

## **Using a social networking site such as Facebook, to enhance the feeling of belonging, within a first year nursing cohort of a large university**

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### **Background**

Recently I asked a first year student how he was coping with the transition from high school to university. The young fellow looked at me and said, “Man, everything is so different!” I smiled and said “like what?” with which he seriously replied, “Well for one thing, no one tells you that you have to wear a hat at lunch time.” I have to admit I was a little amused and surprised by this student’s response, as so often the focus, is placed on getting first year students to engage academically, when it is obvious at times, that even the mere transition in to university life and the culture itself, can be a hurdle.

While teaching, within a large first year unit for over 10 years, it has become apparent that students want more connection with not only the peers that they study with, but also with the University as a whole. Dr Krause pointed out in her keynote paper, *On Being Strategic about the First Year* (2006), that this “sense of belonging is conducive to enhancing engagement, satisfaction with learning and commitment to study”. It has also become evident, that the way in which students want to be able to communicate has changed, with the advent of capabilities such as Instant Messaging via a network and Short Message Service SMS texting via their hand held mobile phones. To be able to chat and feel connected on social networking sites such as Bebo, Facebook and Twitter is not only a way of the future, it is here now and it is here to stay.

### **Networking sites**

Facebook, Bebo, My Space, Twitter are all examples of networking internet sites, which allow individuals or groups to build their own pages, with information, photos and the ability to add bits and pieces like videos, applications such as calendars and fan forums. Even though these sites are free, it is required that members ‘join’ to be able to build or even view another member’s site. This also adds a security feature to the sites, allowing ‘friends or followers’ to only be able to contact the owner of a page through the network itself and information such as the members email address are hidden from view unless voluntarily placed there by the owner.

People of all ages, countries and by both men and women use these networking sites alike. A study done in the States, which was highlighted in Reynol Junco (2008), found that between 60 – 70% of one thousand students about to commence higher education studies, have an interest in using instant messaging, blogs and social networks. These same students showed an interest in communicating with faculty members on and off campus via Instant Messaging and social networking sites. Reynol Junco, 2008, stated that 85.5% of the First Year students studied had a Facebook account and used it and other networking sites to connect with students on campus with similar interests.

Furthermore, a study of university students found that internet use was associated with decreasing loneliness, depression and increasing self-esteem and social connection. (Shaw and Gant, 2002). As discussed earlier, it has been found that these are all factors that increase the First Year students' engagement, learning and commitment to study.

### **A Personal Perspective**

So in taking on the role this year as Unit Coordinator of a large (400 plus) cohort of first year nursing students, my intention has been to engage and help build a network to enhance their learning experience and most importantly, do it as time effectively as I know how. Therefore, with one 'bright' idea and a bit of planning and forethought, I opened the QUT CPOne Nursing Facebook page,

Facebook has the ability to reach a large number of friends in a short period of time. After initially building the CPOne page, I requested in a post, on a larger common Facebook site, that 2<sup>nd</sup> year students, join and welcome the 1<sup>st</sup> year newbies. It took less than 2 hours for eight students to join themselves to the CPOne page and welcome the first years. Comments such as "I have had lot of fond memories with you CP1..." were posted on the site. However, mainly students gave support by just adding themselves as friends.

I have often been asked what the difference is between using Facebook and the university Blackboard site. The Facebook environment is in general, more light-hearted than an official university site such as Blackboard, with the ability to 'chat' to students in my own time, by adding comments to their pages or posting comments and photos to my own. It has been interesting to note that a strong Discussion Forum is also up and running for the same Clinical Practice 1 unit, on Blackboard and the students posting there, seem to mainly be, mature age and international students. While the Facebook friends are mainly 19-20 year olds and mothers with young children.

There are now 60 friends on the CPOne Facebook site with student 'friends', adding daily, including this week, a student in China, that plans on commencing as a First Year student at QUT next semester. A recent posting on the wall from a first year student declared, "I am loving that so many people are on this site. I am loving that a teacher came up with this idea..."

### **Further issue in relation to using a social networking engine**

Even though it all sounds like fun and games at present, so many issues need highlighting and added for further discussion. Such as

- legalities
- inclusion for everyone
- ensuring the 'safety' of the friends on the page
- being mindful that no Unit content is added to the page, that could disadvantage other students that have not added
- time it takes an administrator to oversee the page
- ensuring that inappropriate content is removed in a timely manner
- respecting boundaries of the administrator in charge of the page
- positives such as assisting with a Peer Mentoring program

- age and nature of students using Facebook
- would you get the same response with official University sites, such as Blackboard or Wikis

## **Conclusion**

First Year students not only want a quality education program, they also desire a connection with the University, the Faculty and their peers. A social networking site such as Facebook may benefit and aid this social connection, especially within a large University, where a student could easily feel 'lost'. However, further discussion and research is required to highlight the main areas of benefit, interest and concerns.

## **Reference**

Krause, K. (2006, 5 October 2006). *On being strategic in the first year*. Paper presented at the First Year Forum, Queensland University of Technology

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