Met mates: the development and evaluation of a course-specific social network site for pre-registration Nursing students

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Background

Social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace are websites which allow people to communicate, network and share information and ideas for various purposes. Users can typically create profiles describing themselves, make connections with 'friends' in the network, and join or create sub-groups (Franklyn, 2007; Boyd, 2007). There has been phenomenal growth in the use of such sites in recent years, and their use has become part of the daily lives and activities of millions of users. Given this, it is unsurprising that social networking has received a great deal of attention in higher education in recent years. The use of such tools for assessment, learning and teaching activities is becoming increasingly well documented (Wilkinson et al, 2009; Minocha, 2009), fuelled by a growing emphasis on the importance of affective factors in the learning process and on the establishment and maintenance of learning communities (Jones & Issroff, 2007).

This report outlines the results of a project which aimed to evaluate the impact of making a course-specific social network (Met mates) available to students on the Pre-registration Nursing degree course at Leeds Met from Summer 2008. The main initial aim of providing the network was to supplement the existing strategies to reduce attrition in a multi-pronged approach in line with Department of Health recommendations (2006). It was hoped that the provision of a vehicle for new students to make contact with each other and with existing students would help to smooth their transition onto the course and help them to deal with issues in the early stages. The intention from the outset was to emphasise the site as a 'student space' and to encourage them to take ownership of its development. There were no directed tasks and use of the network was not specifically integrated with module activities or assessments; X-stream (the Leeds Met Virtual Learning Environment) was used as normal for these module-specific activities. However, the project aimed to evaluate how far the students would independently use the social network as a source of ongoing personal, professional and academic support, why or why not this might be the case, and what the students' perceptions would be of its ongoing usefulness.

Establishment of the social network

A private social network was created using the 'Ning.com' platform. This is a web-based service which allows private social networks to be created around particular topics. The project leaders were able to block membership to anyone who was not a course member. The only cost associated with use of the service was to remove the context-specific advertisements from the site. [As of August 2010, the pricing structure of Ning.com, the social network service used to set up the site described in this article, has changed. During the period covered by the study, Ning.com offered a free service. The site now uses the Ning Plus plan which provides the functionalities described including removal of advertisements at an annual cost of $199.95. The following posting from *The Guardian's* Technology blog provides background information to the changes at Ning.com together with suggestions for alternative social network providers:
http://tinyurl.com/y67mdhd
https://owa2k3.leedsmet.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://tinyurl.com/y67mdhd. Ed.]

The site was populated with a number of features including profile pages, facilities to upload images, videos and documents, and the functionality to add and publicise groups and events. Communication between members was made possible through a forum, a chat facility and the ability to post comments on individuals' profile pages.

Issues around Intellectual Property Rights, data protection and acceptable usage were considered and clear statements were incorporated stressing, for example, that any materials uploaded to the site should be copyright free, that the site was not held on Leeds Met servers but was created and operated by Ning.com and subject to their terms of use, and that all use of the site should conform to confidentiality and professionalism standards as laid down in the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code of Conduct (2002). Beyond these terms of use, it was emphasised from the outset that members could develop the use of the site in any way they found useful.

Existing students were provided with an overview of the site and its facilities and then received an e-mail invitation to join the site from summer 2008. Prospective Year 1 students were then invited to join once the site was populated with current students.

Evaluation

The use of the social network was evaluated through an online questionnaire and a series of focus group interviews to gain a qualitative perspective. Usage of the site was also analysed. The questionnaire focused on:

• how Met mates was used, attitudes towards it, and reasons for usage patterns

• how other social networking websites are used, attitudes towards them and comparisons with Met mates

• levels of satisfaction with social, professional and academic aspects of the students' experience

• sense of integration with the course and with life in Leeds

• sources of advice and support, and levels of satisfaction with the support received.

Table 1

Year	Questionnaires returned Adult Health	Questionnaires returned Mental Health	Number of respondents who were members of Met mates / total respondents
One	17 out of 60	8 out of 30	17/25
Two and three	22 out of 90	7 out of 50	17/29

The results were analysed and used to develop the themes for the three focus groups. Key findings are outlined below.
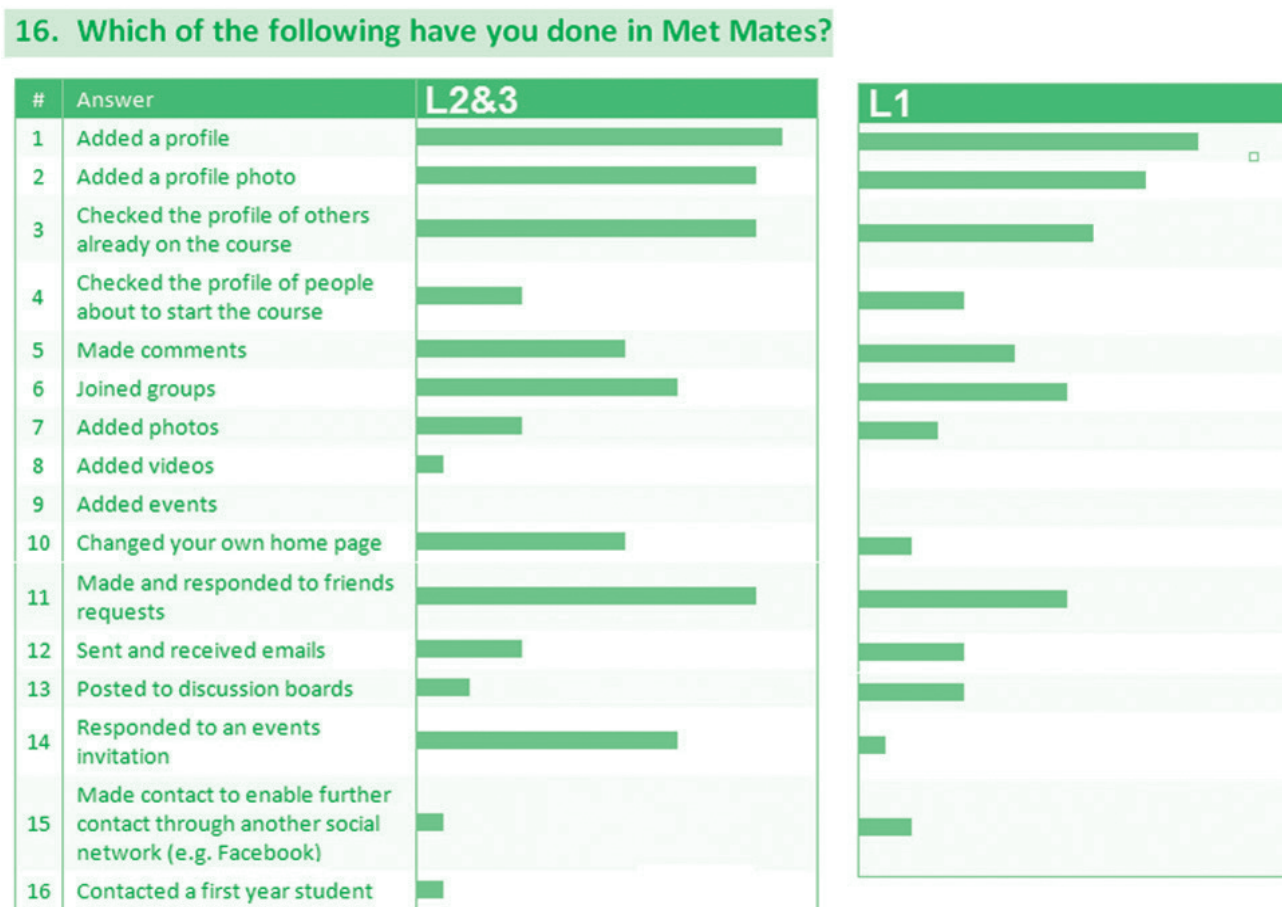
Key findings

The research revealed a great deal of information beyond the specifics of the use of social networking. Course-related and personal issues were raised including the sense of isolation from other student groups and the unique stressors arising from professional practice creating a need for specific support requirements. This provided a useful source of information to use in reviewing the quality and structure of the course.

Some of the key areas of the evaluation with regard specifically to social networks are as follows:

What activities did the students engage in?

The addition and checking of profile information was the commonest activity (see Figure 1). Other common activities were adding comments, joining groups, and making / responding to friend requests. Among level 2 and 3 students, responding to events invitations and changing individual home pages was also common.

Figure 1: Questionnaire results on activities carried out in Met mates

16. Which of the following have you done in Met Mates?

#	Answer	L2&3	L1
1	Added a profile		
2	Added a profile photo		
3	Checked the profile of others already on the course		
4	Checked the profile of people about to start the course		
5	Made comments		
6	Joined groups		
7	Added photos		
8	Added videos		
9	Added events		
10	Changed your own home page		
11	Made and responded to friends requests		
12	Sent and received emails		
13	Posted to discussion boards		
14	Responded to an events invitation		
15	Made contact to enable further contact through another social network (e.g. Facebook)		
16	Contacted a first year student		

Activity levels were relatively high in the initial stages of the academic year including the enrolment period but they tailed off after the first few weeks of the course. Differences were apparent between the use of the site by prospective and current students. The former used the site almost on a daily basis until enrolment to engage in regular communication and provide or seek advice relating to accommodation and finance. The latter used the site less frequently and mainly for the purpose of enrolling on events publicised there.

How was Met mates regarded in relation to other social networks?

Met mates was seen to have advantages over other social network sites as it gave immediate access specifically to members of the Nursing group. Students also commented on the benefits that a private network conferred and the worry of patients or non-nurses accessing other sites. Despite this, other social networks (primarily Facebook) were used more regularly and for a wider range of purposes. Of the respondents who were members of Met mates, 90% were also members of another social network and of the non-members, this figure was 74%. Members highlighted the higher level of activity in Facebook and the speed at which they were able to receive a response as being the main factors in this.

How could Met mates be improved? What would encourage more engagement?

There was a common feeling that usage of the site was likely to grow as the proportion of students on the course who had used Met mates as part of their course induction increases. There was also a feeling that a briefing session on Met mates would be useful to ensure that members are aware of the functionalities and potential uses of the site. Existing students tended to describe the site as being of particular use for new students and this is reflected in the usage patterns. However, these students responded to activities directed at them and to the use of the site to sign-up for events in particular. Whilst the use of comments on profile pages was valued as the most immediate method of communicating, there was also a feeling that more structure would be useful to allow easier access to useful advice or information relating to particular aspects such as placements or accommodation.

Conclusion and recommendations for developing the site

The introduction of Met mates to the pre-registration Nursing degree has had positive outcomes in terms of facilitating the socialisation of prospective students, although its use by students for ongoing professional and academic support has been limited. If the site continues to be used as a resource for prospective students to prepare for life in Leeds as a student nurse, then it is a valuable student resource.

The evaluation suggested that promotion of the site during Freshers' week could lead to its development for personal, professional and academic support during the course itself rather than simply for pre-admission use. This could further be encouraged through devolving responsibility for the administration and continued development of the site to student STARS or course representatives, who could use the site to obtain student feedback regarding course-related issues and to communicate with members of their cohort as appropriate.

The next step is to discuss these possibilities with the students and support them as required, should they choose to take it forward.

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