Using the Blackboard Platform: More than a course site

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This article describes an innovative use of the Blackboard platform to provide a source of information and a sense of presence and connection among students admitted to an accelerated, second-degree baccalaureate (BSN) program. The Internet and, specifically, course platforms such as Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, and others have become popular for course delivery in today’s universities. Although most faculty are familiar with the use of these platforms for teaching, the platforms have the potential to serve other functions as well. We have developed a virtual community on Blackboard to fulfill a need expressed by students accepted into our accelerated BSN program. The critical components in building a virtual community are to:

- Know the purpose of the site.
- Identify the target audience and invite them to participate.
- Design interactive tools to meet the purpose and serve the audience.
- Establish the mood and tone as the host of the site.
- Make it happen.

Specifically, this article discusses the intention and design of this innovative use of the Blackboard platform.

Knowing the Purpose

A virtual community, also known as an online or computer-mediated community, is a group of people communicating or interacting with each other by means of information technologies (i.e., on the Internet rather than in person) (Virtual Community, n.d.). Our intention was to create a site for information distribution and to welcome new students to the university and to the study of nursing.

Identifying the Target Audience

The intention in creating this site was to provide a place to support and nurture new students as they anticipate the transition to a career in nursing. Students are informed of the site when they accept the invitation of admission to the university. This is approximately 4 months before they begin the program. As newly admitted students, they are usually excited and highly motivated to get started. For second-degree students, choosing to study nursing means leaving a previous work life identity. The transition to the role of full-time student can be stressful and anxiety producing. Vinal and Whitman (1994) found that accelerated students require extensive preparation to satisfy their strong need for competence and self-confidence. Our virtual community meets the needs of this audience, as the site provides a source of information and support during a transitional period in students’ lives.

Designing Interactive Tools

This site is hosted on the university’s Blackboard server. Using Blackboard allows students to become familiar with a platform they will use during their studies at the university. The template is modified to reflect the three intentions of the site:

- Providing information.
- Supporting connections among colleagues.
- Nurturing the image of the self as a nurse.

The welcome page serves as a starting point and orients participants to the site’s contents. A section titled Successful Journey guides students through the program of study. It gives a virtual glimpse into the study of nursing and includes a slide show and stories from current students and graduates. An electronic checklist contains hyperlinks to the many health forms, background checks, Basic Cardiac Life Support certification, and other requirements necessary for a professional practice program. Using the concept of one-stop shopping, students are able to access relevant college and university forms, become familiar with the programs and facilities of our nursing practice partners, read the student handbook, and even apply for a university identification card. To maintain student interest and reinforce the information students need to know, an interactive game, “Who Wants to Be an Accelerated Nursing Student?,” is provided.

To encourage a connection among participants, a “Place to Talk” contains a series of discussion boards. One discussion board is focused on issues and questions about the program. Another is focused on the transitional needs and questions of students who are relocating and need to learn about housing opportunities and the local area. Through this feature, many students have found roommates, carpool partners, and study groups. The discussion boards are open 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and are monitored by the program director on a daily basis. Asynchronous discussion boards are a convenient method of communication for incoming students who are often employed full time prior to starting the program. Due to other life demands, asking this population of students to access information via telephone or visits to campus offices during regular business hours is often not practical or feasible.

A popular feature is the “Caring for Self” area. This section contains inspirational thoughts, study and relaxation strategies, and links to meditative and reflective Web sites. Learning to care for the self so they can care for others is an essential ability in nurses’ skill repertoire.

Establishing the Mood

As the site’s host and designer, the program director establishes the mood and tone. The design of the site includes fun and inviting graphics and sounds and a variety of text formats to meet the needs of different kinds of
learners. An informal conversational tone creates a friendly place where students can drop in to access information and communicate with future professional colleagues. To make navigation of the site’s content easy, we strictly adhered to the two-click rule (i.e., users never have to click more than two times to access information or to return to the welcome page). Acknowledgment of participants, timely responses, and ongoing maintenance and updating of the site make it a dynamic and vibrant entity in the perception of the users.

Making It Happen
This site is a constructed point that focuses interactions and facilitates connection among individuals who share a common interest and goal but are not yet able to come together in a physical space. Our experience demonstrates that this site is highly popular with incoming students. This virtual community facilitates students beginning to explore their new career as nurses and to better prepare for their accelerated program of study. Because our program spans 12 months and there is no overlap among student cohorts from year to year, this site is a place for students nearing graduation to share advice and wisdom with the incoming cohort of students.

Project Success
For a virtual community to be healthy and productive, participants must integrate their online lives with their in-person lives. Our students report that their online participation has helped them prepare themselves and their families for the rigors of an accelerated program of study. The overall success of the site is evidenced not only by the visible number of hits and the high quality of dialogue on the discussion boards, but also as students arrive on campus and demonstrate a familiarity with the programs and an evolving professional relationship with their peers. For a minimal investment of time, this site has reaped great benefits in facilitating the transitional experiences of accelerated students with high needs for information as they invest their personal resources in this career-changing endeavor.

References


The author expresses special appreciation to Ms. Lee Smith, Program Assistant, for her assistance in the development of content for this project.

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