Lurking through Virtual Communities (Groups) on the Facebook Social Media Platform as a Form of Legitimate Professional Learning: Experiences of Occupational Therapy Practitioners in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Introduction: 'Lurking' is a phenomenon where members of online communities engage only via observation, without discussion. While wider educational research regards this activity as a form of legitimate peripheral participation in situated learning, reviews on learning in healthcare revealed less favourable perceptions. This qualitative study seeks to examine the impact of lurking behaviours on professional learning in healthcare.

Methods: 27 occupational therapy practitioners across the United Kingdom documented their learning experiences in virtual communities known as Groups, on the Facebook social media platform via an online questionnaire. Data was deductively analysed through the Framework for Value Creation in Communities and Networks.

Results: The findings indicated that learning experiences corresponding with all five (5) levels of value creation were identified: immediate value, potential value, applied value, realised value, as well as reframing value.

Conclusion: The results confirm the legitimacy of lurking through virtual communities on social media platforms as a means of supporting professional learning. With the COVID-19 pandemic imposing significant restrictions to healthcare professionals' ability to access conventional Continuing Education in terms of time, energy and finances, this paper suggested that 'lurking' through virtual communities on social media is a viable alternative and calls for endorsement from regulatory organisations.

Keywords: social media learning, professional learning, online learning, virtual communities, occupational therapy