**Research Article**

**Utilizing Social Media in a Baccalaureate Nursing Course to Enhance Student Engagement**

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**Abstract**

Incorporating social media in nursing courses can enhance both the students’ engagement and satisfaction with learning experiences. Efforts to support students in development of both written and verbal communication skills with other students and healthcare professionals will better prepare the student to enter the nursing profession. Research indicates that students report better satisfaction with learning when the teaching is interactive. This conceptual article presents a summary of current research data about the use of social media in education and describes one university’s experience of creating and implementing professional standards and guidelines for the utilization of social media to enhance student engagement in the course.

**Keywords:** Nursing; Nursing Education; Policy; Politics; Social Media; Student Engagement

**Introduction**

Social media is a recreational tool that students of all ages access regularly. According to a 2019 Pew Research poll, at least 73% of adults admit to using at least one social media platform, and 74% of those users access their social media sites one or more times per day [1]. Healthcare providers have taken on this trend and have begun to utilize social media platforms to engage patients in the management of their own health, and to provide access to care for remote patients. Nursing schools who expose students to best practices in the use of social media over the course of their education will generate graduate nurses who are better prepared to use social media appropriately with patients and other healthcare providers as they begin their careers [2-5].

**Literature Review**

Recent research indicates that learners are more satisfied by learning that is interactive and familiar [6,7], such as that offered in a social media platform. Students also appreciate feedback that is provided in real time and in an appealing and dynamic way [7]. However, the educator is not concerned only with learner satisfaction. Social media platforms also offer the educator the ability to foster critical thinking and cognitive learning principles [6,8]. Use of social media can benefit students by allowing them to connect with other students [7], even when learning in a virtual platform. And unlike today’s learning management tools, which only allow students to connect with members of their current cohort, social media provides students with the unique ability to connect with previous graduates and experienced nurses [5]. Researchers point out that social media used in the classroom can enhance communication patterns between students enrolled in the class, between faculty and students, and even between students and outside influences [9]. This might include leaders and influencers in the fields of nursing and politics, as well as individuals from diverse cultures with vastly different worldviews. Use of social media can also increase participation from students who are less likely to speak up in a classroom situation [9]. In this context, social media represents a familiar technology that could be used to enhance student engagement in the course content.

Despite all the potential benefits of social media, an educator planning to implement social media as a tool in the classroom must also consider the possible drawbacks. The privacy of student information, as addressed in laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), must be considered and protected [8,10,11]. Educators must also be careful to avoid generational stereotypes, like assuming that all traditional students will be on board with social media use in the classroom, and that all non-traditional students may not [4]. Additionally, the educator must consider the likelihood of the student to become distracted, or to utilize the social media platform for non-educational purposes during course meetings, and the possibility of internet connectivity issues that may impact the students’ ability to participate [4].

To mitigate these concerns, educators should ensure that, at minimum, a course policy is in place regarding the appropriate use of social media. Many programs, schools, and universities have developed guidelines for student and educator use of social media platforms. Guidelines for the use of social media can protect the integrity of both the program, the educator, and the students [11]. When utilized responsibly by all involved, social media in education can be innovative, if educators strive to maintain a student-centered relationship and remain closely engaged themselves [11].

**The Need for Change**

Students enrolled in a baccalaureate nursing program participate in educational experiences to learn about the nurse’s role in advocacy through development and improvement of health policy. This may involve advocacy in the workplace, local or state government, or even federal government policy. The course curriculum prescribes specific student learning objectives to be achieved, accompanied by a list of topics to be covered in the course. Traditionally, this information has been conveyed in a didactic format, with lecture being the predominant method of delivery.

Students enrolled in the course are required to complete an assignment at the beginning of the course to self-evaluate thoughts and feelings regarding their power to impact health policy, as well as their interest in doing so. The majority of nursing students report feeling that a single person is powerless to impact health policy and indicate a lack of interest toward affecting health policy, especially at a governmental level. Students complete a similar assignment near the completion of the course, again with the purpose of evaluating the level of empowerment and interest in affecting health policy. Following the didactic method of delivery of this information, the majority of students’ feelings did not change regarding their interest and power to impact policy.

**Introduction of Social Media in the Classroom**

Based on the information received from students at the beginning and end of the course, faculty determined that change needed to occur in the method of course delivery to enhance student engagement and interest in health policy. Internet searches for best practices in heightening student engagement led course faculty to consider the use of social media to enhance learning. Prior to implementation of social media as a teaching tool, however, an educator must consider risks, benefits, and current policies guiding the use of social media.

Current nursing program policy stipulates that all information posted on social media platforms by both students and educators demonstrate professionalism. It also addresses the use of social media overall and prohibits educators from connecting with currently enrolled students on social media platforms. This stipulation presents a problem, because most social media platforms require that users are connected for communication to occur between those users. To ensure compliance with program policy, while also maintaining the privacy of the personal social media accounts of both the educators and the students, the faculty chose to utilize a private Facebook group. In this group, administrators can send potential members a link to join without requiring them to establish a connection between their personal accounts.

To address other risks associated with the use of social media in the classroom, the faculty created detailed guidelines for participation and completion of assignments involving social media. Students were required to locate a current news story from a reputable source that impacts nursing, healthcare, or public health, and is related to policy and politics in healthcare. This news story was posted by the student in the private Facebook group prior to class, and the student was expected to be ready to present the issue to the class and lead a class discussion. The students’ peers were also permitted and encouraged to comment on the students’ posts within the group, provided they adhered to the expectations for professional communication stipulated in the social media policy. The educators maintained a high level of engagement by monitoring the posts submitted by students and by moderating the in-class discussion.

An additional measure taken to ensure professionalism and adherence to program policy was the inclusion of an additional faculty member to act as moderator and co-administrator of the Facebook group. This additional faculty member was not affiliated with the course and acted as a check and balance to ensure that course and program policies were followed by all involved. All faculty members had the ability to remove posts or comments if they did not adhere to the established standards for the use of social media in the course.

Measures were also taken to maximize the benefits of social media in meeting course objectives. Students were encouraged to post information that was relevant to the course objectives at any time, not just when associated with a course assignment. Discussion was encouraged by all, both during in-person course meetings and through comments on posts, to aid in development of critical thinking regarding real-world issues. Additionally, students were encouraged to remain in the group and continue to participate in discussions after they graduated. This allows for current students to learn from the perspectives of former students who are currently practicing in the nursing field. The same expectations for professionalism apply to former students, who could be removed from the group by an administrator if these standards are not upheld.

**Impact of Social Media in the Classroom**

Feedback received from students both during and at the end of the course indicated a definite benefit from the use of social media in the classroom. By the end of the course, students were much more likely to indicate an increased interest in affecting health policy compared to their feelings at the beginning of the course. They were also more likely to report feeling empowered to advocate for their patients through policy. Students were more engaged in peer-led discussion of current events pertaining to course topics than they were in didactic lecture about the same topics. Students actively sought out news stories about topics they were passionate about and were then able to challenge each other to think more deeply about the course topics and their impact on health and healthcare. Perhaps the most interesting and exciting indicator of the impact of social media in this course was the continued involvement of former students in the group. Many former students chose to remain in the group, and a portion of those continue to interact by commenting and posting material relevant to the course objectives.

**Limitations and Future Direction**

The implementation of social media assignments in a nursing course has been a learning experience for the faculty. One limitation has been the breadth of topics that might be discussed in a single course meeting. Facebook groups allow for the organization of posts into units, which allows the group administrators to cluster similar posts together, resulting in a more cohesive discussion. Another related limitation is the possibility that all course topics will not be covered when students are permitted to select the topics of their posts without specific weekly topics. This limitation could be addressed in a variety of ways. Future assignments could include a set topic for each week to ensure coverage of each course topic. Additionally, the educators could post current news stories that address topics not covered by the student-led discussions.

**Discussion**

Most students report low levels of empowerment regarding their ability to advocate for change in policy at the outset of a policy and politics course. There was an observed increase in the level of interest and empowerment following participation in class discussions based on social media assignments. Future directions should include research to evaluate how social media affects the students’ views of advocacy in policy and politics from the beginning to the end of the course. Results of this research could be used to support the continued use of innovations like social media to enhance student engagement and critical thinking.

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