

Keeping in touch while at work

Dawn Morley reports on a project aimed at improving support networks for students on their first placement

First-year students settle better at university and are more likely to withstand the more stressful aspects of their nursing programmes with a strong, supportive peer group around them.

On practice placements, mentors provide students with the support structure that enables them to meet their agreed learning outcomes. However, some mentors' clinical workload and lack of clarity of their mentoring role, can affect their ability to support students adequately.

A project at Bournemouth University involved first-year nursing students being given the opportunity to increase their support networks on their first placement. Traditionally, students on placement only communicated with their university academic contacts at times of crisis. It was not known how often students communicated with their peers or whether this communication benefited them.

Two personal tutor groups, A and B, comprising 52 volunteer students, were each divided into four sub groups to test communication methods.

One group used the usual methods of email to communicate separately with the author (a known academic), while the other three groups were allocated an online tool that allowed them to communicate with both the author and their peers within their group. The tools included a university email group, a wiki group and a closed Facebook group set up as a 'secret group'.



It is important that students are aware of both the risks and advantages of communicating online, particularly as they progress on a professional course. The volunteer students were reminded of the 'netiquette' training they had already received.

Interactive

Groups A and B entered their first placement at different times and the author participated in the communication methods allocated to the four sub groups.

Traditional methods of communication and email were not monitored but wiki communication in one group and Facebook in both groups displayed a higher level of interactivity.

Students predominantly used Facebook to give reassurance to other group members on placement and to ask specific questions related to the tools and process of learning.

Students commented that Facebook was their preferred

method of communication with their peers because of its ease of access. They found it useful to be able to draw on academic support. One student said: 'I find it helpful to see how everyone is getting on and to share ideas'.

Overall, Facebook seemed particularly appropriate to informal group work and its potential for placement support was noted by participating students and by the author in my own reflective diary.

Based on feedback from students participating in the experiment, I drew up a list of good practice recommendations for student contact and support during placements:

- ▶ Keep in regular contact with fellow students during placement. They are going through the same experiences and discussing issues with them may be helpful to you. Clinical work can be tiring and it is good to have an outlet.
- ▶ Before starting a placement, make a note of who to contact at your university if any issues arise on placement. If you cannot meet fellow students face to face, try participating in a confidential online group through, for example, Facebook. Set your privacy settings to include only group members.
- ▶ When communicating online it is important to use professional language and not name or criticise patients, colleagues or the placement in accordance with Nursing and Midwifery Council guidelines **NS**

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RESOURCES

Student Life online

www.nursing-standard.co.uk/students

RCN Placement support for nursing students

tinyurl.com/RCN-Student-support