Why the student voice? The case for investigating the distance learners' experience of ICT in distance education

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In recent years the student experience of higher education in general and distance education in particular has been strongly influenced by wide scale uptake of internet based learning approaches, internationalisation and an expanding distance education market, amongst many other trends. As competition within the sector increases because of access to the WWW and other in-country socio-political influences, the push to attract and retain students is becoming a key issue for institutions. Understanding the distance student's voice in relation to these trends and developing appropriate responses to ensure a satisfactory learning experience is becoming of critical importance. This paper reports on a work in progress. It discusses some of the trends influencing students' learning in our increasingly borderless world and outlines a rationale for investigating the student voice to meet the unique needs of the distance learner. It describes approaches that will be adopted by a consortium of Australian and New Zealand distance education providers to undertake this work.

Introduction

During the last decade several trends have influenced distance education. These trends include rapid growth in distance education; the widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support teaching and learning activities; the merging of modes of learning; the impact of student diversity; a growing part-time mature-age student cohort who are working and upskilling; and the expansion of internationalisation and the globalisation of higher education.

Defining distance education and distance learners.

Definitions of distance education have become blurred in recent times with the widespread adoption of ICTs to support a range of teaching and learning activities including distance education. Several terms, including online learning, elearning, virtual learning and distance learning (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009) are used synonymously. For the purposes of this paper distance learning is defined as all learning that takes place where there is no face-to face interaction between students and between students and teachers. Any interaction between learners and between learners and teachers is mediated by technology (Keegan, n.d.). However, this broad definition of distance learning along with the interchange of terms overlooks the particular circumstances of the distance learner. For the purposes of this paper, distance learners are defined as those learners who participate in 80% or more of their courses and programs off-campus thus having little opportunity for formal and informal face to face learning opportunities with peers and teachers (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

The need to understanding the impact of ICT on the distance learner's experience

As the ownership and use of personal technology has become increasingly ubiquitous, the adoption of ICTs by higher education has continued to grow rapidly with all Australian institutions integrating technology into the learning experience primarily through the use of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as Blackboard, Moodle, and other more home grown varieties (Smithers 2009). Although the use of technology is widely accepted as a strategy that increases communication and interaction for off-campus students, there is often a failure to realise the full potential. Indeed, some recent studies (McKeogh & Fox, 2009; Lonn &Teasly, 2009) suggest that most lecturers make little use of the interactive features of many ICT tools. This situation is potentially problematic for distance learners, as the use of technology has become a key component of the distance learner's experience. Taylor's generation model (Taylor, 1995) describes how distance education has, over time, incorporated ICT use and according to Bernath et al (2009) ,is in transition as ICT collides with the traditional correspondence mode. Indeed, the merging of modes of delivery enabled by ICTs has meant that in many cases the focus on supporting the distance learner that characterised earlier models of distance education has been lost (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009).

While very little is understood about the views of distance learners in relation to their learning experience with ICTs what is evident is that distance learners experience a high level of attrition in some online courses, up to 40% in many cases (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). This gives cause for concern about the nature of their learning experience and impetus to develop a better understanding of the impact of ICTs on distance learners.

Overlooking student diversity

The notion of 'digital natives' was put forward by Prensky, (2001) and dominates much of the discussion around the student learning experience (Jones et al, 2010). Prensky proposed that the 'net gen' students (those born between 1980 and 1995) and now entering university are computer savvy 'digital natives' with high levels of digital competency and high levels of expectation relating to the use of technology for teaching and learning activities. Other authors support this notion (e.g. Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). These papers are highly influential but few are based on empirical research (Jones et al, 2010). The mistaken assumption of these papers is that first year students are homogeneous groups and little attention is paid to the needs of mature age students within these cohorts. While recent studies investigating student experience with ICTs for both personal and learning purposes (e.g. Kennedy et al, 2009) provide evidence to refute this notion of homogeneity, the focus of these studies is largely on on-campus first year students. However, in many institutions and especially in the distance education market mature working professionals make up a more significant proportion of first year enrolments (Jones et al, 2010), a group who is rarely discussed.

Globalisation, Internationalisation and transnational education

As globalisation of education becomes a key trend there is even less known about the challenges facing distance learners within this arena. Relatively little has been written directly on this topic. Most of the literature on globalisation of education is concerned with face-to-face delivery, either at Australian campuses or off-shore. The best recent overview of the impact of globalisation on the Australian higher education sector is Harman (2005) There is a small, but growing, literature on transnational education (e.g.Miliszewska, 2009; Dunn & Wallace, 2008). While the focus is generally on the offshore classroom, such works also address cultural and contextual issues relevant to distance education. Transnational education has also been the subject of a number of research theses at Australian universities (e.g. Hoare 2006; Miliszewska, 2006). References to distance education are limited, serving only to indicate the lack of research. Issues relating to the distance learner are largely passed over in silence.

Why investigate the student voice?

With the rapid adoption of ICT for teaching and learning as outlined above there has been considerable interest in researching the impact of technology on student learning. Consequently practitioners and researchers have investigated and disseminated their work across the numerous journals and conferences

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which have a focus on the use of ICT in education. In 2005, Sharpe, Benfield, Lessner and De Cicco undertook a scoping study which identified that the majority of studies into ICT use in higher education was written from the perspective of the practitioner and are under the control of institutions or teachers" (Mayes, 2006, p.3).

However while these studies provide useful information, this approach:

> Largely neglects a genuinely learner-centered perspective: that students experience formal learning in emotional terms, that their motivation to lean is only understandable by looking at their lives holistically, and that technology is embedded in their social experience. (Mayes, 2006, p.3)

Supporting this finding, a recent literature review (2008) by Moyle and Owen found that investigations into students' perspectives on learning with technology are limited and most studies focus on 'evaluation studies seeking students' responses to particular courses and/or approach to learning' (p.3).

It appears, then, that while much of the dissemination around the use of ICTs for teaching and learning is interesting the methodologies tend to be evaluation 'war stories' of practice, are from the 'teachers perspective' and few have developed methodologies for incorporating the student voice to inform and enhance the learning experience of specific cohorts of students.

Why incorporate the distance learners' voice?

JISC (2009) point out that different cohorts of learners experience learning differently. On-campus students have different requirements to mature age working professionals. Given the paucity of information available about the distance learner in general and the working professional in particular a gap has been identified which requires immediate addressing, given that institutions want their students to succeed and progress in their studies. Understanding the student learning experience can address key challenges that both institutions and students might face. The student voice can be used to inform how we can plan for successful learner experiences. The pedagogies for online learning need to take into account the diversity of students and their needs and to date there appears to be a gap in how these pedagogies respond directly to the distance learner. Additionally, in some countries the growth in population means that distance education is a vehicle for economic success as face to face institutions struggle to meet demand, for example: Malaysia, India and China. With this in mind the authors feel that the distance learner voice is an important dimension worthy of consideration.

Researching the student voice

DEHub, an Australian Research Institute has proposed an innovative large Australian Distance Learner Voice Study that will draw upon a total sample of potentially 85,000 students across four large distance education providers in Australia and New Zealand: UNE, USQ, CQ University and Massey University. These universities will participate in a collaborative pilot study in mid 2010 to test the suitability of the methods proposed to inform a large scale implementation late in 2010 which will draw upon student centered approaches that will be adapted to suit the distance learner so as to better understand this group and to inform the development of learner centered strategies. Student centred approaches allow for the collection of thick descriptions and capture the students' feelings in relation to their activities as well as information about these experiences (Mayes 2006). Guidelines for an ideal learner-centred methodology include: utilising open-ended methods; mixed mode; triangulation; accessing beliefs, explanations and intentions; talking about learning with learners and researching authentic contexts (Mayes 2006).

The methods for this study include:

- an updated meta-analysis of literature
- an investigative survey; and
- the day experience method (Learning Landscape Project Team, 2008).

The day experience method (DEM) in particular will capture students' learning activities over a 24-hour period, Students will be asked to provide as much detail as possible. The DEM is followed up by asking

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participants to take part in a focus group where they share their digital record and describe their day. (Riddle & Howell, 2008). The DEM can provide a rich picture of the student's perspective of their experience and provide additional information to support or refute observations conducted by a researcher.

Data collected from these approaches in the pilot will be analysed using an interpretative thematic approach and we expect to generate propositions that can be further tested in the larger scaled study. We expect to use data to generate a range of possibly useful outcomes for stakeholders who loosely represent University senior managers, Government analysts involved in quality assurance, educational designers, academics more generally and students themselves.

Conclusion

This study to be conducted in late 2010 represents the start of a new and purposeful approach to address the gap of knowledge about distance learners and which it is hoped will provide new methods for others to incorporate into their own development for learning experiences for their students. The approach aims to gather information that goes beyond generalizations about homogenous cohorts and rather provide an approach to gathering data to inform the distance learner experience in localized and globalised contexts.

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