Towards understanding of student engagement in blended learning: A conceptualization of learning without borders

Cheryl Brown
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Niki Davis
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Valerie Sotardi
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

William Vidal
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

In this paper we report on our research exploring undergraduate distance students' experiences of engagement in a context that is blended with on-campus peers and incorporates work-based learning. Drawing on interviews of educators, a survey and focus groups with students we seek to build a picture of what engagement in learning means in the current Aotearoa New Zealand context and unravel some of the contradictions and complexities in what constitutes effective learning and teaching. This paper provides an overview of the study including a review of the way engagement has been conceptualised in online and blended learning contexts over the past decade. Findings suggest that for students, flexibility is paramount and that digital tools did support this along with helping in understanding, independence of learning and enjoyment. Students also foregrounded other less visible learning strategies and the importance of peer support outside of the classroom. There was also a link between students sense of wellbeing, inclusion and/or belonging (related to their feelings and emotions) and digital tools.

Keywords: student engagement, distance learning, contextual conceptualization

Introduction

Not another paper on student engagement! The topic of student engagement has been reported on for decades and there is a multitude of literature adopting different perspectives and views conceptualizing and defining this topic. The terminology has become commonplace in every day discussion about learning and teaching and people talk about student engagement as if we all understand the same thing by it. With so much research on student engagement and what it means, why is this such a difficult concept to understand? Over the past 5 years at ASCILITE alone there have been 24 papers with engagement in the title. In grappling with understanding the concept of student engagement in our context of distance students in a College of Education, Health and Human Development in Aotearoa New Zealand we reviewed over 66 articles defining or conceptualising student engagement (particularly with a focus on online, distance or blended learning) over the past 10 years. Four of these themselves were systematic literature reviews on the concept (Henrie, Halverson, & Graham, 2015; Nortvig, 2018; Schindler, 2017; Trowler, 2010) and all this did was demonstrate to us that engagement can mean many different things to different people. In their new book *Student Engagement in the Digital University*, Gourlay and Oliver (2018) in re-theorising the concept, move away from the idea of a definition or framework and instead view student digital engagement as a set of socio-material practices. However, whilst student voices are critical and individual experiences are clearly varied, we are still grappling with what are the mediating variables that influence each student's engagement with digital learning.

Background and context

Our college at the University of Canterbury (UC) has a long history of distance learning stretching back some 20 years when it first made its Bachelor of Teaching and Learning degree available to students studying at distance. Initially conceptualised as flexible learning this approach was delivered in mixed mode involving on-site intensives and resource-based learning complement with an early innovative LMS. The Christchurch earthquakes of 2010/2011 however catapulted the program into adoption of additional new modes of e-learning and quickly developed innovative digital solutions. The program and its educators have received many acknowledgments for their excellent practice and have been recognised through teaching awards, such as awards from our national association for open flexible and distance learning (Astall et al., 2016; Ayebi-Arthur et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2011). However as both UC and educational technology continue to evolve (Davis, 2018) it is timely to focus on how we can better support distance students in their learning.

The term engagement has many definitions (Louwrens and Hartnett, 2016; Henrie, Halverson and Graham, 2015). Research on student engagement in the tertiary sector confirmed its influence on both student satisfaction and learning and identified reciprocal and complex interactions between emotions, engagement, and

learning (Kahu, et al, 2014). In a higher education context some institutions have been "legislating" engagement through requirement for lecture and tutorial attendance believing that students' physical presence is an important precursor for learning. Innovations such as lecture recording are often met with distrust as a result of concerns that having the option to "watch" a lecture online will result in low attendance by students. In the online / distance context institutions wish to find ways of monitoring student activities that is similar to attendance, which can result in the allocation a mark for contributions to forums and requiring students attend synchronous sessions or undertake particular activities as coursework. Lots of solutions are being developed and "learning analytics" is seen as a powerful way of identifying at risk students (Vyberg, Hatakka, Bälter, & Mavroudi, 2018). But how can one make sense of such information when there is confusion about what is meant by engagement?

In order to develop the foundation of our study we undertook a literature review of how the concept of engagement had been described over the past decade. Using the search terms distance learning, online learning, blended learning, engagement, concept, definition and framework we identified 66 articles and grouped them according to themes. Four dominant views emerged

1. Social dimension: The key element is social interaction. Definitions were based on a constructionist and Community of Inquiry approach, active learning, student identity/belonging. Engagement understood as a result of social interactions. [20 articles]
2. Individual dimension: The key element is the student's behavior. Definition based on the individual's involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning. [15 articles]
3. Flow – effective teaching practices: The key element is student satisfaction. Definition based on the individual's feeling of enjoyment. and the extent to which they become immersed in their learning. The idea is that individuals engage in activities that meet certain or specific conditions that motivate them to continue to study and enjoy learning. It is argued that the triggering of interest establishes engagement. [11 articles]
4. Multidimensional approach: Definition based on the idea that engagement does not comprise a single dimension but different and interconnected ones (e.g. behavioral, cognitive, emotional, etc.) [12 articles]

Our view, which is in line with the Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education (TKI, 2018) is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond learning and teaching and pedagogy because it intersects with the individual student's confidence, motivation, culture, and life experiences in their diverse interconnected ecosystems (physical and digital) (Davis, 2018). From an organisational perspective, student engagement in ODL encompasses both the conditions which create an enabling (or disabling) environment for learning along with the pedagogical strategies that are used in course design. The socio-emotional aspect is critically important in our context.

Research Design

The research began at the start of 2018 in response to the College Learning and Teaching Committee request to research the learning experience of undergraduate students studying at a distance. The first stage of research explored the current context. The research team interviewed five tertiary educators including e-learning champions, members of the institutional e-learning support team and program convenors to get a broad understanding of what different stakeholders understood by "distance education", obtain an overview of pedagogical approaches currently adopted in our distance courses in the College, and explore their conceptions of student engagement. This helped us position our research focus and assisted in guiding the design of a survey for students. All distance students (n=386) across all years in undergraduate teacher education programs (our one year graduate diploma and four degree for primary and early childhood teachers) were surveyed near the midpoint of their academic year. These programmes are fairly typical for initial teacher education (Davis 2010), except that the students study in a hybrid mode so that the online learning spaces in the LMS and sometimes video conference are the same for both distance and on-campus students, a development that is discussed later in our paper. The survey and focus groups explored the distance students' overall experience of distance education as well as their self-efficacy/confidence in using digital tools for learning (n =84; 21.7% of the total). Our survey drew on existing instruments such as the Community of Inquiry framework (Akyol, Garrison and Ozden 2009), the Online Learning Environment Survey (Clayton, 2007) and the Student Digital Experience Tracker (JISC 2018). This was followed by 7 focus groups (n=46; 54.8% of survey participants) to gather more data about students' expectations and preparedness for studying at a distance, the aspect(s) of the program were the most valuable in supporting their learning, and their challenges.

Findings

We begin with reflecting on who our students are and why they choose to study at a distance. When asked why they decided to pursue their current qualification by distance the majority of students surveyed (40%) responded that it was to give them flexibility, and another third indicated it was their only option (see Table 1). If location had not been a factor, 54% would still have preferred to be a distance rather than on-campus. This reminds us that for half of our students, distance learning best supports their circumstances and the flexibility they wish for study. Through the focus groups we found that flexibility, family, and work commitments, as well as individual learning style preferences, were closely related to this choice. Participants explained that they look for a programme which fits well with their time constraints due to their multiple commitments as well as their personal predispositions or orientations to learning (e.g. preference for taking tests or engaging in activities online from home) as one student indicated "*I like to pause the lectures throughout. I find this beneficial as I can better seek clarification by recapping or doing further research*" (Survey)

Table 1: Why students chose to study by distance

I decided to study by distance because it would give me flexibility in my schedule.	40 %
I decided to study by distance because this was my only option (e.g. live outside Christchurch).	33 %
I decided to study by distance because I felt that on-campus study was not for me.	9 %
Other:	17 %

In terms of whether distance enabled enough flexibility in their schedules the majority indicated it did (45% were definite and 48% said somewhat), whilst the remaining 7% indicated somewhat not or definitely not. Some contradiction that emerged in the focus groups indicated that, whilst they students valued the flexibility their distance programs provided, certain factors implemented as part of their programmes (often with the intention to enhance flexibility) had the opposite effect. The coding of qualitative data about program effectiveness identified that "tool friendliness" and "course organisation" were mentioned in all focus groups (45 and 33 times respectively). This was a more dominant theme than workload, student guidelines, staff-student relationships and course structure (which had either 22 or 23 mentions each). In relation to this, students indicated that the lack of consistency in the design of courses in our institutional LMS and the variable way in which recordings are used led them to spend extra time and effort finding what they needed rather than focusing on learning. One student encapsulated this well as "*time is so precious for all of us, to waste so long trying to figure out how each different course is set-up, whereas there's a couple of courses for example, our xx course which I find really well set-out, and I can just go on it, and boom – boom – boom –I know what I have to do.*" (FG 2). They also mentioned being overwhelmed by the workload and the multiple tasks (watching recordings, collaborating online and attending real-time sessions on top of readings and online activities).

Students were asked to indicate their general attitudes towards the use of digital tools in the course including the LMS and a range of video conferencing. The statements with which most students agreed related to flexibility, understanding, independence of learning and enjoyment, see Table 2. Although the majority agreed with all aspects, the two aspects that fewer than 70% of students agreed with were the role of digital tools in connecting them with lecturers or other learners. Participants demonstrated a positive attitude towards technology, its use and effectiveness during the focus groups; however, some students indicated that some digital tools appeared to be used for ineffective purposes at times. They also commented on the wide variation that they experienced in teacher educators' digital practices.

Table 2. Students' positive attitudes towards digital tools

When digital tools are used in my courses	Strongly agree/ Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree/ somewhat disagree
I can fit learning into my life more easily.	82%	12%	4%
I understand things better.	79%	15%	5%
I am more independent in my learning.	78%	12%	9%
I enjoy learning more.	71%	20%	7%
I feel more connected with my lecturers.	62%	18%	19%
I feel more connected with other learners.	53%	24%	21%

Students confirmed that they had reasonable access to online learning with 83% indicating they almost always or often are able to access the course materials and could go through this without support. Likewise, students

were positive about their ability to control their learning (77% indicated they almost always or often had control) and 62% found the internet stimulating for their learning. In addition, during the focus groups students also indicated that they engaged in meaningful learning activities outside of the formal learning environment such as study groups (either with other students in close proximity or through social media), spending time annotating hard copy readings, and talking to others about what they learn.

Whilst engagement is most often viewed in terms of positive experiences (eg connection, independence, understanding, enjoyment), lack of engagement is seen in terms of negative experiences (eg overwhelming, frustrating, isolating, distraction). These negative experiences have been reported as challenges for learning online (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, Santiague 2017). As shown in Table 3 less than a third of students strongly or somewhat agreed that digital tools resulted in these "negative" disengaged activities. This demonstrates a link between feelings and engagement, at least for some students. These different perspectives demonstrate the importance of understanding individual student's needs and there appeared to be a link between the sense of wellbeing, inclusion and/or belonging (related to students' feelings and emotions) and digital tools. Students' support networks were explored further during the focus groups, where the importance of peer support to provide experience, knowledge, emotional, social and practical help was evident in all the focus groups (mentioned 20 times); it was mentioned more than family networks (9 mentions) or other colleagues (12 mentions). Participants highlighted the importance of "interactions" and their need to establish "real" connections with their lecturers and peers. Peer support appeared to be critical in helping students cope.

Table 3: Students' negative attitudes towards digital tools

When digital tools are used in my courses	Strongly agree/ Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly disagree/ somewhat disagree
I find it harder to motivate myself.	19%	22%	57%
I feel overwhelmed.	32%	13%	52%
I feel frustrated or annoyed.	26%	22%	50%
I find it harder to manage all the information.	39%	15%	45%
I feel more isolated.	36%	20%	45%
I am more easily distracted.	31%	23%	44%

Discussion and Conclusion

We plan to deeply reflect on how to act upon our findings. At this preliminary stage we have yet to develop a complete picture of the findings and still need to analyse data with participating teacher educators and other staff; a process that will inevitably result in a broadening of our sources of evidence as we seek to make recommendations about how to optimally design our blended learning spaces. It might be useful to note that a project approximately a decade ago, informed the change to the blend we have today with the unusual configuration of one LMS course site for multiple course offerings. We had recognised that distance students could feel like second class citizens and made a conscious decision to create remove those boundaries in the virtual learning space and share the distant students' course materials with on campus students and stream campus lectures and workshops with for distance students so that students in both modes could benefit and participate in various ways. Thus, considerable co-creation and sharing had resulted from that college-wide decision and related support from champions and leaders as well as students. This blurring of boundaries mirrors the conference theme "Open oceans: Learning without borders". We have strived for an "ocean" where our distance students "swim alongside" our on-campus students so as to increase opportunities for engagement (Dabner, Davis & Zaka 2012).

Students' desire for consistency across courses does present a challenge as differences in pedagogy that come with different disciplines, cross disciplinary area's and teaching philosophies, make it inappropriate to prescribe a common LMS course template. In addition, reducing the diversity of our teaching approaches could result in a reduction of student and staff engagement, if it became less stimulating and limits opportunities to model a diversity of good practice that can be transferred into schools (Davis, 2010). However, it does appear that an explanation of how the course is structured at the start might assist students to navigate the differences in the pedagogical design of courses more easily, while also assisting transfer into their future practices as teachers. Our findings also indicate that with the widespread uptake of social media, students' agency has increased thus adding previously unconsidered informal channels to their learning interactions; something that was only dreamed of in 2008 (Dabner & Davis 2009). We already recognise that the social aspects are invisibly mixed

with private and informal learning. The visible perspective of engagement should not "wash away" the informal and social aspects so that they are missed. This reminds us that, while engagement with digital tools continues to increase in prominence for staff and students, they are only the more visible of channels through which students engage in their learning. Therefore, as educators, we need to be cognizant of this and seek ways to acknowledge the variety of tools and channels including the invisible non-digital components that are likely remain particularly important for the learning of students who engage from a distance.

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