from peers or tutors?”</p> <p>-</p> <p>“What did you learn?” “What did you expect or know already?”</p> <p>-</p> <p>“How will you strengthen your performance and understanding of this skill?”</p>
Readiness and applicability to real-life situation	Provision of materials incorporating the content and tips for successfully completing OSCE.	Materials posted at points in time relevant to student need and course delivery.
Motivation to learn	Provision of case study challenges across the spectrum from simple to complex.	Affirmation of student learning evident in posts and discussion to build confidence. Extension activities provided to motivate further development.
Problem centred approach to real-life situations	Case studies with triggers to engage students in content in relation to the relevant clinical skills provided.	Posted case studies required learners to consider application of a clinical skills concept to a current or past life situation.

Methods

A qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenology approach was used to elicit lived experience and reveal meaning through interpretation and understanding.

Data Collection

Data were collected through field notes and semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews (see interview questions Table 2). The primary intent was to reveal an understanding of nursing students' perceptions of Facebook as a learning strategy in clinical skill development. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, which further advantaged the interaction due to the receipt and delivery of additional nonverbal cues to prompt deeper enquiry and promote safety and confidence within the relationship. The interviews followed the end of semester OSCE. Historically, the significant weighting and authenticity to clinical practice serve to mobilise student engagement with the assessment task. Hence interviewing students following the OSCE where all of the preparation and learning are 'put to the test' was determined by the researcher as the optimum time for participants to reflect on confidence in skill development and the impact of the SNS.

Table 2. Key interview questions.

1.

What prompted you to join the Facebook group?

2.

Tell me about your experience of using the Clinical Health Assessment Facebook site.

3.

Have you used Facebook or social media in the past? If so, have you ever used it for learning?

4.

What areas of the discussion did you find useful?

5.

When group members posted on Facebook, did it affect your understanding of a topic? How?

6.

Early posts on the Facebook site broke down each section of the assessment? Did you use this? How?

7.

Could you see a relationship between the posts and what you were trying to achieve?

8.

Were there areas missing from the discussion that you would have liked included?

9.

Do you think the use of the site is changing? What do you think about this?

10.

Would you use this site in the future to discuss courses with group members?

11.

What effect (if any) do you think the Facebook site had on your confidence in your clinical skills for the OSCE?

12.

Do you feel group member discussion had an impact on your confidence in preparing for assessment and professional practice?

13.

What kind of support do you feel you need while you are studying this semester?

14.

What kinds of support have been most useful for you in your study so far?

15.

What would be a useful way for you to connect with academic staff to support your learning?

16.

What type of online platform would be best for you to be in contact with academic support (e.g. Facebook, a blog)?

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and extensive field notes were made following each interview, providing opportunity to highlight key impressions. These field notes were also used to list the major ideas as presented, and therefore served as an active record to determine when data saturation was achieved.

Data Analysis

Inductive analyses of the collective descriptions were used to sort and extract meaning from the data, within a framework of existing knowledge. Emerging themes were re-evaluated with processes and relationships identified to define students' experience, specifically their 'sense of self' in the world, and their concept of what it is to 'be in the world' (van Manen, 1990). Data collection and analysis followed van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology, using his methodological structure as a basis to understand the lived experience. Pseudonyms were determined for all participants to ensure anonymity and protect their privacy.

Rigour

Rigour was achieved via the application of a systematic and reflective research design ensuring the researcher's actions remained transparent to scrutiny. A single researcher conducted the interviews, maintained meticulous field notes and records of interviews. The process of data analysis was documented in detail and adhered to the hermeneutic approach to achieve depth and detail of the lived experience. Additionally, the researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the data interpretation, by authentically representing the informant's voice. Methods to ensure this included thorough verification with informants (member-checking) during interviews and the use of verbatim extracts from the informants.

Findings

The sample included three male and seven female students, aged between 17 and 38 years. All participants were domestic students and only one student spoke a language other than English at home. Three students were recent secondary school graduates, one student was an experienced tradesperson, four students had undertaken vocational training, and two had some previous tertiary study. All had previous experience of Facebook, and while most had used SNS for social purposes only, three students had prior use to support learning.

Four main themes emerged from the interview text. These provide new insights into the participants' engagement with SNS dedicated to supporting and developing confidence in clinical skills development and are: 'We're all in this together'; 'I can do this'; 'This is about my future goals and success'; and, 'Real time is not fast enough!'.

We're all in this together embodied students' realisation of an enhanced sense of social connectedness and acceptance as both a tertiary student and a student nurse. Individuals ascertained their degree of connectedness by using the SNS to identify and consolidate existing peer relationships, to forge new alliances, and to explore their personal fit within the group. Jared's insights capture the complexities of socialisation for new students:

I think it is different asking on Facebook... like, in a lecture you are asking a question, you put your hand up, all eyes turn to you. You don't want to sound like an idiot asking a stupid question. Like on Facebook you know you can kind of like sort of morph the question to make it sound not stupid, but you know that you don't like have the time in class to say it right.

The SNS was seen as a mechanism to broaden networks and offered security through the realisation that the individual's experience mirrored their peers.

...it's a great idea because people will then tend to feel comfortable because they are part of that group... and it's a group that everybody has a common interest in" (Claire)

...it filled me with confidence when other students also had the same doubts as me ...like: 'okay, I'm not alone'. I could see where other students were either going right or wrong and stuff like that and seeing the fact that yeah, they were thinking in the same line that I was and maybe that was a more correct way. I had a lot of the same questions as everybody else on that page (Mariella).

I can do this expressed students' perceived capability for learning clinical skills and integrating theory and benchmarking themselves ("what am I able to do?") against posts which indicated the standard of existing knowledge

the things that are being put up, you're checking you know about all of that and you keep running it through your head, so I guess it ... makes you feel more confident I guess that you're on track:

I can do this, I can go into it [OSCE] and actually perform this without worrying that I'm saying the wrong things or that I'm talking too much about a certain subject and stuff like that (Mariella).

The individual would then address identified deficits ("what do I need?") through a feasible plan to mobilise available resources such as nursing faculty or textbooks. This cycle of detecting gaps in understanding, undertaking enquiry and gaining understanding provided ongoing motivation and bolstered self-belief.

It helped me a lot. [Other students] can explain it in a way that is different to how other people explain it. Whether it is the terminology that helps or they just understand it differently... people would come up to me and go: 'I saw this' [an online animation] and I would go: 'Oh yeah?' and we would just sit down and talk. (Jenna)

This is about my future goals and success articulated student perception of the Facebook site as purposive and integral to short term and longer term ambitions, and as inspiring a desire to succeed as they reflected on their understanding of concepts.

Going on placement is such a big thing. You are not looking after students any more, not looking after dummies or anything in the lab. It is actual, real people and if you mess something up it is not like: 'oh I can try it again next week?' It is: 'oh dear!' (Jared)

I think I put a lot of pressure on myself to get it right because I've seen some nurses out there that are not the best and I wouldn't want to be like them (Mariella)

'Real time' is not fast enough! captured an impression of the efficacy of Facebook as a learning platform and highlighted its familiarity, immediacy, conveniences as well as the informal nature of this method of information sharing. Participants compared these benefits favourably against the traditional contact lag time experienced in the interval between scheduled classes.

Yes, so when you posted something, because I was on Facebook at the time socialising, it ... prompted me to, you know, get my head out of Facebook and get back to the books. (Ryan):

It's just ready information that's there when you need it, because people have Facebook on their phones and everything and you can get an answer wherever you might be. (Zara)

Discussion

The meanings of students' experiences drawn from the interpretation of the themes highlight that their sense of confidence in clinical skills was increased in the context of positive connectiveness with peers; when their self-worth regarding ability was affirmed; and, through the immediacy of resources. Connectiveness describes an individual's sense of belonging and relatedness and the perception of connection with the outside world for those engaged in online activity (Rieck & Crouch, 2007). The findings of this study revealed that while participants encountered many challenges in the process of clinical skill development by predominantly self-directed learning strategies, engagement with Facebook raised their confidence in this undertaking. Correspondingly, student confidence motivated a commitment to encouraging and actively supporting peers towards attaining successful learning outcomes.

The reasons for positive self-efficacy and skill proficiency amongst participants in this study are numerous and partially explained in the findings. All participants found the Facebook site useful for opportunities to connect with peers and develop knowledge. These findings are consistent with previous studies which have demonstrated a positive correlation between peer support and confidence in clinical skill development (Chuan and Barnett, 2012, Meechan et al., 2011, Roberts, 2008). The SNS offered an informal and recognisable platform for students to engage with peers. Findings indicate students valued peers in the process of learning clinical skills. Specifically, students trusted and were motivated by shared information from participants in the Facebook group.

Identifying members of the peer network and establishing a place within the group was important to these commencing students' sense of belonging. The Facebook site was a nonthreatening mechanism for learning more about others in their course. One salient point emerging from the data was the anxiety associated with talking in front of a class, where students felt they would seem 'like an idiot'. This notion of protecting self-image appears in previous research which emphasises the importance of presenting the best version of yourself (Wilson & Proudfoot, 2014).

The Facebook strategy augmented the on-campus opportunities for collaborative learning and peer support. This aligns with the findings by Tower et al. (2014), that Facebook affords academics another means to support learning. While collaborative learning traditionally occurs during face-to-face encounters, the SNS offered flexible off-campus interaction with peers. In this study, findings suggest that an increased peer-to-peer interaction achieved the positive outcomes found in previous

studies including community cohesion (Barczyk and Duncan, 2013, Wang, 2011), feedback and clarification (McCarthy, 2010, Tower et al., 2014), and motivation (Bowers-Campbell, 2008). All student posts were seen to be worthy contributions to the developing body of knowledge, since each addressed the individual learner's needs either as a source of new information, or to confirm the reader's understanding or highlight a misunderstanding or false perception. As a result, students reported a gain in confidence related to understanding the skill requirements which motivated their commitment to skill practice for further refinement and to embed understanding. The positive contribution of Facebook to increase engagement and confidence with assessment has been reported in two other studies (McCarthy, 2010, O'Bannon et al., 2013), but has not been reported in nursing research or specifically linked to assessment of clinical skills.

The students developed collegial relationships through the SNS that spilled over into the on-campus domain. Two students with significant extracurricular commitments reported using Facebook to identify like-minded peers in order to form face-to-face skill practice partnerships. Posting on Facebook indicated a peer's knowledge of course content, however commitment to study was also attributed to students with less active Facebook participation, including those who supported peers through the 'like' response to posts. While previous research has demonstrated student perception that SNS assisted communication with peers (Brady et al., 2010), the finding that Facebook acts as a bridge to face-to-face social and academic networks in commencing students has not been studied.

Through their Facebook 'News Feed' feature, that added updates to their home page, students identified tangible signs of other students' anxieties and limitations and the strategies used to manage these. The discovery that *'we're in the same boat'* assuaged some of these fears associated with the unfamiliar expectations of tertiary study and the complexities of learning nursing skills. Similarly, posts outlining solutions enacted by peers to effectively resolve a concern became a model for future application. Other student nurses were felt to share a unique understanding of the experience of learning. Christiansen and Bell (2010) also found this commonality lent credibility to a peer's reassurances and perceptions.

Participants in this study reported both posting and non-posting behaviours. Those who elected not to post, frequently monitored the site discussions as a gauge to measure their progress against peers. Notably, in response to these posts, students initiated active approaches to increase their knowledge through in-person discussion with a smaller set of peers and their tutor during laboratory classes. Nursing studies have not explored this finding, however, in an unrelated discipline, Dennen (2008) identified the benefits to non-posters of reviewing others' Facebook posts included exposure to ideas which provoked reflection and off-line peer discussion. Dennen's study also noted that samples of peer posts empowered future posting behaviour by providing a design prototype and by identifying a point of entry into the discussion (Dennen, 2008).

Student peers played an unexpected role in promoting professional socialisation which for nursing students is associated with an increased sense of belonging, improved perseverance and academic success (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook & Irvine, 2011). Participants on the Facebook site credited peer interaction with a tangible and meaningful connection to their future career, and this perception instilled a heightened sense of satisfaction and self-esteem which sustained internal motivation.

Confidence was enhanced by the encouragement of others on the Facebook site. Students reported gains in self-confidence after receiving 'likes' or responses that acknowledged the accuracy of their post. This echoes the findings described by Smith and Peterson (2007), that student knowledge is enhanced through teaching peers. However the Facebook platform offered two additional benefits gained through peer interaction. Firstly, unlike the face-to-face learning environment, students had

sufficient uninterrupted time to reflect on questions posed, and to mobilise resources in order to present their version of a comprehensive response. In this way, students had a strong foundation of understanding, which was further strengthened by self-reflection and participation. Additionally, acknowledgement by others and the informal culture is characteristic of Facebook, empowered individuals to post what might have been feared to be a 'stupid question'. Secondly, students who preferred not to post, reported using the question as a prompt to construct their answer, and then later referring to the Facebook discussion to confirm their understanding. These students expressed a sense of relief and reorientation to preparation after reading posts which confirmed their knowledge or identified gaps to be pursued. Two studies in unrelated disciplines described the relationship between non posting students and positive learning benefits (Arnold and Paulus, 2010, Dennen, 2008).

Before crafting a post, students also reported first consulting textbook resources and notes for the information, which added another layer to the active learning process and increased familiarity with reliable resources. This enabled them to measure their understanding with that of their peers. When supported and developed, students indicated an increased sense of both motivation and self-efficacy. This process involved students reflecting on their existing understanding and using peers and traditional resources to challenge conceptions in order to refine and strengthen their knowledge. The use of SNS in this fashion was demonstrated in findings by Tower et al. (2014).

The Facebook strategy stimulated an active learning approach, as members self-initiated knowledge exchange or were prompted to undertake further research resulting in regular and sustained engagement with content. The nature of SNS allowed for students to access information with immediacy, addressing the point-in-time need without waiting for class time or a response to a formal email. Furthermore, the continuous use of the familiar Facebook platform by students facilitated the speed at which interactions occurred. This also maintained their momentum in study, thus boosting motivation. Students seeking information could also refer to previous posts at the point which best suited them via the enduring 'News Feed' discussion thread. The Facebook 'Notifications' feature alerted students to new posts, reconnecting them with the community of learners through reading and occasional posting on the site. Interestingly, study participants reported that the Facebook site activated their preparation for weekly lab classes to avoid being perceived by peers as incompetent or lacking necessary knowledge. This preparation enhanced confidence during small group practice for trying out skills, seeking peer and tutor feedback and clarifying understanding.

The Facebook site was particularly useful in time management as it provided ready access to videos, images and a peer network for discussion. An important finding of this study was that peer learning was more efficacious than independent study since it provided the means to discuss, reflect on, clarify and consolidate learning. The availability of learning opportunities at all hours extended on-campus experiences. Being able to engage around the clock, beyond the traditional university operating hours, enabled these students to make the most effective use of their time in consolidating knowledge and course content, thus enhancing confidence in clinical skill development. Across a broad demographic, students interacted on weekends and evenings, fitting their learning into often complex personal schedules. The familiarity of Facebook and students' habitual use of it were aspects found to trigger interest in using the learning strategy and thereafter sustained ongoing participation. Facebook therefore engaged students in collaborative and active learning processes which are increasingly accepted as promoting student success (Hamada, 2013, Johnson and Romanello, 2005).

Limitations

This was a small exploratory study based on nursing students experiences of one clinical skills development course in a programme of study in one university so further research is needed.

Conclusions

Facebook is a popular, well established and appealing communication tool which individuals use in everyday life to connect socially, share information and resources, widen networks and increase their awareness of world events. The familiarity, functionality and immediacy of Facebook positioned it as a natural fit with the proposed learning strategy to connect students with their peers and academics, share learning resources for clinical skill development and provide encouragement and support. Exploring students' experiences of using Facebook as an adjunct to traditional learning approaches was a first step in establishing ongoing and effective teaching and learning interventions. This study provided a snapshot of students' everyday challenges as they strived to gain confidence and proficiency in clinical skills through the use of traditional approaches including clinical skills laboratories, clinical placement and blended learning resources. Further, the findings of this study indicated the effectiveness of a targeted Facebook group to increase student engagement with the course, and the development of a collaborative network of peers for information exchange, knowledge building and reassurance. The study showed the ways in which students' confidence and self-efficacy could be significantly enhanced with Facebook engagement and effectively channeled approaches to self-directed learning. The knowledge gained in this study may therefore contribute to the implementation of effective learning strategies for ongoing support of self-efficacy in nursing students throughout their undergraduate programme.

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