

Tapping into Gen Z Ways to Enhance e-Learning and Meaningful Connections

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Abstract: Generation-Z born 2000-2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024) are comfortable with digital technology and connecting with one another using social media platforms. Regardless of this proficiency they may still experience challenges engaging with online learning especially around social cohesion, wellbeing and learning success. Other challenges they may encounter are communicating and interacting face-to-face in the workplace, which is a vital 21st Century graduate attribute. A growing societal concern is staff shortages and unfilled vacancies within the health sector. There are many factors influencing health care workforce shortages, but Generation-Z may be a good fit due to their growing awareness of societal concerns and willingness to upskill. This study seeks to investigate the enablers and barriers impacting Generation-Z nursing students' ability to successfully engage with e-learning and to communicate effectively in face-to-face interactions within the workplace environment. Furthermore, this study seeks to explore the ways Generation-Z nursing students communicate and interact with each other on social media. The study will use a qualitative, social constructionism (making meaning in a social context) methodology. Methods include three focus group discussions with students aged 18-24 years, enrolled external/online in an undergraduate nursing program, with a minimum of one clinical placement completed or attempted. Data will be analysed using thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Findings will inform e-learning design strategies that address the identified barriers and use the enablers to help Generation-Z successfully transfer their social media communication knowledge and skills to better engage with online learning, leading to higher satisfaction and completion rates. These strategies include supporting the transference of their fluent online social media communication skills to build and use meaningful connections relevant to the healthcare workplace that further supports the enablement of the graduate attribute, effective communicator.

Keywords: Effective communication, E-learning engagement, E-learning design strategies, Generation-Z, Human connection, Nursing education

1. Introduction

There is a global shortage of healthcare workers. Focussed collaboration is needed to prioritise efforts towards a refreshed strategy to attract, educate and train individuals to grow the healthcare workforce. The World Health Organisation (2024) projected a shortfall of 10 million health workers by 2030. In Australia, Generation-Z is the largest age group consistently graduating from nursing programs each year (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation 2023). However, a recent Australian Government, Department of Education Cohort Analysis 2005-2022 Report (2024) found nursing program completion rates were consistently in the mid 70% range placing the growth of the future health workforce at further risk. Additionally, completion rates were consistently lower for external/online students compared to internal and multimodal students. Indicating some students regardless of discipline are experiencing challenges. Future e-learning research on Generation-Z students, health disciplines, and bridging the divide between traditional learning platforms and social media is needed (Ferguson et al, 2016; Natarajan & Joseph, 2021; Shorey et al, 2021).

2. Aim

This study aims to investigate a) the enablers and barriers impacting Generation-Z nursing students' ability to successfully engage with e-learning and to communicate effectively in face-to-face interactions within the workplace environment and b) the ways Generation-Z nursing students communicate and interact with each other on social media.

2.1 Implications for Practice

Findings from this study will inform the development of e-learning design strategies that address the barriers and use the enablers to help Generation-Z transfer their social media communication knowledge and skills to better engage with online learning, leading to higher satisfaction and completion rates. These strategies include supporting the transference of their fluent online social media communication skills to build and use meaningful connections relevant to the healthcare workplace that further supports the enablement of the graduate attribute, effective communicator.

The following sections detail the theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, methods and analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

Maslow's theory of motivation and hierarchy of needs and two interrelated nursing philosophies, person-centred care and holistic care will frame this study. Maslow's theory (1943) lists five needs in pre-potency order; physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Person-centred care is founded on respect, effective communication, deep value for the person and their personhood (Kitson et al, 2012). Holistic care includes physical, intellectual, socio-cultural, emotional, spiritual and environment (Dempsey, 2014). These theories are relevant in establishing connections with others and in e-learning practice (Bandhu et al, 2024), and in supporting nursing students to form therapeutic relationships vital for the workplace (Lawrence & Reedy, 2019). These theories will inform the questions posed to each research aims and analysis to increase the understanding of Generation-Z nursing students lived experience of online learning and their existing social media skills.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Generation-Z Learners' Preferences, Drivers and Challenges

Generation-Z learners preferences include a mobile learning approach with concise content that suits their on-the-go lifestyle, interactive content, games, Web 2.0 and social media platforms and sharing and collaborating with peers (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Issacs et al, 2020). They are purpose-driven and motivated by recognition and rewards (Savithri et al, 2024), preferring real-world scenarios and social causes (Manzoni et al, 2020). Student engagement includes teacher presence and connection, and a sense of belonging for students created through collaboration and supporting students (Berry, 2019). Many students continue to report dissatisfaction with learning online (Asad et al, 2020; Reedy et al, 2013). Challenges include quality and standardisation of online instruction, teacher presence, engagement, authenticity of learning activities, internet stability, and organisational information communication technology (ICT) support (Mosteiro-Diaz et al, 2023; Odikpo et al, 2024).

4.2 Effective Communication and Forming Meaningful Connections

Generation-Z have mature social media communication fluency (Issacs et al, 2020), however many nurses and some Generation-Z nursing students struggle with forming therapeutic relationships with their clients (Kordkolae et al, 2024; Smyth et al, 2023). Communication is vital in providing safe, quality person-centred care (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care 2021). Training in effective communication is known to improve the patient/family care experience and health outcomes (Banerjee et al, 2017) and is a vital inclusion in nursing curriculum to prepare students for the health care workplace (Lawrence & Reedy, 2019). There are gaps in the literature in how to support Generation-Z nursing students' to transfer their social media communication skills into the workplace.

5. Design

The study design will use a qualitative, social constructionism (making meaning in a social context) methodology.

5.1 Ethics

Ethics ID for this project is ETH2024-0829. Ethics approval will be sought from the University Ethics Committee prior to commencing this study.

5.2 Methods

Three focus groups consisting of 4 to 6 nursing students will be conducted at a university in Queensland, Australia, with Generation-Z nursing students enrolled external/online in an undergraduate nursing program, aged 18-24 years with a minimum of one clinical placement completed or attempted. Volunteer participants will be recruited using convenience sampling.

6. Analysis

Data will be de-identified and transcribed verbatim and member checked prior to analysis. Data will be analysed using thematic analysis detailed by Braun and Clarke (2022) and the theoretical framework informing this study and will be conducted by two research members to ensure validity and reliability. Each transcription will be read independently by these two research members, data coded, and initial themes identified. Themes will be presented to all research team members and discussed until final themes agreed.

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