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Using a Wiki to develop first year engagement

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The first year of University study has been recognized as of importance in the success and retention of students. During the first year, the development of a sense of belonging to a community has become increasingly difficult, due in part to restrictions on space for students to socialise, larger classes, a more diverse student body and increased on-line study. This paper describes the use of a freely available and private “wiki” to provide opportunities for medical radiation students to interact and develop first virtual and then physical communities and academic and social networks. In the first few weeks, students were initially offered small incentives to contribute to the wiki, which was monitored but not regularly contributed to by academic staff. The wiki was used extensively by students in the first term to identify and introduce each other. The wiki was subsequently used by students to develop 56 discussion “threads” with 96 members joining the wiki. Topics of discussion threads ranged from social activities to organising study groups and sharing experiences of clinical placement. Conclusions: a wiki provides one way of assisting in the development of a student culture in first year students.

Keywords: first year experience, wiki, engagement

One of the key factors related to success and retention of students at University is the experience of the first year. Several studies have reviewed the first year experience, particularly in relation to the expectations of what studying at University will be like (Stavrianopoulos, 2008; Pritchard, 2008). Student engagement and the first year experience (FYE) have received a lot of attention in recent years, with Krause and Coates (2008) stressing the complexity of first year engagement and arguing that student engagement, as well as being related to academic outcomes, is a key outcome in its own right.

In analysis of the results of a national survey of first year students, Krause and Coates (2008) identified seven elements contributing to student success. The first year engagement scales developed by Krause and Coates consist of Transition engagement, Academic engagement, Peer engagement, Student-staff engagement, Intellectual engagement, Online engagement and Beyond-class engagement. Jacobs and Archie (2008) identified a sense of community in first year students as being an important factor in retention and performance in first year. Retention has been shown to be higher in students involved in small learning communities, probably through the resulting increases in confidence and facilitation of social integration (Hotchkiss et al. 2006). Longden (2006) described “social engagement” as having components of practical, spiritual or religious engagement with others, or more passive involvement in culturally appropriate events organised by others. Although factors including academic difficulty, making the wrong program choice and personal circumstances can impact on a student’s decision to withdraw from a program of study, a student’s social experience at

University has a considerable influence (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Involvement in social activities at University is related to academic success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004), possibly due to the development of organizational and interpersonal skills and the development of friendships with other students. Tsui (2000) also discusses how student interaction with peers and faculty can impact on cognitive development and critical thinking.

Curriculum reform initiatives in the health sciences area are being instituted at our University. The introduction of common foundation courses for health sciences students benefits students who wish to transfer between programs and can reduce the administrative load of running many small profession-specific courses. However, having common courses across health science disciplines results in large classes that allow for limited interaction between students. There was some concern about the impact of these changes on social engagement of students. Even in smaller practical classes of around 25, students are likely to find themselves in a different group in each course. The change from previous program-specific courses in areas such as anatomy and physiology to large generic courses also occurred at a time when the culture of "university life" was under threat with the demise of most student clubs and societies, as a result of voluntary student unionism.

Approach

The Medical Radiation Program has three streams; in Radiation Therapy, Diagnostic Radiography and Nuclear Medicine. The student cohort was around 20, 50 and 15 students respectively. In an attempt to facilitate the engagement of students in the broader sense of the term, a series of initiatives were put in place to assist interaction of medical radiation students.

One such initiative was to encourage networking to our target cohort in a communication style that students could relate to, bearing in mind that the vast majority of our first year students are from the "Y generation" (13-26 year olds). This generation has access to advanced technology that plays an integral part in their day to day communication with over 75% having a Facebook or MySpace™ account as stated by Junco et al. (2007). In an attempt to develop a culture of university life for first year students we chose to create a student Wiki to mimic the look and feel of a Facebook or MySpace™ account.

Wiki is short for wikiwiki that means "quick" in the Hawaiian language as it quickly allows users to construct a collaborative web site. Users can easily create or edit pages on the Wiki site through their web browser; this includes adding text, images, hypertext links or video content. We investigated a range of free Wiki providers that would be appropriate to an educational environment. "Wetpaint™" was chosen as it provides an easily used editor and features that allow password-controlled access. This meant that students were able to use their real names in discussions, rather than the pseudonyms usually used in public applications. In addition, Wetpaint™ is advertisement free for educational institutions. The Wiki was targeted at first year students in Medical Radiation, a cohort of about 85 students. The students were informed about the existence of the Wiki during the University's orientation sessions. To encourage students to participate, a prize draw of iTunes Music Cards was offered to students who contributed to a page titled "It's all about me".

Student use of the Wiki

In the initial stages, students used the Wiki in order to identify themselves and to find other students within their discipline, demonstrating their desire to develop a sense of belonging to

a professional group. Students became very involved in this topic, adding lengthy discussions about themselves with multiple photographs of themselves, their pets and their activities.

The use of the Wetpaint™ Wiki is quite intuitive, and the students quickly extended the number of discussion threads. Organisation of social events commenced spontaneously, with the (probably inevitable) pub crawl being one of the first events. In addition, students organized a barbeque and a camp and a raffle to raise funds for the camp. Students also used the wiki to arrange participation in Community Events, such as a fund-raising walk for a charity.

The students maintained ownership of the Wiki. Although the authors reviewed the content of the Wiki to ensure it was used appropriately, care was taken to keep staff contributions to the wiki to a minimum. Interestingly, the students decided to restrict their social activities to first year medical radiation students initially, with the intent of extending further once they had established themselves.

As well as social events, students used the Wiki to discuss organization of study groups, their opinions about different courses and academic staff. Anatomy and physiology are two content-heavy courses in the first year of the program, and the students used the site to discuss content and clarify their understandings of difficult concepts. Students also utilize the wiki site during the semester breaks as a communication tool to plan social events. By the end of the first year of activity, the site had 96 members with 59 separate discussion topics ranging from social activities to academic issues.

Activity on the wiki varied considerably through the year. An initial flurry of individual identifications and posting of photographs was followed by students identifying and connecting with other students who had attended the same secondary school, lived in a similar area or were in the same program stream. The students then used the wiki to elect representatives from their cohort to form a “Student representative group” that had dual functions of communicating issues of concern to academic staff and organizing social events. Participation in the wiki then reduced until the first examination period started, when the site was used to discuss course content and arrange study groups. In the latter part of the year the students undertake a one week clinical placement in order to allow some identification with their future professions. During this week the students used the wiki to share experiences of their clinical experiences, ranging from how to get to a particular site to what procedures they had observed.

Discussion

The importance of having a “space” for first year students has been identified by Kift (2004). With the high pressures on room availability in a city based campus, providing a separate meeting area for individual groups of students can prove to be difficult. Despite this we were able to allocate a small tutorial room for students to meet and study in, and to keep materials for social events. However, the virtual space provided by the wiki enabled students to feel connected to other students whether they were on campus, studying at home or on a clinical placement.

Evaluating the use and effectiveness of the wiki poses an interesting question. Does one count “hits” as on a webpage, “threads” of discussion developed or outcomes achieved (such as study groups or social events).

Relating to the seven engagement scales developed by Krause and Coates, it could be argued that the wiki contributed to Academic engagement, as students identified areas of difficulty and organized study and revision groups with peers. Student-staff engagement was not directly facilitated by the wiki, as we wished to keep the wiki as the students' "space". However, academic staff were able to unobtrusively respond to some issues identified by students, such as a concern about the number of tables and chairs available in the student study room.

Given the difficulty of obtaining sufficient responses using online instruments for course evaluation, we were pleasantly surprised with the way in which the students used the wiki. Students were initially offered incentives to participate in the wiki, but this soon became unnecessary. It appeared that students were using the wiki in a similar way to FaceBook or MySpace™. Indeed, the authors received many invitations to join FaceBook or other online groups, which were tactfully declined.

The wiki certainly facilitated Beyond-class engagement. Although students have in the past organized social events, the number of activities has declined in recent years. Using the wiki, the students organized a considerable number of social events, as well as introducing themselves to each other. Of interest was the fact that International students participated freely on the wiki, as these students frequently find engagement with local students difficult. We had anticipated that mature-aged students may not be as comfortable with use of the wiki, but did not receive any indication that this was the case.

Conclusion

The students' use of the wiki provides evidence that they found it useful, as after the initial incentives there was no further encouragement for its use. Given the difficulty of getting students to respond to online questionnaires, the number of times the students spontaneously accessed the wiki must be seen as successful. Thus we believe that our first year wiki has successfully provided a communication medium that encourages a relaxed environment of information sharing that is socially conducive in the style that suits and fosters student culture.

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