



Connecting Learners through Deakin Buddies

Joan Sutherland¹, Corinna Ridley¹, Chie Adachi² and Fiona Greig¹

¹Deakin University, ²Queen Mary University of London

This poster will outline the ways in which technology has been used in the development of a university wide, in-house app, Deakin Buddies, to increase online students' sense of belonging, and will showcase early evaluations of how it has been used.

Learning environments are built on complex networks that involve multiple interactions in the physical and online space. From computer networks to social networks, one of the most important ways to facilitate these interactions is to enable learners to connect with and learn from each other. A sense of belonging is the feeling of connectedness to a group or community and is promoted through social connections with peers. In higher education, belonging is linked to students' effort, self-esteem, perseverance, and enjoyment of learning tasks (Ulmanen et al., 2016). A sense of belonging is also promoted through those social connections with both teachers and peers (Watson et al., 2010).

Although university campuses have supported learners to develop these connections through formal and informal spaces, learners in the online environment have found it more challenging to make meaningful connections with peers outside of formal learning tasks (O'Shea et al., 2015). In response to this, the Deakin Buddies app was developed to enable online learners to find and connect with their peers. Unlike other social media platforms, Deakin Buddies is specifically designed to connect learners within the same study area and empower them to decide how they interact and build connections. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted all teaching and learning practices online, it heightened the need for connection, so Deakin Buddies was made available to everyone.

Social presence is defined as learners being able to identify with their community, communicate in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships (Garrison, 2009). Research suggests that social presence is one factor that supports learners to create a sense of belonging where they feel connected to their peers and the university. Deakin Buddies facilitates the initial connection required to build learners' social presence and start to develop these relationships. By connecting with other learners, they are creating relationships that can enhance their ability to bridge knowledge gaps, their interests, and their peer culture (Ito et al., 2013).

Since recent studies have shown a positive correlation between learner belonging, motivation and enjoyment (Pedler et al., 2022), it is crucial that learners are able to connect at varying points in time. Deakin Buddies is open to learners throughout their studies to meet their need for connection. Analysis of data from within the app has shown there are points in time where there is a heightened need for connection, particularly at the beginning of teaching and during exam periods. This could suggest that learners would welcome opportunities for discussion and interaction with peers at these critical times in their studies and are proactively seeking connections with peers to achieve this. To evaluate this project further in light of the conceptual framework used by Community of Inquiry (Garrison, 2009) qualitative analysis of student surveys is being undertaken to determine whether the students feel that the Deakin Buddies app is providing authentic opportunities for them to build meaningful connections beyond the initial connection.

Keywords: connection, create a sense of belonging, social connections, social presence

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