Superficial social inclusion? Reflections from first-time distance learners

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Abstract

This paper will report on a research project that sought to investigate the experiences of first-time distance learners from their own perspectives, using their own words collected through video diaries. The research took place against a background of low retention and completion rates among distance students, which brings in to question what actually happens to learners once they are enrolled. While the project will ultimately generate evidence-based deliverables targeted at both distance education providers and distance learners, this session will report on a selection of learner stories that have highlighted the issue of superficial social inclusion in the absence of support and engagement strategies that reach out at the point of need throughout the study lifecycle. Participants of this session will be asked to reflect on the challenge of supporting distance students to engage effectively with study amid other commitments; whilst being mindful that, to survive the distance, they need to be independent, self-motivated learners.

Context

Distance education has its roots in the promotion of social inequity by encouraging the inclusion of women and men from lower socio-economic groups, those from minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and mature people. This is particularly true in developing countries, but also in most developed countries, even in those where access rates of the traditional age cohorts to higher education have reached 50% and over (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). However, there has been minimal focus on what actually happens to the students once they are in the institutions (Basit & Tomlinson, 2012).

Educational institutions that use elements of open and distance learning practice in their course delivery generally experience lower reported rates of retention and completion than institutions operating in face-to-face teaching environments (Simpson, 2004). In Australasia, some indicators concur that distance learners are less engaged than on-campus students (AUSSE, 2010); although a recent analysis of New Zealand university survey data claims they are actually more engaged than on-campus students (Poskitt, Rees & Suddaby, 2011).

In this context, there is a notable contrast in the respective governments' education policy in promoting wider participation to tertiary education. The current New Zealand government under a relatively new capped funded system largely devolves the responsibility for student success to individual institutions. In contrast, in Australia the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) amongst other initiatives aims to ensure that Australians from low SES backgrounds not only get the opportunity to study at university but also receive support via strategies designed to improve the retention and completion rates of those students.

Simpson (2009), a leading international scholar in the context of distance learner retention, claims there are many possible interventions available that have been known to successfully

support the engagement 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 education (Simpson, 2009). Zepke and Leach (2010) argue that more research is required that 'listens' to what students have to say and takes greater account of the 'soft factors' which influence distance learner success.

Against this background, the objective of the research was to address a significant gap in the literature, which was to investigate the experiences of first-time distance learners, whilst listening in particular to the 'soft factors' that influenced their success; and all this from their own perspectives using their own words.

Methods

The research team sought to recruit first-time distance learners from Massey University before the start of Semester Two, 2011. Full ethics approval was obtained before beginning the recruitment process. The primary method of recruitment was an email invitation to all first-time distance students at the point when their enrolment had been approved. The invitation included a Participant Information Sheet along with a link to a participant-facing website, which included video introductions from the Project Leader and Project Manager using the same Sony Bloggie™ touch video camera that would be supplied to participants.

From a pool of 145 volunteers, twenty participants were selected to broadly represent the demographic and geographic diversity of distance learners at Massey University. 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.

The research involved each participant recording a weekly video diary of their distance learner experience. While the investigation primarily focused on the first six weeks of study, twelve of the twenty participants continued their diaries and remained actively engaged in the research until the end of semester. During this time, reflections were gathered using a 'reflective prompt protocol', which was adapted from previous video diary techniques from Riddle and Arnold (2007) and Cashmore, Green and Scott (2010). The protocol was designed to encourage free-flow reflections whilst providing 'fish-hooks' to elicit targeted categories of information in a lightly structured manner. Fish-hooks were designed to encourage student reflections as indicators of deep, strategic and surface learning. The reflective prompt protocol was intended to accommodate the diversity of individual responses from the previous diary entry while maintaining enough consistency to ensure that insights were gained from all participants on common aspects of the learner experience.

Results

The research presented a window into the backgrounds, motivations and aspirations of twenty first-time distance learners along with some of the rewards and challenges of distance study. For the purpose of this paper, the stories of Jack, Libby and Ursula have been reported (all names are pseudonyms):

Jack wanted his life to go better places following what he described as a long period of recklessness. He had a vision to make his mark on behalf of his church and become a role model to Pacific Islander and Maori people. He was also the guardian of his niece and hoped to have more children who he would support with a wealthy income. To this end, he was

returning to study for the first time since high school and was enrolled on four distance papers, which he was forced to juggle around full-time employment for financial reasons.

He demonstrated remarkable determination and habitually studied beyond midnight. Having been away from study for so many years, Jack noted that he did not feel mentally sharp in terms of memory and recall, which proved difficult considering the volume of reading he needed to absorb. However, in the first half of semester, he passed all his assignments and was aiming for A-grades. However, during the second half of semester, he reported increased procrastination and episodes of complete stagnation that led to slippage on deadlines:

> Things are crunching up. I've fallen a bit behind in some of my studies. As usual, I feel tired. At the end of the day, to study, it's just trying to slog it. I think it's I've not done as much study as I wanted to do in the last couple of weeks. It's combination of things. I'm tired from work, it sucks it out of me a bit. And pressure at home don't help as well. So that's not all rosy all the time. Physically, I'm not in great shape...

Although he lived near campus, full-time employment meant that Jack could not attend contact courses. Plus, other than reading the questions posted in Moodle discussion forums, Jack did not leverage academic resources or build networks with other students. In retrospect, he admitted that he should have made better use of Moodle and academic resources such as online library tools. In hindsight, he also admitted that one of his lecturers had made a valid point when he'd warned Jack that studying four papers alongside full-time employment was very unwise. All in all, Jack concluded:

> Unfortunately I did not do as well I had hoped. I faded badly towards the end of the study program mainly because of time constraints. I was busy up to my eyeballs at work. Plus I had problems to deal with at home. I don't think the problem is I am not smart enough, the problem is finding the time to study while my brain is fresh and not tired.

Like Jack, Libby was also enrolled in four distance papers. Although Libby was not employed, she was a full-time mother to seven dependent children who were aged between one and sixteen. She was returning to study for the first time since high school and dreamed that her studies would lead to a career in Social Work. However, her transition in to higher education proved challenging:

> As for assignments, I'm looking at getting a tutor as they don't seem to be going the way they are supposed to be. I've done a lot of research on how to do an assignment but it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to me.

As indicated in the second week of semester, Libby requested academic support from a Learning Consultant via the website but never received a response. Although she considered following-up her request, she preferred not to "push them" under the assumption that there were other students in greater need of assistance. She considered paying for a private tutor but decided to prioritise her funds and hire one instead for her son who was also studying by distance.

By the third week, Libby had failed two assignments. In addition, it had come to her attention that she was enrolled on four papers; as opposed to three papers as she'd initially thought. Altogether by Week 4, she was behind on three papers and, although she'd passed an

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assignment in her fourth paper, the tutor of that paper had accused Libby of not taking her studies seriously enough. This terse communication had come at a time when Libby was still hoping for academic assistance from a Learning Consultant but, in the meantime, was making a concerted effort to battle through:

> I didn't realise when I took everything on how everything is so close together – you've got quizzes and assignment and you've got to read this and that... Didn't realise how hard it is to find 1500 words. I can do it verbally but putting on paper, not working... Having to find so many words without rambling is pretty hard.

Libby withdrew from the project after Week 6, which coincided with the hospitalisation of her baby, followed by the deterioration of her terminally ill mother-in-law. During these weeks, Libby described herself as a 'solo parent support system' and exhibited outstanding commitment to her whānau. In her final correspondence, Libby remained determined to study but recognised her journey to becoming a Social Worker was going to be fraught with challenges:

> As much as a couple of weeks ago I was ready to give up, my goal is to be a social worker and I'm not ready to give up. So I'm going to rest, maybe sleep.

Ursula was in her late fifties and of Pakeha descent. Unlike Libby, her children had left home and, unlike Jack, she enjoyed part-time employment. Ursula was enrolled on one paper with a vision to upgrade her teaching diploma to a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education. However, she was unfamiliar with technology and the exclusively online-nature of her paper (as well as the technology associated with the project) was a source of anxiety from the outset:

> I'm having trouble. Bloggie, can't get it to send. Go in to Moodle, blaaaaaaaaaa, too much information. Then in to Pairwise. There's all this technology; all these sites and I'm not really too sure what I'm supposed to be doing in any of them. It's like overload.

Ursula quickly began to report feeling disadvantaged. For example, she described the Moodle discussion forums as somewhat overwhelming and intimidating. Equally, she struggled to access online library resources and became particularly frustrated with the APA Referencing tool. When it came to submitting her assignment online, she was uncertain whether she'd sent it with any success and, when results were published, she couldn't read the lecturer's comments. However, she was able to report that her assignment grade was a pass and, although she should have done better, she was ambivalent towards the pass at her current, "leg of the journey".

Ursula eventually withdrew from the project citing frustration with the technology associated with the project's data collection protocol, whilst making an associated point about the online learning aspect of modern distance education:

> I would like to continue [participating] but not being able to send the video misses the point of the exercise. It highlights a concern for online learning doesn't it? There are people who don't know the technology well enough to be able to work it with ease.

Discussion

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This paper reports preliminary findings of an innovative study in which video diaries opened a window in to the lived experiences of 20 first-time distance learners. At the time of writing, a comprehensive thematic analysis of participant's data is underway. Results will be used to inform evidence-based deliverables targeted at both distance education providers and distance learners. Some of these materials will be available to participants including a 'Guide to being a Distance Learner'.

In the meantime, our preliminary analysis confirms that distance education provides an important pathway for social inclusion through the provision of flexible learning that can be undertaken alongside family and life commitments. However, the goal of 'inclusion' is problematic in the absence of support and engagement strategies that reach out at the point of need across the student lifecycle. Moreover, the growth of new learning technologies creates additional barriers to distance learning that have yet to be fully understood. These initial observations raise a number of important issues for discussion under the following overarching question:

> How do we support distance students to engage effectively with their study amid other commitments; whilst being mindful that, to survive (and thrive) across the distance, they need to be independent, self-motivated learners?

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