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From despair to somewhere: activating students in a distance learning environment

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Abstract

Student engagement in part-time and distance learning is critical in terms of retention and progression. But ideas about engagement often focus on academic priorities and on students who collude with the concept of being "active" learners. To establish a virtual community called *Student Connections* the faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University held a one week online conference where students and academics presented their ideas. Supported by two audio downloads, a drama "This Student Life" and a news magazine "The Podmag", students were encouraged to attend online 'Activate sessions' where they became part of a community and worked on collaborative extracurricular projects that were presented at the *Student Connections* conference. In reviewing the process of engagement it is proposed that there were four levels; 'super-engaged' 'critically-engaged', 'passively-engaged' and 'none-engaged'. This paper includes a discussion about the importance of these groups in establishing a community and makes suggestions for further research into student engagement.

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Keywords: Student engagement, Online communities, Livestream conferencing

Introduction

Retention and progression are important to every Higher Education (HE) institution. Very often student engagement is seen as the panacea to poor retention. Thus student engagement has become as Pittaway (2012) notes: "a key focus in higher education, as engagement is increasingly understood as a prerequisite for effective learning." Whilst it may be the case that all HE institutions have an investment in student engagement, distance learning providers have additional challenges in engaging students. It is clear that irrespective of the mode of teaching delivery, having a relationship with others and a sense of community can act as a protective factor when students consider withdrawing from education (Zepke & Leach, 2010). The underlying idea behind *Student Connections* is whether it is possible to establish a community that is accepting, supportive, inspiring and most importantly opted into, and whether being part of this could protect students during their studies when challenges of part-time distance education arise.

The Open University is different from the majority of higher education institutions; students do not systematically engage with other students or academics on a daily, or even weekly, basis. Indeed, many students join the The Open University because they are unable to engage with other students as a result of disability, geographical location or accessibility, but mainly because they are fitting part-time study into a full time schedule. Distance learning, and indeed part-time learning differs vastly from a traditional university experience, yet the requirements for project work and group participation are an increasingly important factor of much of The Open University's assessment. The growth of distant and part-time study that makes the initiatives reported in this paper both timely and relevant to the sector more generally.

The Open University is the largest supplier of higher education in Europe with over 140,000 undergraduate students, and there has been substantial sector growth in the distance and part-time markets. Part-time students in the UK now account for over 40% of the total (Million+, 2010), whilst the number of students in part-time employment had risen to 56% by 2006 (TUC, 2006). This growth, whilst welcome in terms of widening

student choice also brings with it the challenge of retention and progression. Current retention rates on modules in the faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University are around 65% at level one, rising to 70% at level two and 78% at level three.

Through our interactions with students we have become aware that students often feel demotivated, isolated and lacking in confidence, and so in certain situations students will disengage from their studies and feel unable to access support to get back on track. This can cause subsequent feelings of 'despair' leading to drop-out. The general picture then is quite clear: drop-out is a problem that needs addressing.

Whilst in the past distance learners tended to be those where are returning to education after a long layoff, this is now less common. Indeed the average age of distance learners has fallen sharply over the last five years to an average of 29 for new students at The Open University. In 2009 15% of undergraduates were under 25, by 2013 this figure had doubled to 30% (Open University, 2009/10; 2013/14). It seems to us that as tuition fees and a more competitive labour market have made part-time study more attractive, the needs of students have also changed. No longer content to receive their studies via a box and record late night TV shows and attend the occasional tutorial, today's digital students want to be engaged beyond their modules. Furthermore, there have been rapid increases in the amount of freely available digital learning material thanks to the rise of 'open educational resources', and indeed the Open Universities "Future Learn" initiative is one such way that students can enjoy high quality MOOCs free of charge (www.futurelearn.org). So this presents the challenge for the University: How do we engage and retain our students in a competitive learning environment when we do not have compulsory attendance or in many cases accessible and frequent support on their doorsteps?

In this paper we describe a project initiated by the Faculty of Social Sciences called *Student Connections*. This project comprises a series of inter-connected activities which culminated in a week-long free online conference. However, before reaching the conference we had created a nurturing environment in which, what we came to term 'critically-engaged' students, were transformed into 'super-engaged'. It is too early to assess whether this project can improve retention and progression, but we suggest that the 'super-engaged' are able to act as both role models and change leaders for those we call 'passive engaged' or 'none-engaged'.

Four types of engagement

According to Kahu (2013) there are three phases of student engagement. These start with a state of engagement. This engaged state is preceded by the antecedents that influence it and is followed by the consequences of the engagement. Kahu argues that no one theory is likely to capture all that there is to engagement and therefore a more holistic model such as the one she proposes is to be welcomed. This paper does not attempt to add to the established debates about why some students choose to engage and others do not. In our own work students engaged with a series of events, some of which (listening to a weekly podcast, for example) are relatively passive.

We have clustered students within the faculty, all of whom we contacted by email and through news items on their module websites, into four discrete, but overlapping, groups: 'super-engaged' 'critically-engaged', 'passively-engaged' and 'none-engaged'. Like many models where there is a difference in levels of engagement it could be assumed that those that are 'super-engaged' are "better" students than those who are 'passively-engaged'. Yet, in line with the student-centred approach that underpins this project, we feel that participation offers something different for each cluster of students. We make no assumptions that 'super engagement' equals super student. They are simply those students with most enthusiasm for this particular project, and they are the first group that are described below.

'Super-engaged' refers to those students who became presenters and/or producers of materials. They were a small minority of the students who actively and fully engaged with the entire project. There were a total of eight students involved in the creation of a series of videos (one of these dropped out for personal reasons) and 20 students who were presenters at the online conference. These students have now become unofficial ambassadors for the Open University and are influential in their own settings. For example one of these students designed and completed a survey on making distance education less isolating and used her social networks to generate 244 responses from 20 countries in one week. As Rachel MacLeod (2014) writes in a recent blog piece:

> *We wanted to find out what OU students really felt about their studies and how*
>
> *they coped with working alone, juggling their other commitments. The results*

were fascinating – whilst all were broadly positive about studying with the OU, many expressed feelings of 'isolation', 'frustration' and shyness as a result of being a distance learner.

These students have also generated PR, used social media and engaged with the live chat function available during the conference to actively include others who were less engaged. Despite arguing that this group does not form the tip of an hierarchical pyramid, it is important to recognise that this small group has had a huge effect on others. The student voice they convey is the main way that the concept of a place where students can connect has been achieved. In a blog piece written during the conference, student Ami Harty (2014) writes:

> *Some of the people we have been talking to are already OU students but some are also due to start soon so this is a really great opportunity for them to see some of the academics but also have conversations with other students to find out what they can expect from OU study.*

If Kahu (2013) is correct then some of the antecedents for engagement can be seen here. Whilst most student engagement research concentrates on outcomes as defined by institutional priorities (higher retention, better grades, more students on committees etc.) the reasons these students give for engaging in this project are rather less prosaic. It is a feeling that they are missing out on some part of the full-time face-to-face experience. It is a desire to connect with their fellow students. It is a desire to engage with their subjects and interests beyond what are often fairly narrowly defined curricula. Brendan Lavery (2014), another student blogger writes:

> *What's amazing and unique about this conference is the way it engages with the students, talking to us and not at us from printed material, to interact and allow any conversation to occur, this made for some interesting debates within the chat [live text during the conference presentations], although there were talks of a revolution, are we still on for the pitchforks on parliament lol? The point is by allowing students personalities and their creativity free from the seriousness of the textbook learning can be much more enhancing and life affirming.*

The 'super-engaged' had an effect on the 'critically-engaged' students who either attended the online 'Activate sessions' (which were hour long sessions on online to meet and generate ideas for the conference) or attended the conference and contributed to the "live chat" function. This would, by definition include all of the 'super-engaged' students but also a considerable number who whilst interested in presenting had, for various reasons, not been able to do so. Many of those engaged in the "live chat" had not attended the 'Activate sessions' but committed themselves to the conference fully, mainly due to the inclusion demonstrated by the 'super-engaged'. Brendan's previous comment about the fun nature of many of the chat comments is illustrative of the humour and sense of fun that pervaded the entire project. Many of these students are now keen to participate in next year's conference and feel part of a wider community.

Our third grouping is the 'passively-engaged' referring to those who knew about and took part in various activities which were related to the project but were anonymous participants. We do not know for certain how many students were in this group, but they might typically have listened to the audio downloads – The PodMag and This Student Life – or they attended the conference but with "live chat" disabled, or via the "catch-up" option.

The 'none-engaged' students should have been aware of the conference but did not engage with it at all. Every student in the Faculty received at least 3 emails, more if their tutors also chose to encourage them to participate, and should have seen the messages on their module websites and forums. 'None-engagement' should not be read as disinterest since students had to actively register for the conference. Students may not have engaged because they had subsequently withdrawn from their study, had not planned the date in their diary, did not understand the concept of level of participation, or they could have lacked the confidence to take part. Equally they may not be interested in attending conferences of participating in anything outside the module. We have no illusions that in terms of our student body this remains the biggest challenge.

The key point about these four levels of engagement is that it took very few who were 'super-engaged' to have an impact on the remainder. Their enthusiasm for the project is

evident in the Facebook posts, Tweets, blogs and emails that they continue to send. Their contribution academically was just as important as the social role in making this conference the unique space where students and academics all had a voice and were able to reciprocate knowledge and enthusiasm for the social sciences. Indeed, as part of the study by MacLeod (2014) that was a presentation at the conference, she sums up her findings;

> *Our data found that many felt marginalised, on the periphery, and were crying out to contact and connect with their fellow students. That's why the Student Connections conference last week was so valuable. By signing up online, anyone, from anywhere in the world could take part, and not just watching, but interacting, chatting and really feeling like they belong to a community.*
> (MacLeod, 2014)

Developing Connections

Online conferences are not new, but conferences that embrace a broad theme such as "What's interesting to you in the Social Sciences right now?" are a move away from the traditional themed format. However what was most innovative was the introduction of student presenters alongside academics. Many students present their ideas, but here they had carte blanche to research and present things that really mattered to them. Are video games harmful?, what can we do about all these plastic bags?, should we be charging on the NHS?, and the overcoming isolation and shyness survey were examples of work that students presented in groups at the conference. All these presentations can be seen on the conference website catch-up page (http://connections.kmi.open.ac.uk/content/catch-up). There was no review process, just weekly online 'Activate sessions' offering a space to explore ideas and work on projects. We trusted these students to deliver interesting and engaging talks, and nurtured them to do so. Despite our inclination to shape their ideas, teach them how to present, and refine their arguments we recognised that these students, who were mainly at level one, had the ability to generate content without academic intervention. They just needed space and support.

We previously have made the point that much of the literature on student engagement is focussed on the institutional and academic dimensions of engagement, and so it is welcome to see the 'social' aspect which we have found to be so important flagged up by Fredricks, Phyllis, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004). According to Fredricks *et al.* (2004) there are three distinctive aspects to student engagement. These are:

1. Behavioural engagement: this is participation in academic and social activities.
2. Emotional engagement: this is the development of relationships with staff and students.
3. Cognitive engagement: this is the investment in deeper learning.

Too often learning is seen in instrumental terms by 'teachers' whose entire focus is output orientated. For example, the classification of learners as transforming, performing, conforming or resistant (as used by Bunderson, 2003) suggests that what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful students is their individual orientation to learning. Transforming students are those who are most eager, confident and able to take control of their own learning. Whilst so-called resistant learners are those who "dare you to make them learn." (Bunderson, 2003, 2203:283). Whilst there is undoubtedly some truth in this, our approach is less confrontational and stigmatizing. The tendency of academics to 'blame' students for not engaging prevents them from seeing their own role in pushing students away. During the 'Activate sessions' it quickly became apparent that these students merely needed encouragement and support to excel. And a sense of belonging.

In a review of engagement for the Higher Education Academy, Trowler (2010) suggests three foci of engagement. These are:

1. Individual student learning: meaning active engagement in their studies;
2. Structure and process: meaning an active engagement with the governance of the institution;
3. Identity: which is explained as "engagement towards individual student belonging"

It is noticeable that from an institutional perspective it is the first two that have received most of the attention. Indeed, very often student engagement becomes a tick box exercise in which various University committees are filled with willing students. These students, as with those who become involved in student politics or as student reps are a small minority and whilst they claim to be representative of the student body, are often an unrepresentative sample. The students who do not embrace active engagement in this model tend to be a relatively large proportion. The tendency is to regard non-participating students as somehow 'deviant', or not compliant. In our institution we often hear the phrase 'weak' students to describe students who have incredibly complicated social lives which interfere with their ability to concentrate on their studies. Rather than recognise that many of these students simply need time, space and understanding we apply a label to them which reinforces their feelings of inadequacy. Instead, we wanted to create a space where students could enjoy their passion for their qualification without these institutional constraints.

Our decision to launch *Student Connections* was however motivated by a range of factors. Chief amongst these was the desire to increase student progression rates through their qualifications and the imperative to create a qualifications based platform to support students in their specific degree over and above the support that was on offer during each module. But we also had a genuine desire to overcome the isolation which had become apparent to us in conversations with students. So, whilst our initial motivation was an institutional one this transformed very quickly into a student-centred approach.

Putting The Social Into Social Science

In planning the *Student Connections* conference we found that as we engaged with them, students invariably described their feelings of isolation as a major factor in their participation. Although the students who came forward were actively engaged in their studies, on the whole, as has been found previously they had no active engagement with the governance of the institution (Trowler, 2010). They did however express a clear desire toward developing connections with other students in a meaningful way which validated their identity as "student". What we provided was a space where this self-affirmation could take place and a nurturing environment where it could flourish. This

was achieved through a series of online workshops, called 'Activate Sessions', which ran weekly from March until June. These were run online with Blackboard Collaborate, which many students had never used. These sessions had been promoted and were supported by two regular audio downloads – This Student Life (a drama) and The PodMag (a weekly magazine) which will be outlined in detail.

The weekly podcasts, 'This Student Life' (TSL) and 'The Podmag' played a part in facilitating engagement with the subsequent activate workshops and ultimately the conference. The purpose of the fictional drama 'This Student Life', written by Dave Middleton, was to demonstrate how problems such as isolation, dyslexia, being a single parent and having little support from your partner can be overcome. This drama was a continuation of an interest in using drama as a teaching tool which one of the authors of this paper had used in previous projects (Middleton, 2009). The 24 part drama began with three students beginning a level one module, and ended with them presenting at the *Student Connections* conference. TSL, often described "Like The Archers but with no cows" appealed to students who felt isolated and enabled them to connect in some sense to other students and the Open University. As one student related in an email:

> *It also surprised me at how fondly I felt about DD101 and starting my study 'journey' with the OU while listening to the Student Life audio drama. It was a reminder of how it felt to start out and adjusting to self-directed learning while also I imagine being of interest to those who are themselves just starting out with the OU*

The other audio was 'The Podmag', an irreverent news podcast fulfilled another important function, this time in creating accessible "characters" who were behind the conference. Written, produced edited and presented by Dave Middleton and Karen Foley, the pair of OU academics grapple with trying to find a recording location whilst managing to generate sensible interviews and advice for students from their colleagues in the Social Sciences. Students took to the style of the presentation but also understood the role of The PodMag in supporting the wider project as some of these email responses show:

> *I found myself grinning and chuckling at some points from the presentation style of PodMag – it's so cheerfully recorded and a real joy to listen to.*

> *Hi, Karen and Dave (I think I'd better alternate whose name I put first - it's your turn this time, Karen!!), Keep up the good work. Have fun in your new venue ... the swimming pool next time?? (GLUG, GLUG...)*

> *I'm now a fan of your show, and I'm looking forward to the workshops and conferences, they sound really interesting.*

> *Hi! I am just emailing to say that I am really enjoying pod mag and I like that you do something different each week (attending tutorials, interviewing people...). I look forward to the next one!*

When students who had accessed these audios came to an 'Activate session' they knew that there would be a serious, but fun component, and they had a sense of knowing the characters who would be present. Unlike a tutorial which is almost exclusively focussed on module materials and assessment, the 'Activate sessions' were an open shop where students could engage with the wider social sciences or simply talk about how it felt to be a student. The point was that unlike in traditional universities, students felt that they lacked the ability to identify as students, and the 'Activate sessions' appear to have gone some way to providing this opportunity.

Attendance at the Activate sessions ranged from 4 – 20 students each week. Students would often attend intermittently but a core group of students attended every session. It is worth contrasting the 'Activate sessions' with online tutorials which have become a growing feature of OU provision. It is rare to attract more than 15 students to an online session and our experience has been that attendance diminishes very rapidly (Middleton & Smith, 2013; Kear, Chetwynd, Williams & Donelan, 2010)

What did we do that is different?

Our approach was based on a philosophy of student engagement that prioritised the individual over institutional concerns. Indeed, rather than present what we were doing as related to qualifications we took a deliberate decision to promote a project that was extra-curricular. This decision came with risks. At the beginning of this project we had no idea how many students would engage or if any would. Over 1200 students registered in advance for the *Student Connections* conference.

We believe that the key to the success of the project was the nurturing and non-judgemental approach taken to the development of students. It is noticeable in the literature that caring for the students is an often unspoken assumption. Much of the research is output orientated seeing success in terms of grades achieved (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Zepke, 2014) or sessions attended (Coates, 2007). These are worthy goals but are a narrow definition of student engagement seen from the institutional perspective. As McGowan and Partridge (2014) argue the philosophy of 'making community happen' whilst accepted within the institutional framework is often sacrificed to prescriptive measures of student engagement.

Whilst we would welcome any of these measures they ceased to be our primary goal as the project progressed. The reasons for this change are complex, but have much to do with the personalities and pedagogical outlook of the two academic leads. We have hesitated to state that the project's direction was fundamentally dictated by the personalities of those leading it, but it does seem that the 'super-engaged' students formed a particular bond with the lead academics. This is important but also difficult for us to assess. The question we often ask ourselves is: could this project have succeeded if undertaken by different personalities? For obvious reasons it is not a question we find easy to answer. To do so in the affirmative would sound egotistical, to do so in the negative would be to negate one of the major influences on the project.

What we can say is that from the outset we were determined to make the project a success neither because the institution demanded it, nor because it would further our own careers, but because we wanted to provide our students with a good experience. We adopted a particular approach because we felt it would work based on our years of experience. It is worth pointing out that prior to the 'Activate sessions' we had not met a single one of the students who took part. That we now have developed working relationships with the 'super-engaged' was not an outcome that we had foreseen. The bigger question is: if the project was dependent upon the staff running it could it work elsewhere with different staff? We believe that the lessons learned about the motivations of distant learners are applicable to other institutions. That distant learners often feel isolated is beyond doubt, that they desire a community where they can affirm their identity as students is also intuitively correct; that some of this isolation and lack of

identity can be overcome by nurturing a sense of belonging is, we would argue, our key finding.

A sense of belonging implies a nurturing environment. As Tinto (1987) has argued students are more likely to succeed in a communal environment where their emotional needs are met. Any staff looking to replicate our experiences would need to be prepared to see themselves as facilitators not teachers. Although that is common parlance these days, it is noticeable that teaching staff tend to adopt the teacher role as a default position. What we tried to do on this project was develop a sense of belonging and a belief that it was possible for an undergraduate student, even one who had only just started their own learning journey, to contribute to a conference alongside experienced academics. Gaining their trust was the key aspect of our success in achieving this modest ambition.

Conclusion

The *Student Connections* conference has clearly engaged students at a variety of levels, as we have shown. We have found that students engage in different ways, but in our view that engagement should not be seen as hierarchical, or indeed permanent. Those 'super-engaged' students will act as ambassadors to bring in both the passively and critically-engaged. In this way the numbers of students engaging with The Open University and more importantly with each other, will increase over time. What distinguishes this approach from others in the engagement literature is our emphasis on nurturing and support. Whilst we would like to think that any staff could achieve this, it is clear from even a casual perusal of the literature that most staff are focussed on the outputs in terms of institutional goals. Those goals we would argue may well follow from the approach that we have taken but by avoiding making the outputs the entire rationale we have been able to develop stronger relationships with the group of super-engaged students who were not suspicious of our motives, which they may have been, had we had an agenda other than providing them with an opportunity to tell their stories in a way in which they felt comfortable.

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