Lights, camera, action: Gathering experiences of first time distance learners

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This paper reports 'research in progress', which investigates the experiences of first-time distance learners with a strong phenomenological dimension. It takes place against a backdrop of challenges facing distance education in Australasia in which issues of recruitment, attrition (retention) and completion rates have come into sharp relief. This study will go beyond the current literature by producing a set of research-led deliverables that will enhance the supports and services available for first-time distance learners. The project is framed by an audit of initiatives designed to enhance the success of distance learners at two Australasian universities. The primary investigation gathered reflective video diaries from 20 first-time distance learners during Semester 2, 2011. The paper describes the methodological challenges of collecting learner stories through video and shares some of the preliminary qualitative data from this phase of the study.

Keywords: Distance education; learner engagement; reflective diary

Introduction

There is a wealth of literature exploring the individual, social and organizational factors which impact on student recruitment, attrition (retention) and completion rates in higher education. As Zepke and Leach (2007, p.237) observe, 'Improving retention rates in post-school education has become a focus for policy-makers and researchers throughout the western world'.

Student retention has been linked to learner engagement. There are three 'dimensions' of learner engagement that are used in educational research (Bull et al., 2010). The first is 'behavioural engagement', which is demonstrated by students who are involved and participating, meaning that they are likely to be on task and following instructions. The second is 'emotional engagement', which manifests as signs of interest / enjoyment and means that students find the learning sufficiently worthwhile / challenging to give it their attention and effort. Lastly, 'cognitive engagement' manifests at a surface level through a student's ability to describe what they have learned or to complete a task accurately. However, at a deeper level, a student who is cognitively engaged is likely to initiate self-directed investigation or setting and solving related challenges.

A number of Australasian studies have investigated learner engagement in tertiary education (James et al., 2009; Kift, 2009; AUSSE, 2010). In brief, we know from previous research that:

- The first year experience is critical to learner success and, during this time, institutions have the influence to enhance the student experience and, in turn, which students succeed (Kift, 2009);
- A high proportion of students consider dropping out of university in their first year. However, only a few indicators suggested that distance students were less engaged than on-campus students (AUSSE, 2010).
- More students than ever are studying by distance, which has been augmented by new digital technology. Students now expect technology to be a central feature of their learning experience (James et al, 2009).

Internationally, Simpson (2009) is one of the leading scholars whose work focuses on learner engagement and retention in the context of distance education. He claims there are many possible interventions available that have been known to successfully support the engagement and retention 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 learning (Simpson, 2009). To overcome this problem, MacKay et al., (2010) adapted an 'intervention framework' for distance learners as part of a major externally funded project to enhance distance learner retention. The framework is based on a combination of the 'intervention pyramid' by Wilson (2009), which identifies the different needs of different learners; and on the student life-cycle published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2001).

Building on this work, the current research has been designed to answer the following question: What are the overarching principles for engaging students in distance learning and, to that end, which are the most effective intervention tools, supports and resources during the early stages of the study lifecycle?

Methods

First phase

The first phase involved an audit of initiatives designed to enhance the success of distance learners at two Australasian universities. The audit framework adopted the six stages of the study life cycle (HECFE, 2001; MacKay et al. 2010), against which initiatives were recorded:

1. Thinking about study – Initiatives that encourage a variety of people to participate in higher education by raising their aspirations, while helping them begin to understand the learning and teaching methods used;
2. Making choices, e.g. Tools that assist potential students actively gather information, which may help them self-assess their readiness, suitability and capacity for study via distance;
3. Enrolment – A well designed admissions process can not only help to reduce stress but also contribute to retention, as the student is better informed and more aware of the expectations within higher education;
4. First weeks – In addition to initiatives surrounding orientation, this stage incorporates retention and engagement strategies relating to the first 6 to 8 weeks of study via distance;
5. Progression – Initiatives that provide ongoing support for student success and review the appropriateness of teaching and learning approaches during and beyond the first semester;

6. Completion – Interventions that prepare students for life after their current distance paper(s), which may include strategies to support students as they make the transition to the working environment.

Second phase

The second phase adopted a mixed methodology with a strong phenomenological dimension. This meant that the experiences of learners were recorded from their own point of view using Sony bloggie™ video cameras for data collection . Approval to conduct the second phase of the project was granted by the University's Human Ethics Committee.

Recruitment
The recruitment of first-time distance learners was enabled by the Director of Student Management who granted the project permission to access enrolment data for students studying via distance for the first time in Semester 2, 2011. The primary method of recruitment was by email invitation from the Project Leader via inyourownwords@xxx.ac.nz to all potential participants at the point when their enrolment had been approved. For further information, the email invitation included a 'Participant Information Sheet' along with a link to a participant-facing website: http://inyourownwords.xxx.ac.nz. A notable feature of the website was a video introduction from the Project Leader and Project Manager using the same Sony bloggie™ video cameras that were provided to participants.

The Information Sheet explained that the greatest benefit of participation was likely to be the activity of self-reflection, which is known to enhance learning outcomes. In addition, it was highlighted that participant data will be disseminated across the distance education community to help improve the learning experience for future students. To compensate participants for their time, the Information Sheet explained that a token of our appreciation (koha) would be extended upon receipt of participants' final diary episodes.

Sampling
The recruitment campaign reached more than 750 potential participants, of which 140 first-time distance learners volunteered. The sampling process was based on the decision to select 20 participants who broadly represented the demographic and geographic diversity of distance learners. The profile of diversity was informed by a demographic analysis of the University's distance students during the 2010 academic year. Although more students volunteered, the funding and feasibility of the study restricted the sample size. 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. Twenty successful volunteers received an email request to confirm their agreement to participate by signing a 'Consent Form'. Those 120 volunteers not selected received a transparent explanation.

Data collection
Upon receipt of signed Consent Forms participants were sent a Sony bloggie™ video camera via courier to their home address. Upon receipt of the bloggie™, participants received an orientation document via email, which was designed to support each participant in becoming sufficiently confident with technology to participate effectively, i.e. operating the camera then uploading and submitting data files. Those who required additional assistance were contacted by the Project Manager. As part of the orientation process, participants were asked to record a practice diary in response to some initial reflective questions.

Reflections were gathered using a video diary technique adapted from previous studies. Riddle and Arnold (2007) used the 'Day Experience Method' to investigate everyday life situations. They required participants to record written answers to specific questions sent at irregular intervals (between 30 and 90 minutes) between 8am and 10pm on three separate days. In contrast, Cashmore, Green and Scott (2010) adopted a free-form approach to video diaries in a longitudinal study with undergraduate students at the University of Leicester. The present study adopted an approach that struck a balance between a structured approach and free-form approach.

The initial expectation was for five minutes-worth of video footage per week; although this expectation waned given that the greater issue was not one of duration but 'forthcomingness' of information. Of the twenty participants, six presented some concern around their willingness and/or natural ability to reflect deeply on their distance learning experience. Simultaneously, three participants capable of speaking at length (>10 minutes per week) presented a challenge in the limited depth and breadth of their dialogue. The research team faced the challenge of accommodating diversity while maintaining enough consistency across participants to prevent the data becoming skewed. In response, a 'reflective prompt' protocol was designed to encourage 'free-flow' reflections whilst providing 'fish-hooks' to elicit targeted categories of information in a lightly structured

manner. Within 48 hours of receiving a participant's video file, the Project Manager would respond via email with a set of reflective prompts, which were based on the following framework:

- What's on your mind at the moment?
- Fish-hooks for deep, strategic and surface learning indicators
- Fish-hook for support indicators
- Is there a word that sums-up your study this week?
- What's on your plate next week?
- Are there things you'd like to continue, start and/or stop?

Exceptional data was collected during the first half of Semester 2. During semester-break, participants were given the opportunity to continue or conclude their involvement in the project. Eight participants chose to conclude, while twelve chose to continue until the end of semester. The research team were mindful of any sense in which the students felt abandoned on conclusion of the study.

Data management
To mitigate any participant concerns about being identified via their video recordings, data was handled solely by the Project Manager. Upon conclusion, participants were given the opportunity to review their data before deciding whether to authorize its release for the purpose of academic dissemination. Participants were given the option to release a transcript of their data under and alias identity and withhold their video recordings.

Reporting data
Data analysis is scheduled to take place in November 2011. The analytic method will be thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2003). In this study, thematic analysis will follow a 'realist' method in which the experiences, meanings and the reality of participants are reported. An inductive approach ('bottom-up') will be applied, which means that themes will arise from the data. Thematic analysis follows a six-step process: Familiarization; Generating initial codes; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; Reporting content of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2003).

Third phase

An invitation to participate in an anonymous, online survey was extended to all 160 first-time distance learners who volunteered to participate in the second phase. The survey was not extended to the potential pool of 750+ first-time distance learners at the university because it was assumed that their preference not to participate was implicit in their rejection of the initial invitation to participate. The invitation was sent via email from the Project Leader and accompanied by an Information Sheet. Approval to conduct the online survey was granted by the University's Human Ethics Committee.

The pre-semester survey comprised two sections: a reflective section followed by a demographic section. The reflective section was structured horizontally around the concept of deep, strategic and surface learning taken from the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students used by (Anderson, B., 2011); and vertically around the Equivalency of Interaction Theory of student interaction with other students, staff and content (Anderson, T., 2003). This strategy aimed to gather insight in to preferences around interactions by students who indicated tendencies towards deep, strategic and shallow learning; and then to triangulate these finding with demographic data. The survey generated 65 responses. The end-of-semester survey adopted the same vertical and horizontal lines of investigation while reflecting on the preceding 12 weeks. Results of the survey were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Inc., Chicago, USA).

Conclusion

Preliminary analysis has highlighted four points: (A) Hearing from students in their own voice was the original raison d'être of this project. Reflective video diaries opened a window in to the lives of twenty participants as they embarked upon their inaugural journeys in to the realm of distance education. From this privileged observation platform, the extent to which stories add flesh to what it means to be a distance learner has become evident. Thus, the value gained from the video diary protocol far outweighed the challenges that arose along the way; (B) Distance education is the mode of choice for 21st century learners who are empowered by the

flexibility to assimilate tertiary study around life's less flexible commitments; (C) Digital literacy is hugely variable among distance learners, which presents a challenge as distance education providers transition to online delivery; (D) It is important to make explicit tacit knowledge of what's required to be successful as a distance learner from the outset. Support services for distance learners must be mobilized and advertised at the point of need; and must appreciate the unique challenges that they face in contrast to internal students.

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