Mentoring and Performance Support for Graduate Students using Google+

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CITATION


Overview

Many schools and colleges of nursing now have partially or fully online graduate programs, including the Masters and Doctoral levels. Although there are many advantages to online courses, there are some disadvantages (Hu & Meyen, 2011; LaBay & Comm, 2011; Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013; Simuth & Sarmany-Schuller, 2012), including feelings of isolation and disconnectedness. In a recent editorial (Yensen, 2011) I suggested:

It is clear that many other applications can be derived from the current functionality. As Google+ develops, it will be interesting to see how students and instructors find new and creative ways to leverage its current and future functions in the service of enjoyable and engaging learning and teaching.

It is time to explore some of the newer functionality and look at how this may be leveraged for mentoring and performance support of graduate students in online courses or programs.

Mentoring

Mentoring is known to enhance retention and success in nursing programs (Kirkley, 1999; Sherrod et al., 2012; Veal, Bull, & Miller, 2012), so for online courses one way to facilitate mentoring is to use mentor circles whose members consist of the student and any faculty or workplace associates acting in a mentor capacity. I will use an hypothetical doctoral student named Sylvie. In the Google+ circle below, Sylvie is shown along with her workplace and academic mentors. This circle does not show the owner (me) acting as an academic mentor too, but circle owners are members of their circles. The existence of this mentor circle means that the circle itself can be used as the target of other Google+ functions like Gmail, Hangouts, stream sharing, Google Drive, Calendar and Events, so asynchronous and synchronous communication are easily effected and the sharing of files, and documents is painless.
Through Google+ Calendar, either the student or any member of her mentor circle can look for mutual free times and schedule an Event, like a Hangout, since Calendars can be shared on a circle by circle basis. Since Calendars support timeline views in addition to regular calendar views, they offer an excellent form of project management where all members of the circle can see the timeline and its milestones. Projects may be simple, like a course assignment, or more complex like a thesis, dissertation or journal article in preparation. Here is what scheduling an Event looks like:

In this example, one of the academic mentors has inspected the shared Calendar and looked for a suitable and mutually available free time to schedule a video Hangout to discuss Sylvie’s research proposal. The Event invitation will appear in the Google+ stream shared with the other members of the circle, where they can accept or decline the invitation.

Simultaneously, the Event will appear on the shared Calendar:
On the day of the Event, all members of the circle will receive a gentle reminder (pop up and chime) as the Event time nears, and will already have seen an agenda listing showing the next Events for the day or the week. Here is a static screen capture of the Event Hangout under way:

During this video Hangout, it is possible for participants to share documents using Google Drive, using the Google Drive tab at the top of the Hangout screen, or to share their own screens, using a similar tab. Once the Hangout draws to a close, members can use the Calendar to schedule a next meeting or to revise the timeline. Clearly, the combination of these Google+ functions adds considerable support to the student working remotely.
Committees

Students may be involved in academic committees, including thesis or dissertation committees, and Google+ functions add similar convenience to all forms of communication and file and document sharing and scheduling. Here is the student Sylvie in a Dissertation circle:

This circle affords all participants instant access to shared Google Drive folders and documents, shared calendars for scheduling meetings and monitoring timeline milestones in the dissertation trajectory. This allows the student to minimize logistical issues and focus upon the dissertation itself, and yet be able to communicate easily and conveniently, as the student can see when members of the dissertation circle are online and can take the opportunity to invite one or more of them for a Hangout, or audio chat, spontaneously. Since Google+ indicates the type of connection of online parties, the student can use text messaging or audio to call the mobile device of the circle member, who may be on the move.

Peer Support

Once they are introduced, students rapidly seize the implications of Google+ functionality and start organizing caring and support circles among themselves, through shared Calendars, Event scheduling for Hangouts, phone trees through audio chat within or across circles, document and file and folder sharing, and text messaging to each other’s mobile devices.

Document Sharing

Google+ Drive allows the sharing of folders and files with circle members and can be accessed through Hangouts or browser, or the Google Drive client side software on a desktop computer or mobile device. The screen capture below shows Sylvie’s documents arranged in folders, according to circle.
Conclusions

Using Google+ it is possible for faculty and students in online courses or programs to transcend some of the limitations of online offerings by leveraging such online tools in the service of enjoyable teaching and learning, mentoring and performance support. As the Google+ platform evolves, there is the possibility that new functionality will lend itself to further enhancements of student support and ultimate success.

References


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