Networks for Knowledge: Social Media enthuses students of Early Years Education

Summary

Networks for Knowledge (n4k Ltd) are a Work Based Learning organisation which specialises in Early Years Education. Training and Development Manager, Elaine Wareing has developed the use of Facebook and Twitter to promote peer learning and interaction beyond the classroom. It also allows trainers to discuss ideas and challengers with a wider group of learners. This has allowed practitioners across a wide geographical area to share their thoughts and ideas together on some of the subjects relating to early years practice.

About Networks for Knowledge

N4K Ltd is an early years training and consultancy company, offering a wide range of high quality, up-to-date training for the early year’s workforce. It offers training to practitioners in a nursery, pre-school or maintained setting, a child minder, nanny or Early Years Professional and has the expertise and experience to meet all training needs.

Their motto is: 'We believe that when practitioners learn, the children in their care learn too.'

The challenge

The use of social media was devised to offer a platform for practitioners to workshop ideas, learn from each other’s experience and to not be restricted by where people lived.

Elaine Wareing explains: "Because we do stand-alone sessions time is limited, and we may not always be able to facilitate prolonged discussion within sessions - Facebook allows us to extend and develop this discussion and learning beyond the physical time limits of a training session.

A lot of the time, it is a Local Authority that we are contracted to do sessions for and they usually do the follow-up after sessions, so it is a good platform for us as well as we now get to see the impact of our training and what people do with it."
She says another challenge is getting the older age group to sign up to Facebook as there was a perception it was only for young people.

Because of the setting the social media is being used in, all learners participating are made aware of the ‘acceptable use policy’ for both n4k Ltd Facebook and Twitter pages and that the information was being used for Elaine’s studies.

This policy includes:

- Respect confidentiality – please do not post anything that may uniquely identify children, families or settings in your posting

- Respect each other – defamatory/ discriminatory posts are not acceptable, and any such postings will be removed.

- All posters confirm that Elaine Wareing may use information and comments from this group within her PGCE study on the understanding that any such data used respects confidentiality and assures anonymity ie names/identities/images removed.

The activity

One of the steps to getting the social media utilised was to get stakeholders on board, as there was an assumption that Facebook was not a professional tool.

Attendees at any of the n4k Ltd sessions are asked if they want to sign up to Facebook and Twitter to stay engaged with the group and to offer it as a place to network afterwards.
Facebook is kept up to date with resources and discussions that may be of interest to learners. Other activity includes:

- Concerted effort to engage with social media
- N4K Ltd currently use Twitter to tweet copies of posts made on Facebook page
- Learners are invited to use #n4kew tag to comment either within or after training sessions
- Alerts sent to personal mobile

All administrators ‘sign’ comments/posts. Elaine used a personal blog during the project to record comments and thoughts on work in progress, and learner input.

**The outcomes**

As the use of Facebook grew n4k Ltd noticed more:
• Discussions on proposed revisions to Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (EYFS)
• Requests for supplementary information after sessions had finished

Kerrie McManus, Registered Child Minder says: "The Facebook page is great and very easy to access from my phone. In the area I live there isn’t a lot of up-to-date information about our practice and N4K are very professional and on-the-ball. I find the things they post really invaluable. It helps me keep ahead of what’s going on such as new legislation. My niece is a child-minder as well and she saw an N4K post and it gave us a chance to talk about it. Even though I don’t always want to be the one posting things myself it made us aware of the issue."

The impact

N4k Ltd wanted to learn how many learners access their Facebook and Twitter pages, how the pages were being used and what people thought of using social media. To do this they monitored both sites over a four week period in February/March 2012:
They found that between 22-47 learners were engaging with Facebook and Twitter posts.

n4k Ltd learners are accessing and using social media, but is mostly used by those under 45.

Some n4k Ltd learners are denied access to social media because of their digital literacy skills.

n4k Ltd learners express a preference for Facebook over Twitter, but Twitter had a higher increase in followers during the project.

n4k Ltd learners are concerned about privacy and safeguarding issues, but nonetheless, Facebook used by learners to gain/share information from n4k and peers.

The lessons learned

Monitoring the Social Media platforms for a month enabled Elaine to get an overview of what was working and the lessons she learned were:

- n4k Ltd should consider modelling use of social media within sessions, particularly the #n4kew tag.
- n4k Ltd should consider signposting learners to sources of support regarding digital literacy.
- n4k Ltd should consider use of a ‘closed’ Facebook discussion group to acknowledge privacy concerns, perhaps in addition to the existing page.
• n4k Ltd should consider utilising Twitter more fully as everything on twitter is carbon copy of Facebook and sometime needs to be spent on writing individual tweets as well

• the Facebook data was useful to get a breakdown of users such as their gender and where they are from.

Useful links

Jisc RSC Northwest

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