Online learning for professional development

In this article...
➤ How nurse education has changed and developed
➤ The role of online education in professional development
➤ How students can be supported to learn online

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A lack of study leave can prevent nurses who hold diplomas from attaining graduate status. Online learning can provide professional development after registration.

In this article...
In the past, care was driven largely by “knowing how”, a mixture of having knowledge and skills, but without learning the theory (Benner, 1982); expert skills were largely thought to come from experience. However, the move to evidence-based practice in the late 1980s and 1990s changed education and practice. This is described by Sacket et al (1996) as: “The conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients.”

Project 2000 was launched in 1986 to move nurse education from hospitals to universities as the nursing qualification became diploma level or diploma level with advanced studies. Project 2000 was based on the idea that the increasing complexity of medical and clinical treatments meant nurses needed a more complex grasp of care delivery.

Healthcare has continued to increase in diversity and complexity, and nurse education is changing again. Since September 2013, only degree-level pre-registration nursing programmes have been available in the UK. This move is intended to sharpen critical thinking skills in the context of current and future healthcare delivery (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010). Nurses who do not hold a degree may find themselves disadvantaged in this new professional environment.

One response to this is to develop level 6 top-up degree programmes to enable nurses who hold a diploma or diploma with advanced studies to progress to graduate status. However, long-term financial cutbacks and reduced use of agency staff often prevent nurses from taking study leave from their place of work. How

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Online learning

Many commentators suggest online learning is the biggest educational change since the printing press (Campbell, 2012) and are asking whether technology is altering the way the world is learning. Prensky (2005) and Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) describe students born after 1980 as the “net generation” or “digital natives” – a group of people who process information and communicate very differently from previous generations.

University education has moved from traditional classroom-based methods to include online learning; discussing this change, The Economist (2012) said:

“Some universities see online learning as a way of continuing to grow while facing harsh budget cuts.”

A study of online education in more than 100 higher education institutions in the UK suggested that there would be further expansion of online courses within the next five years (White et al, 2010).

Online learning gives learners the opportunity to study at a time and place that suits them, so they can fit it around work and other life commitments.

Early commentators of online learning suggested that it was impersonal and unsociable as it lacked teacher or social presence (Walther, 1996), but more recent studies have shown that achievement and satisfaction are higher for online than face-to-face learning (Suanpang and Petocz, 2006; Dutton and Dutton, 2005; Katz and Yablon, 2003; Yablon and Katz, 2001). However, the low “social presence” (the need for student nurses to feel connected with each other) of text-based systems such as online forums is seen as problematic. This type of communication does not allow for visual or auditory communication cues and there can be long delays between messages, which can lead to it feeling impersonal and people disengaging from online learning (Kear, 2010).

However, it has been suggested that users’ perception of presence is most important (Garrison et al, 2000). Online learners study as part of a group and have a common goal; this has been described as a community of practice, referring to how adults learn through everyday social practices rather than by focusing on situations that are intentionally set up, such as higher education institutions (Gray, 2004). The notion of communities of practice is different from other communities in the following three different and distinct ways:

- Membership of an online community requires a presumed level of competence and knowledge that distinguishes it from other communities;
- Online communities interact and learn by engaging in activities and discussions, by helping each other and sharing information the community develops around itself;
- The online community shares a collection of experiences, stories and best practice to solve the problems set by the course facilitators.

Gray (2004) states that members must feel the community is of value to them: “This type of community cannot be mandated into practice, and they exist only as long as participation has value to its members.”
Support for students
While many factors affect student drop-out rates, levels of interaction and support are at the top of the list (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). According to Abrami and Bures (1996), some students in distance learning programmes reported feelings of isolation and lack of self-direction and management, which can lower motivation.

Although distance learners must have high levels of motivation and take responsibility for their own learning, online courses must be designed around the student. Student support can be based around several models and ideas including the following:
» The notions of scaffolding (Wood et al, 1976);
» The five-step model of e-moderating (Fig 1) with the incorporation of e-tivities (electronic activity) (Salmon, 2004);

The term “scaffolding” is used to describe the way students construct a network that represents their cognitive abilities (Wood et al, 1976). The construction starts from the ground up, with new knowledge built on a foundation of what is already known. This can be seen clearly in face-to-face learning, and Salmon’s (2004) five-step model of e-moderating, with its e-tivities, addresses student support through scaffolding in online education.

Introductory weeks of online courses allow students to gain access and increase their motivation as the community of practice develops (Wenger, 1998).

The e-moderator is responsible for helping students with technology failings and addressing other frustrations. E-moderators and online activities must add to this motivation by encouraging students to be involved with e-tivities, responding to student queries and offering feedback (Salmon, 2004).

Choice of e-portfolio
E-portfolios are an innovative approach to the design and delivery of educational programmes; they should be used for personal development planning, assessing and learning over time.

Weller (2005) defines an e-portfolio as: “A collection (or archive) of reflective writing and associated evidence, which documents learning and which a learner may draw upon to present her/his learning and achievements.”

The IMS Global Learning Consortium suggests that an e-portfolio should contain six characteristics:
» Assessment;
» Presentation;
» Learning;
» Personal development;
» Multiple owner;
» Working (IMS GLC, 2005).

However, Himpls and Baumgartner (2009) add five more practical characteristics to consider:
» Collecting – how easy it was for students to collect their data;
» Reflecting – the facilities available for reflecting;
» Administrating – ease of administration of the software;
» Usability – ease of use of the e-portfolio;
» Cost – total costs incurred.

However, e-portfolio development does not so far achieve all these issues. We carried out a critical evaluation of three e-portfolio systems (PebblePad, Mahara and the OU MyStuff) during 2010 and concluded that only one (PebblePad) contained all the necessary functions to achieve the above. However, we found the usability of the system to be lacking. Weller (2005), following a review of seven systems, also found this and commented about PebblePad:

“I found the navigation, which relies on rollovers, a lot, very irritating. There were also a few counterintuitive controls; for instance, in order to move back up in a hierarchy, one had to click the ‘close’ button, which doesn’t close that window at all. Finding files I had uploaded was not easy, although I did it after a while.”

The key benefit of PebblePad is that it is a personal learning environment, which places the student at the forefront of their learning and student experience. As education fees increase, students will be placing greater significance on their individual learning journeys.

Conclusion
Online learning opportunities are continuing to grow and develop alongside changes in everyday life brought about by the development and increasingly diverse use of the internet.

Nurses and nurse managers are recognising the benefits of online education, particularly as nurse education is becoming increasingly academic. It is becoming easier to access course materials on mobile devices at the user’s convenience, and health budgets are increasingly constrained.

References