Using synchronous online virtual classrooms for small group collaboration with students undertaking practice placements

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Aim
To enable pre-registration nursing students on placement to participate remotely in online, collaborative small group learning sessions.

Rationale
Throughout nursing student placements, ‘Supervision of Learning Days’ (SoLD) are timetabled. Traditionally, SoLD were facilitated face-to-face, however with a limited number of learning disability nursing placements in the Bristol area, several students are now required to relocate for practice placements to neighbouring counties.

Consequently, innovative approaches to facilitating SoLD are required where students can learn together and have contact with academics and peers whilst being remotely located.

Outcomes
The use of Collaborate for online learning was positively evaluated by students. The overwhelming student preference for Collaborate appeared to be more about keeping in touch and still being able to work and learn together whilst on placement.

It may be that interactive forms of e-learning, such as Collaborate are more appropriate for supporting students during practice placement, whilst other asynchronous, individual online approaches might be better suited for blended theoretical modules. This has some parallels with a study by Blake (2009), in which e-learning was identified as potentially beneficial for poor support whilst students were on placements.

References

Pedagogy
Biggs and Tang (2011) emphasise e-learning is "learning that happens when students engage with technology, not something teachers "deliver" (italics added). Consequently it is the pedagogical design of e-learning that is important and not the method of teaching or delivery per se (Blake, 2009). The focus of teaching and learning should still therefore be on what the students are doing (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

A method for facilitating constructivist, student-focused learning was required to support students whilst they were on practice placements and not able to access face-to-face sessions at the Glenfield campus. Although the synchronous transmission of Collaborate is more akin to an instructivist approach to learning, it also offers opportunities for constructivist and social learning. The use of virtual breakout rooms for small group learning activities in which students work collaboratively on an activity and present their findings collectively to the larger group enables collaboration and problem-based learning.

What we did
We decided to pilot the use of the BlackBoard Collaborate web conferencing system to facilitate five online SoLD for the NPE 2014/15 module run (three SoLD continued to be face-to-face). BB Collaborate allows students to join an online teaching session remotely via an Internet browser. It includes tools for collaboration such as a whiteboard, class polling and breakout rooms. Through use of this technology, we were able to facilitate a class teaching session plus breakout time for small group learning activities.

Participants
The module cohort comprised Learning Disabilities Nursing Students in their 2nd Year of study on practice placements spread across the south west of England. Student numbers for the 2014/15 and 2015/16 cohorts were 28 and 31 respectively.

"Felt a bit at pressure at first with talking on the mic. But it’s OK now we’re used to it"
"I like the group work the most and the different activities."
"Not having to travel up to Bristol just for the day…"
"...easier when living away for placements"