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Superficial social inclusion? Reflections from first-time distance learners. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project that sought to investigate the experiences of first-time distance learners from their own perspectives, in their own words, through weekly video diaries. The research took place against a background of growing concern about low retention and completion rates among distance students, which raises questions about what actually happens to learners once they begin their study. While the project will ultimately generate evidence-based deliverables targeted at both distance education providers and distance learners, this paper reports on a selection of learner stories that highlight the nature of superficial social inclusion in the absence of support and engagement strategies that reach out at the point of need throughout the study lifecycle. The research challenges educators to reflect on the difficulties of supporting distance students to engage effectively with study amid other life and work commitments, at the same time as being mindful that to survive the distance they need to be independent, self-motivated learners.

Background context

Distance education has its roots in providing access to education to people and groups who might not otherwise have the opportunity to undertake study. Historically, it provides opportunities for study and life-long learning for mature and second chance learners, working professionals, geographically isolated people and those from minority and lower socio-economic groups, along with students with disabilities (Bernath et al., 2008). Although distance students should not be regarded as a homogeneous group, the majority are likely to be women who, on average, are older than typical students (Thompson, 1998). An increasing number of students in Australia are studying via distance but relatively little is known about the differences in how they learn from campus-based learners (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement [AUSSE], 2010). There has been minimal focus on what actually happens to these students once they begin their study (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012).

Educational institutions that use elements of open and distance learning practice in their course delivery generally experience lower reported rates of retention and completion than institutions operating in face-to-face teaching environments (Simpson, 2004). In Australasia, some indicators concur that distance learners are less engaged than on-campus students (AUSSE, 2010); although a recent aggregated analysis of New Zealand university survey data claims they are actually more engaged than on-campus students (Poskitt, Rees & Suddaby, 2011).

In this context, there is a notable contrast in the respective governments' education policy in promoting wider participation to tertiary education. The current New Zealand government under a relatively new capped funded system largely devolves the responsibility for student success to individual institutions. In contrast, in Australia, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) amongst other initiatives aims to ensure that Australians from low socio-economic backgrounds not only get the opportunity to study at university but also receive support via strategies designed to improve the retention and completion rates of those students.

Simpson (2009), a leading international scholar in the context of distance learner retention, claims there are many possible interventions available that have been known to successfully support the engagement of distance learners. However, these interventions are often applied in a seemingly "ad hoc" manner or what he describes as a "goulash approach" to distance education (Simpson). Zepke and Leach (2007) argue that more research is required that "listens" to what students have to say and takes greater account of the "soft factors" which influence distance learner success.

Against this background, the objective of the research was to address a significant gap in the literature, which was to investigate the experiences of first-time distance learners, in their own words, and in particular the "soft factors" that influence their success.

Research design

The research was framed around Design-Based Research (Reeves, 2006) and involved a mixture of approaches over three phases. The first phase involved an audit of initiatives designed to enhance the

success of distance learners at two major distance education providers. Initiatives were mapped against the conceptual framework developed by Shillington et al. (2012) to support different interventions across the study lifecycle. Phase 2 involved a baseline and follow up survey of first-time distance learners at Massey University, New Zealand.

In the final phase, the research team sought to recruit a purposive sample of 20 first-time distance learners from Massey University before the start of Semester 2, 2011. From a pool of 145 volunteers, 20 participants were selected to broadly represent the demographic and geographic diversity of distance learners at Massey University. Selection criteria included: age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, subject of study, level of study, entry qualification, along with prior or current experience of tertiary study on-campus.

Full ethics approval was obtained before beginning the recruitment process. The primary method of recruitment was an email invitation to all first-time distance students at the point when their enrolment had been approved. The invitation included a Participant Information Sheet along with a link to a participant-facing website, which included video introductions from the Project Leader and Project Manager using the same Sony Bloggie™ touch video camera that would be supplied to participants.

The research involved each participant recording a weekly video diary of their distance learner experience. While the investigation primarily focused on the first six weeks of study, 12 of the 20 participants continued their diaries and remained actively engaged in the research until the end of semester. During this time,

reflections were gathered using a "reflective prompt protocol" which was adapted from previous video diary techniques from Riddle and Arnold (2007) and Cashmore, Green and Scott (2010). The protocol was designed to encourage free-flow reflections whilst providing "fish-hooks" to elicit targeted categories of information in a lightly structured manner. Amongst other things, fish-hooks were designed to encourage student reflections as indicators of deep, strategic and surface learning. The reflective prompt protocol was intended to accommodate the diversity of individual responses from the previous diary entry while maintaining enough consistency to ensure that insights were gained from all participants on common aspects of the learner experience.

Selected findings

The research presented a window into the backgrounds, motivations and aspirations of 20 first-time distance learners along with some of the rewards and challenges of distance study. For the purpose of this paper, the stories of Jack, Libby and Ursula are reported (all names are pseudonyms):

Insights from Jack

Jack wanted his life to go better places following what he described as a long period of recklessness. He had a vision to make his mark on behalf of his church and become a role model to Pacific Islander and Maori people. He was also the guardian of his niece and hoped to have more children whom he would support with a wealthy income. To this end, he was returning to study for the first time since high school

and was enrolled on four distance papers,[1] which he was forced to juggle around full-time employment for financial reasons.

He demonstrated remarkable determination and habitually studied beyond midnight. Having been away from study for so many years, Jack noted that he did not feel mentally sharp in terms of memory and recall, which proved difficult considering the volume of reading he needed to absorb. However, in the first half of semester, he passed all his assignments and was aiming for A-grades. However, during the second half of semester, he reported increased procrastination and episodes of complete stagnation that led to slippage on deadlines:

> Things are crunching up. I've fallen a bit behind in some of my studies. As usual, I feel tired. At the end of the day, to study, it's just trying to slog it. I think it's I've not done as much study as I wanted to do in the last couple of weeks. It's combination of things. I'm tired from work, it sucks it out of me a bit. And pressure at home don't help as well. So that's not all rosy all the time. Physically, I'm not in great shape.

Although he lived near campus, full-time employment meant that Jack could not attend contact courses. Plus, other than reading the questions posted in Moodle discussion forums, Jack did not leverage academic resources or build networks with other students. In retrospect, he admitted that he should have made better use of Moodle and academic resources such as online library tools. In hindsight, he also admitted that one of his lecturers had made a valid point when he had warned Jack that studying four papers alongside

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[1] Referred to in other jurisdictions as "units," "subjects" or "courses." It is essentially a semester-long teaching activity. (Eds.)

full-time employment was very unwise. All in all, Jack concluded:

> Unfortunately I did not do as well I had hoped. I faded badly towards the end of the study program mainly because of time constraints. I was busy up to my eyeballs at work. Plus I had problems to deal with at home. I don't think the problem is I am not smart enough, the problem is finding the time to study while my brain is fresh and not tired.

Insights from Libby

Like Jack, Libby was also enrolled in four distance papers. Although Libby was not employed, she was a full-time mother to seven dependent children who were aged between one and sixteen. She was returning to study for the first time since high school and dreamed that her studies would lead to a career in Social Work. However, her transition in to higher education proved challenging:

> As for assignments, I'm looking at getting a tutor as they don't seem to be going the way they are supposed to be. I've done a lot of research on how to do an assignment but it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to me.

As indicated in the second week of semester, Libby requested academic support from a Learning Consultant via the website but never received a response. Although she considered following-up her request, she preferred not to "push them" under the assumption that there were other students in greater need of assistance. She considered paying for a private tutor but decided to prioritise her funds and hire one instead for her son who was also studying by distance.

By the third week, Libby had failed two assignments. In addition, it had come to her

attention that she was enrolled on four papers, as opposed to three papers as she had initially thought. Altogether by Week 4, she was behind on three papers and, although she had passed an assignment in her fourth paper, the tutor of that paper had accused Libby of not taking her studies seriously enough. This terse communication had come at a time when Libby was still hoping for academic assistance from a Learning Consultant but, in the meantime, was making a concerted effort to battle through:

> I didn't realise when I took everything on how everything is so close together – you've got quizzes and assignment and you've got to read this and that... Didn't realise how hard it is to find 1500 words. I can do it verbally but putting on paper, not working... Having to find so many words without rambling is pretty hard.

Libby withdrew from the project after Week 6, which coincided with the hospitalisation of her baby, followed by the deterioration of her terminally ill mother-in-law. During these weeks, Libby described herself as a "solo parent support system" and exhibited outstanding commitment to her whānau. In her final correspondence, Libby remained determined to study but recognised her journey to becoming a Social Worker was going to be fraught with challenges:

> As much as a couple of weeks ago I was ready to give up, my goal is to be a social worker and I'm not ready to give up. So I'm going to rest, maybe sleep.

Insights from Ursula

Ursula was in her late fifties and of Pakeha (European) descent. Unlike Libby, her children had left home and, unlike Jack, she enjoyed part-time employment. Ursula was enrolled in one paper with a vision to upgrade her teaching diploma to a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education. However, she was unfamiliar with technology and the exclusively online-nature of her paper (as well as the technology associated with the project) was a source of anxiety from the outset:

> I'm having trouble. Bloggie, can't get it to send. Go in to Moodle, blaaaaaaaaa, too much information. Then in to Pairwise. There's all this technology; all these sites and I'm not really too sure what I'm supposed to be doing in any of them. It's like overload.

Ursula quickly began to report feeling disadvantaged. For example, she described the Moodle discussion forums as somewhat overwhelming and intimidating. Equally, she struggled to access online library resources and became particularly frustrated with the APA Referencing tool. When it came to submitting her assignment online, she was uncertain whether she had sent it with any success and, when results were published, she could not read the lecturer's comments. However, she was able to report that her assignment grade was a pass and, although she should have done better, she was ambivalent towards the pass at her current, "leg of the journey."

Ursula eventually withdrew from the project citing frustration with the technology associated with the project's data collection protocol, whilst making an associated point about the online learning aspect of modern distance education:

> I would like to continue [participating] but not being able to send the video misses the point of the exercise. It highlights a concern for online learning doesn't it? There are people who don't know the technology well enough to be able to work it with ease.

Wider insights and lessons

A number of wider insights and lessons are revealed from these learner stories for both first-time distance students and distance education providers. While distance learning was perceived to enable tertiary study to fit around other life, work and family commitments, these first-time distance students had relatively little conception of the actual demands of studying by distance. As early as the orientation period, the perceived flexibility and self-paced nature of distance education appeared to create a false sense of security, which appeared to result in making way for more pressing demands in their immediate environment. Although speculative the opportunity to *experience* distance learning before actually committing to, or formally commencing, university work may be a valuable way of helping students to think about study and make appropriate choices according to their personal circumstances.

The three case studies affirm the importance of the first few weeks of study, but they also reveal ebbs and flows in the life of a distance student over the semester, which needs further investigation. There is potentially evidence from the video diaries of a second critical at risk period later in semester. This observation appears to be supported by anecdotal evidence from other experienced distance educators. The key point is that contrary to popular belief the crucial period of ensuring the success of first-time distance learners appears to extend well beyond the first few weeks of study. There are obvious implications here for the types of services and resources that need to be available to distance learners as they progress with their study.

Finally, the level of digital literacy is variable among first-time distance learners and all three of the students reported in this paper had little or no experience as an online learner. The difficulties that new models of online, blended and distance education appear to be posing for distance learners appears to be a common theme amongst other distance education providers. That said, technology, when used appropriately, now presents distance learners with a transformative advantage to interact with teachers and peers to an extent that rivals or even betters traditional campus-based teaching and learning. Of course this potential is highly dependant on the skill and will of the teacher. The key point is that social inclusion in a digital environment along with online engagement needs to be modelled and nurtured by empathic teachers who encourage risk taking, personal dialogue and friendly interaction between staff and fellow students. In this regard, the way teachers interact matters and a welcoming digital culture may go a long way to helping to build a stronger sense of belonging amongst distance learners.

Final thoughts

This paper reports selected preliminary findings of an innovative study in which video diaries opened a window into the lived experiences of 20 first-time distance learners. Already from our analysis we are confident the stories will add considerable flesh to the "soft factors" of what it means to be a distance learner. At the time of writing, a comprehensive thematic analysis of participant's data is underway. Results will be used to inform evidence-based deliverables targeted at both distance education providers and distance learners. Some of these materials will be available to the distance education community

including a *Guide to being a Distance Learner*.

In the meantime, our preliminary analysis coupled with feedback from experienced university educators confirms that distance education provides an important pathway for social inclusion through the provision of flexible learning that can be undertaken alongside work, family and life commitments. However, the goal of "inclusion" is problematic in the absence of realistic goals and support and engagement strategies that reach out at the point of need across the student lifecycle. Moreover, the growth of new digital technologies creates additional barriers to distance learning that have yet to be fully understood. These initial observations raise a number of important issues for further discussion under the following overarching questions:

How do we nurture a sense of belonging and connectedness amongst distance learners that will help to sustain deep levels of engagement?

How do we support distance students to engage effectively with their study amid other commitments; whilst being mindful that, to survive (and thrive) across the distance, they need to be independent, self-motivated learners?

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