What learning means to you: Exploring the intersection between educational and digital lives of university students through digital narratives

Tingting Yu
University of Sydney Business School
University of Sydney
Australia

Peter Bryant
University of Sydney Business School
University of Sydney
Australia

The inclusive nature of the student experience in higher education has been recognised by a growing number of researchers (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012). Understanding how the whole experience is affected by students' emotions, connections and use of technologies is essential for higher education providers and professionals in a post-digital context (Verdonck, Greenaway, Kennedy-Behr, & Askew, 2019). Conducted in 2018 and 2019, the Work. Live. Play. Learn (WLPL) project series collected digital stories from 143 university students about their technology empowered holistic learning experience. These stories covered topics around how students' educational, digital and personal lives intersected with the use of social media and learning technologies. Apart from providing access to more expansive and accessible learning spaces, the use of technology also revealed the challenges in the transitive state many students are facing, such as social isolation, pressure and engagement with disciplines (Barnett, 2007). While exposing some complexity in their learning experience, the students also engaged in actively seeking for ways to better their own learning experience. The findings and digital narrative method in this study can be used sustainably in getting students' feedback and understanding modern learning to design better educational experiences for students.

Keywords: learning experience, student satisfaction, digital narrative, digital storytelling

Introduction

The student learning experience in higher education has received more and more attention from contemporary researchers and education providers as a response to the changes and challenges in the modern education system in a complex and increasingly internationalised environment (Tan, Muskat, & Zehrer, 2016). Historically, student satisfaction surveys and service quality management processes have been employed by educators, institutions and researchers to evaluate and improve educational experience (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; McGhee, 2017; Sabri, 2011; Smith & Segbers, 2018). Traditional definition and deeply held assumptions have also been adopted to interpret the student learning process and experiences. Marton and Säljö (1976) developed surface and deep approaches to describe different level of learning a task. Biggs (1979) claimed that student learning involves "three stages of input, process and output", input includes different elements in the teaching context, process is how students select and learn from the input, and output is the quality and quantity of the outcome. Temple et al. (2016) described student experience as the "totality of a student's interaction with the institution". Although previous studies have extended the understanding of the student experience, few of them have approached students directly to get their first person authentic lived experience. We know little about how students' personal, digital and educational lives intersect and shape their learning experience. As noted by Montgomery (Lim, 2012), "learning takes place in contexts beyond the classroom and beyond university walls". The aim of our study is to explore some of the internal and external factors around student experience, examine learning from both inside and outside of the classroom and add insights and new approaches to the existing research in the student experience.

Methodology

Digital storytelling and narrative techniques

According to Porter (Porter 2010), digital storytelling is "the combination of the ancient art of oral storytelling with a palette of technical tools to weave personal stories using digital images, graphics, music, and sound mixed together with the author's own story voice". Digital storytelling has been used by researchers and educators for tasks such as engaging student learning, replacing assessments, creating new knowledge, supporting creative writing and teaching (Barber, 2016; Benmayor, 2008; Clarke & Adam, 2012; Porter, 2010). However, few researchers have adopted digital storytelling into student experience and empowering students to tell stories of

their personal and educational lives. Building on the previous implication, we developed a unique way of employing digital storytelling in capturing student satisfaction with their educational experience.

Selected randomly across the faculty, 143 students were engaged into the project WLPL series from 2018 to 2019 to have conversations and share stories with the research team. In WLPL1.0, all conversations were filmed in *situ* at the faculty building and recorded and edited into forty-one hours of video. More digital narrative methods were employed in WLPL1.5 including digital storytelling, podcast and online information journal. A range of prompts such as flash cards, white board exercises, drawing sessions and games were used to trigger the conversations. Open-ended questions were incorporated to enhance the storytelling on broad topics around student's work, life, leisure and learning from both inside and outside of the institution. Questions that closely related to the students learning experience were used to help us address the critical research questions:

- What are our students lived and authentic experiences of learning?
- How do our students react/respond to the requirements placed upon by the faculty?
- How do they balance the interactions and tensions of work, life and play with learning?
- What role does technology and social media play in all this?
- (WLPL 1.0)

- What does being a student/graduate of the faculty mean to them? (Identity)
- What does it mean to them to be a member of the community of the faculty? (Community)
- What importance do they place on making, leveraging and sustaining networks and connections whilst studying at the faculty? (Connection)
- (WLPL 1.5)

The students in the project were also asked questions that touched on their experiences in areas such as their classroom learning, learning support, study habits, engagement with discipline, career options, work life, leisure, socialisation, clubs and societies, hopes and dreams and suggestions. The design of unstructured questions ensured interaction between students and the team while letting stories emerge from the flow with openness, freedom and playfulness.

The use of digital narrative approaches including high quality video recording, audio recording and digital journals expanded the access through which students would share their stories. The students expressed ideas and share their experiences by not only participating in the project but also co-creating themes and content with an interactive dynamic of the conversations and storytelling (Barber, 2016). The form of digital storytelling ensured that whilst there was a sense of spontaneity on the conversations, the permanence and lasting nature of video and audio shifted the way students engaged with the team. This was reinforced through asking students to hold the microphone during the filming, which added sense of centering the students as both the storyteller and the recorder of the narrative. The use of video and audio and the way in which it was set up also ensured that:

- Students were active story tellers rather than passive interviewees;
- There was an atmosphere of excitement, fun and freedom;
- A sense of community was fostered and bridged the faculty and community where the stories reside.

Student-led analysis through reflection workshops

Three main analysis techniques were used to show the patterns and connections among the stories (drawn from transcripts made of all the conversations and journals). Firstly, student researchers were engaged in analysis and reflection workshops to identify key themes and dichotomous stories during and after the conversations through mapping, brainstorming, poster notes exercise and Q&As (Li, Marsh, & Rienties, 2016). The themes and dichotomies revealed from the reflection workshops were then used to support the thematic and content analysis to disclose the stories among common and conflicting themes. The transcripts were coded and categorized using *NVivo* and the connections between different themes were drawn out of the codes and textual reviews from the reflection workshops. The stories that emerged from the analysis were then edited into short videos to share with students, academics and audiences across institutions and countries through social media channels, presentations and articles.

Findings and discussion

Group work is where everything begins

The stories that the students shared with us show that their study habits impact how they interact with others, what they do in their leisure time, and ultimately shape their holistic learning experience. We found that the students often stay with group members either for doing group projects or because they choose to study with peers. One commonly raised idea is that group work is the main, if not the only, way to make friends and socialise with others. They prefer to stay within a group as opposed to studying alone, because they can communicate with students from different backgrounds and open up about their problems in learning while receiving feedback and support from peers. This is quite different from the deeply held assumption that students do not like group work because there are issues such as unequal work allocation, free riders and managing various expectations (D'alessandro & Volet, 2012; Gammie & Matson, 2007; Soon & Sarrafzadeh, 2010). This study learned that students need better solutions in forming groups, setting group rules, getting tailored feedback from instructors and efficient communication. At the heart of those stories, students emphasize the importance of connection with peers and staff, socialisation and engagement with discipline and institution in shaping their learning experience while revealing the issues of disconnection, isolation and loneliness. As a starting point to understand the learning experience, the stories of how students learn after class and with whom are essential in informing the practices of educational designers looking at curriculum and teaching practices (Berbegal-Mirabent, Mas-Machuca, & Marimon, 2018).

Technology empowered learning

Several authors have suggested that the modern students are self-directed learners, who take responsibility for their own learning process, learn how to build and use networks, collaborate with others, and use information and communication technology to find appropriate information (Beckers, van Der Voordt, & Dewulf, 2016). Social media channels were one of the many technologies where learning resides as revealed by the students, along with online learning portals, cloud storage and digital communication tools. The boundary between classroom learning and social learning is blurred from the immersive use of social media in the students' everyday university life (K. Smyth, 2012; L. Smyth, Mavor, Platow, Grace, & Reynolds, 2013; Yang & Wu, 2012). While providing learning resources and information to the students, the application of social media platforms empowers students to transit from passive recipients into active learners, content makers and learning co-producers during their university experiences without limiting to location, space or personnel. The students also constantly used a range of technology tools and platforms in learning which require high level of creation and collaboration with peers. Some main ones discussed during the conversations are online peer assessment and feedback, student-designed online tests, self-created video recordings for main topics and online discussion board. Apart from traditional ways of using tools like *Canvas* or *Wikipedia* in providing resources, choices and control to enhance the learning, the students are empowered in collaborative and self-led learning supported by a developed use of technology (Smyth, Bruce, Fotheringham, & Mainka, 2011). This technology empowered learning process, according to Smyth (2012), will help students in reflecting "how knowledge is created and used in professional environments". Challenges associated with the use of technology, however, highlighted that the lecture engagement and student-staff liaison is low due to the lack of face-to-face interaction.

I, You, We – learning through connections in a community they call their own

This study explored the student perceptions, experiences, affordances and reactions around their identity being as a student at the faculty, the connection they made during university experience and what is means to them to be a member of the community of the faculty. The students developed personal interpretation around the 'I', 'you' and 'we' aspects of their identity within the community. While they identified and defined themselves as unique individuals, the students also explained their identity through relationship with others such as friends, tutors, lecturers and other people from the community. We found that they generally have a sense of community and experience community life by participating in student societies and unions, interacting with friends in the classes and attending a wide range of events and activities happening within the community. They acknowledged that they have received various forms of support from the faculty which reinforces their sense of community. Despite the diverse background of the people within the community, they co-exist in harmony while reflecting on their own identity of being part of them. They are motivated by others to play their roles to achieve their personal goals as well as the goals of the community as a whole. The students are also positively making efforts to build social and professional connections through tutorials, lectures, peer-assisted groups and various societal meetings and hope to keep these connections even after graduation. The sharing of those stories in turn helps other students

locate themselves in the community not only through watching the stories of other students but more importantly, passing them on to others.

Conclusions

The digital narrative method offered opportunities for students to express and share their insights, feelings, cases, stories and experience widely with their peers and a broader network. This will inform the community and education designers to develop various aspects in learning and teaching. The repeated application of the digital narrative method also proved that it can be sustainably used by other institutions and stakeholders to support their research. In our future studies, more digital narrative approaches will be explored to further enhance the depth of the conversations and make it more accessible for students to share stories both online and offline.

At the core of the stories, a diverse and supportive community was revealed by the students where they connect with others, develop their own identity, get support and help each other. The major themes around emphasis on group work, extensive use of technology, and sense of community set the tone of their learning experience in an increasingly competitive post-digital context. The other side of the stories, however, exposed the common issues and challenges modern students are facing, which are social isolation, disconnection and lack of engagement with the institution. These findings combined draw out a picture of a complex and multi-dimension student experience.

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