Learning to learn online

Online resources are playing an increasingly important role in veterinary undergraduate education and lifelong learning. The challenge is to know where to search for useful, authoritative and comprehensive information without wasting time aimlessly browsing the web. Nick Short, head of the e-Media Unit at the Royal Veterinary College, gives a brief overview of some of the sites available.

The students of today have grown up using computers from their primary education right through to university. In fact, the term ‘digital native’ is widely used to describe this generation’s familiarity with technology. Almost all these veterinary ‘digital natives’ have their own computer and use it for several hours a day. This is likely to consist of multi-tasking between online learning, checking their e-mail or updating their Facebook status – not necessarily in that order.

The veterinary schools have embraced e-learning to add value to existing teaching practices. All staff use PowerPoint presentations, and these are usually published on a virtual learning environment linked to audio recordings of the lectures. In addition, there are online videos of common clinical procedures, interactive guides to anatomy, radiographic image banks, online assessments and more. In fact, the problem is often prioritising what topics to review and finding the time to work through the relevant material.

While online resources can never replace hands-on experience, there is no doubt that online resources have become central to veterinary education. As a result, after five years at vet school, students are comfortable with e-learning and have developed strategic approaches to referring to educational websites to keep in touch and up to date. However, without access to past electronic study material, they can easily lose touch with sources that they have grown to rely upon.

A number of websites have grown up to support veterinary graduates in their transition from university to practice. There are also, of course, many other websites, which provide a wide range of more or less reliable information. The first port of call for many of us is Google, which is likely to throw up links to Wikipedia and other high-profile sites. However, while these may provide some background information, they are often not veterinary-specific or quality-assured.

For a veterinary-specific search of websites, I would recommend Intute (www.intute.ac.uk/veterinary), which reviews all the main veterinary sites and provides an expert review of each site. The NetVet site (http://netvet.wustl.edu) has a comprehensive list of links, but does not seem to have been updated for some time. Finally, the Merck Veterinary Manual (www.merckvetmanual.com/mvm/index.jsp) is freely available and often used by our students.

While veterinary online reference sources can be valuable, for example, in working on an assignment for the certificate of advanced veterinary practice, they are not really seen as educational resources. In contrast, there are a number of free or commercial sites that include instruction, guidance, interaction and assessment. These often mirror the pedagogical approaches to teaching in the modern veterinary school.

WikiVet (www.wikivet.net) is one example of online learning that I am involved with, and draws on much of the expertise and content available in UK vet schools. Using student and graduate authors with peer-review by experts, it is working to create an online undergraduate and graduate curriculum. The attraction of this approach is that it builds logically on the existing taught curriculum and reflects on well-tested e-learning methodologies.

Many of our students and interns are enthusiastic users of the Veterinary Information Network (www.vin.com), which is the oldest and probably the largest continuing education site on the web.
Ten-minute chat

Victoria Roberts is currently president of the British Veterinary Zoological Society. She works as a small animal locum and has a particular interest in poultry.

What got you interested in poultry?
I was brought up in the countryside of Suffolk. We had a large vegetable garden plus hens for eggs and, at the age of four, it was my job to stop the turkeys fighting. I was too small to lift the usual bucket of water that was effective in quelling their aggression, so I was given a railway bell instead. It was just as effective.

How did you get to where you are today?
I have always been happiest surrounded by animals, but my very old-fashioned father did not want me to be a vet as he was afraid I would be stuck in a city treating cats and dogs. In those days you did not argue, and it took me a good many years to realise that my career was within my control.

I moved to Worcestershire in the early 1980s and ran a poultry tourist attraction with about 3000 birds – a variety of breeds of chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys. It was inordinately hard work and I was not only breeding and looking after the birds but running the business as well.

I was frustrated that I could not do enough for either the poultry or our farm animals, and decided that I would investigate becoming a vet. I had originally taken the wrong A levels, so I took four science subjects in a year. I decided that being a small animal locum would give me the flexibility to continue my other interests, which include writing books on poultry. I am honorary veterinary surgeon to the Poultry Club (www.poultryclub.org) and a judge, with 35 years’ experience breeding, showing and judging poultry. I have edited the British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS) publications (four annually) since 1999, and was elected BVZS president in April this year.

How do you spend a typical day?
I am an early riser and get any writing done then. Whether I am going to a practice or not, my working spaniels get walked here in hilly West Yorkshire, which keeps us fit and gives me time to think.

I have an irritatingly high enthusiasm and positive slant on life. I love gardening and still keep too many chickens, but they are definitely excluded from my vegetable garden. Watching the ornamental waterfowl in our orchard at the end of a hard day is relaxing: they range from black swans to Hottentot teal and include my favourite – red-breasted geese.

What do you like about your job?
It is better than I anticipated. I love the variety of each day, and the several practices that I go to are all illuminatingly different; my computer skills have expanded to include all of the veterinary management systems. I love teaching, and cover bird and small furries’ anatomy and diseases at Liverpool. However, I am finding that backyard chickens are so popular that vets need to catch up on their knowledge of chicken and waterfowl diseases in a pet setting, so am lecturing around the country. I am pleased with my work/life balance.

What do you like about your job?
Arrogance.

Why is your job important?
I set out with the objective of improving the welfare of backyard poultry as it is a rising hobby; vets need this specialised information to cope with the increasing number of pet chickens that are presented with diseases and disorders, often caused by owner ignorance.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
I am always delighted to have back-up in what is a small but growing area of veterinary practice, but as with all animals, if vets keep them they have a vital understanding and empathy, which the clients spot immediately.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
Choose your goals carefully as you might just achieve them.

What was your proudest moment?
Qualifying, aged 48, in 2000.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
Getting to work on the wrong day at the wrong practice.
Ten-minute chat

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Veterinary Record 2010 167: ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.g7004

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