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Stories of learning spaces from distant places

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Digitally mediated distance education is the fastest growing sector of tertiary education. However, online and distance education providers frequently report lower completion rates than traditional face-to-face providers for reasons that are subject to considerable speculation. Against this backdrop, the objective of the current study was to seek a deep understanding from first-time distance students about their learning experiences. The overarching methodology was Design-Based Research, within which the study drew on phenomenological data gathering methods. The lived experiences of 20 first-time distance learners were captured in their own words in over 22 hours of video diary data. A grounded theory approach was applied to the process of thematic data analysis. The discussion reflects on deep insights into the complexities of life as a distance learner. The paper concludes that institutions should not take for granted that students who choose distant learning spaces are intuitively able to transform them into effective places for formal learning.

Keywords: Distance education, online learning, student experience.

Background

A new generation of digitally mediated distance education has fundamentally changed the tertiary education landscape (McKee, 2010). Throughout the world, an estimated 17 million students now study in open and distance teaching institutions and this figure is growing exponentially (Guri-Rosenblit, 2010). Surveys suggests that 31% of higher education students now take at least one course by distance in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2011); 26% in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2010); and 19% in Australia (DEEWR, 2010).

Daniel (2011) asserts that digital technology can transform a triumvirate of factors underpinning distance education: wider access, higher quality and lower cost. Guri-Rosenblit

(2012) adds that distance education is particularly suitable for providing a rich spectrum of opportunities for lifelong learning, which is based on the notion of part-time studies throughout the whole life cycle. Bates and Sangra (2011) report that lifelong learning has become critical for the economic development of the knowledge-based economies; and project that lifelong learning in the future will match the current market for students leaving high school for university and college studies.

However, Bourke and Simpson (2011) caution that it can be difficult for distance education programmes to achieve 50% retention. At the Open University in the United Kingdom, a report on part-time first year students reveals that only 22% of distance learners who enter an undergraduate degree complete their study within eight academic years (HEFCE, 2009).

However, globally there is no discernible picture of the typical dropout among distance learners (Nichols, 2011) and there is a low level of understanding around what actually happens to first year distance students once they have enrolled in tertiary institutions; what motivates them and how they learn (Bourke & Simpson, 2011). Existing research suggests that data relating to campus based students cannot be transferred to distance students because they have a very different student experience and engage with their study differently (Poskitt, Rees, Suddaby & Radloff, 2011). For example, among higher education students in Australia, 23% of internal students were studying part-time; which contrasted with 79% of external students (DEEWR, 2010). Tyler-Smith (2006) highlights that the number and age of dependents alongside the pressure of earning an income to support the family can impact on a distance student's engagement with their learning experience.

Fortunately, new technologies alleviate two of the major disadvantages of traditional distance teaching by enabling the update of study materials on an ongoing basis; and facilitating the interaction between students and teachers, and among students (Guri-Rosenblit, 2012). However, online learning is not a positive influence on distance education by its inherent nature (Harnett, St George & Dron, 2011) because technical solutions not informed by effective pedagogy can translate into poorly designed or executed resources that potentially waste student's time (Crampton, Ragusa & Cavanagh, 2012).

Against this background, the research set out to gain greater insight in to the lived experiences of students whose learning places were distant spaces. The intended outcome was to inform the future design of strategies to support student success.

Methods

The overarching methodology was Design-Based Research, which was chosen to guide the development of enhanced educational outcomes. Design-based research has increasingly received attention from researchers in education for its interactive and integrative qualities (Reeves, 2006). It aims to make a grounded connection between research and real-world contexts. This methodology can be thought of as seeking to develop best practice in complex learning environments through the incorporation of evaluation and empirical analyses, from which multiple entry points for various scholarly endeavours arise (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit & McCloskey's, 2009).

Within the overarching methodology, the study drew on phenomenological data gathering methods to study the experiences of first-time distance learners from their own point of view. With permission from the University's Human Ethics Committee, enrolment data was

obtained for 750 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 to all potential participants at the point when their enrolment had been approved. The invitation included a Participant Information Sheet, which explained why students might consider recording video diaries for the purpose of research. The greatest benefit for the student was likely to be the activity of self-reflection, which is an important factor in supporting student success. In addition, it was highlighted that participant data would be disseminated across the distance education community to help improve the learning experience for future students.

One hundred and forty students volunteered to participate from which 20 were purposefully selected. The intention was to broadly represent the demographic and geographic diversity of first-time distance learners. The profile of diversity was informed by a demographic analysis of the University's distance students during the 2010 academic year. 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.

Using Sony bloggie™ cameras, video reflections were gathered using a 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 and free-form approach. The expectation was for five minutes of video footage per week, although the key factor was not one of length but forthcomingness and insightfulness of the reflections provided. 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 fresh set of reflective prompts for the following week.

Consistent with a phenomenological approach to understanding experiences in participants' own words, a grounded theory approach was applied to the process of thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is a technique for identifying, analysing 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). By following a realist approach, the student voice was retained at the forefront of the analysis. In other words, participants' experiences were described as fully as possible to retain a sense of context. Within the limitations of a grounded theory, an inductive approach (bottom-up) was applied, which meant that the major themes arose from the data.

Results

Table 1 presents a summary of the participant sample in terms of demographic variables:

Table 1: Summary of the participant sample

Gender	Male (7), Female (13)
Age	Under 25 (4), 25-29 (4), 30-39 (6), 40-49 (4), 50-59 (2)

Ethnicity	Pakeha / European (12), Māori and/or Pasifika (8)
Location	A campus town (11), Other urban town (3), Remote (4), Overseas (2)
Mode	Distance only (17), Mixed mode (3)
Total papers	Undergraduate: One (6), Two (6), Three (0), Four (6); Postgraduate (2)
Subject	Business (8), Humanities (6), Education (3), Sciences (3)
Prior education	High school (8), Diploma (2), Degree papers (5), Degree (5)
Employment	Full time (11), Part time (3), Casual (1), None (3), Full time mother (2)
Dependents	None (11), One (1), Two or three (5), Four or more (3)

Twenty-two hours of rich video data was collected from the twenty first-time distance learners who participated in the research: Andy, Beth, Chris, Deborah, Emma, Fiona, Geraldine, Hannah, Ian, Jack, Kane, Libby, Maggie, Nathan, Olivia, Penny, Rachel, Susan, Tom. All names are pseudonyms. From the analysis of their video data, four themes arose that related to the current focus on place and space: (1) motivating factors; (2) inhibiting factors; (3) seeking support; and (4) study approaches.

Motivating factors

The majority of participants chose distance education as a flexible mode of study that allowed them to combine study with existing daytime commitments. Several explained that today's world did not afford them the luxury of being able to fund tertiary level studies without simultaneously earning a full time salary. Others were committed employees who described distance education as after-hours professional development. Those with dependents reported that it was neither viable nor desirable to relocate the family home in favour of campus-based education. Like employees, full time mothers were attracted by the impression that distance education could be juggled around their daytime commitments. For example, Libby reflected:

Distance learning for me I am hoping will be semi easy so I can be home to look after my children as well as do some study.

Inhibiting factors

Employment

Many of the participants were studying while in some form of employment. For some, juggling study with full-time work proved incredibly taxing. Within the first few weeks of semester, most participants began to report feelings of being torn between the pressure of work and study. Working more than 50 hours each week, Geraldine withdrew from one of her courses (papers) while Jack made the point:

My mind is not as functional at night when coming from work; [work] takes it out of me mentally.

Dependent children

Almost half the participants lived with dependent children, which seemed to affect men and women differently. Those who were fathers claimed to be active parents but on their own admission enjoyed supportive partners who assumed primary responsibility for childcare. In

subtle contrast, mothers seemed to perceive themselves as the primary child caregiver, with that role not as apparent among their partners. Penny, who was juggling one paper with part-time self-employment and six dependent children, described the kind of conflict that touched many of the mothers at some point:

I have also had thoughts that this is not the right time to study because I can't get my children around giving me the time to study; my family is not on the same page as me.

Partners

The influence of partners was complex. Most described their partners as supportive and some even engaged in scholarly discussion and offered assistance with academic tasks. Even though some partners were supportive in principle, reports suggested that sometimes they struggled to get used to the change in dynamic at home. For example, Maggie shared some frustration when her husband suggested tidying the house on a night that she had allocated to study. Susan and Fiona experienced relationship troubles during the course of semester and these episodes seriously impacted their emotional capacity for study. As Fiona reported:

Unfortunately I'm going through a relationship break-up, which involves changing everything in my life so university study is far, far away in my mind.

Health and wellbeing

Almost all participants experienced unforeseen health issues over the course of semester. Some reported feelings of tiredness and exhaustion, while others were stalled by more serious winter viruses; as well as longer-term health concerns such as allergies and depression. Libby and Kane reported that their children had been hospitalized, while Libby and Beth reflected on their involvement with family who were losing their battle to live. In Rachel's case, health complications led her to withdraw in the second week. She reported:

My surgery has taken a bigger toll on me than I thought, and I am now looking at further surgery before the end of the semester.

Home environment

One quarter of participants were distracted by moving house during the course of semester which, for most, was an unforeseen circumstance. Those who shared their homes with other students found this constructive whereas those with professional flatmates tended to find them a distraction, especially when a dedicated study space was not available. Susan reflected upon how much living in not only a distracting but hostile environment had impacted negatively upon her resolve to study:

The move to the new flat has been extremely positive and it means that I've enjoyed knuckling down and getting study done whereas, if it had been my old flat, I wouldn't have wanted to.

Leisure pursuits

Many participants struggled to find a healthy balance between study and leisure time. Jack was distracted by his nightly gym routine until he found it was unmanageable alongside full-time employment and four papers. Deborah and Fiona were distracted by their social calendars. Other participants who may have otherwise dedicated a couple of hours to study in the evenings found themselves engrossed in the Rugby World Cup 2011, which was taking place at the time of data collection. This was particularly the case for Kane:

I have picked up my books once and put them down to turn on the rugby and I knew this would happen but I was hoping that I would not fall victim to it; unfortunately things have not worked out too well

Digital literacy

Most participants were reasonably comfortable using the online learning environment following an initial orientation period. However, a few participants were limited by access and ability to use digital technology; while others — from across several generations — were limited by relatively low levels of digital learning fluency, i.e. not necessarily perceiving the digital environment as an important place for learning. Two participants, both older than 45, consistently felt overwhelmed by digital technology as Ursula described:

I'm having trouble. Go in to Stream, blaaa 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.

Socioeconomic factors

Very little was reported in relation to socioeconomic limitations; and nor was this the focus of the research. However, a couple of participants reflected upon financial difficulties and how this distracted from study. Olivia reported:

I've had a lot of money problems this week. That has to be my biggest stress of the week. It really upsets me and distracts me completely. It makes studying really hard when you're worrying about how to buy the groceries.

Prior experience

Two-thirds of participants had prior tertiary-level experience. However, reflections suggested that their study skills had been heavily conditioned to an internal learning environment and that distance study techniques were not necessarily intuitive. More than one third of participants were returning to study for the first time since high school after an interval of more than a decade. From within this group, some struggled to find effective study techniques to meet the demand of university-level study. For example, Libby described:

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.

Seeking support

Support seekers

One quarter of participants were avid, interactive Support Seekers in blended spaces. In other words, they maximised a range of cyberspaces and campus spaces. They engaged early with the distance library website and the learning support website provided by the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning. They regularly contributed to online discussions forums with fellow students via Moodle and/or Facebook groups, while Beth generated discussion and debate through reflections on her personal blog. Support Seekers were particularly interested in contact with lecturers for the purpose of discussion, reassurance and feedback. To this end, they typically attended contact courses, which they described as the highlight of their distance learning experience. Attending a university campus helped them integrate with other students and maximise university support services. Penny, who had a strong preference for face-to-face interaction, initiated a campus-based study group. Having moved house to live closer to campus, Susan reported spending six hours each day in the university library. Olivia particularly enjoyed campus-based meetings with Learning Consultants:

I've just been thinking because I've done two degrees, I think I'm so proficient, why would I need to learn any other techniques. Thinking like that has stopped me going to learning centre. So I'm glad I've conquered that one. Old dogs can learn new tricks.

Self sufficient learners

In contrast, around three-quarters of participants adopted more of a self-sufficient, static approach that was limited to cyberspace. They did not frequent campus — including those who lived in a campus town — and they did not attend their contact courses. Some did not attend contact courses due to family circumstances, while others attributed little value to the opportunity. Kane was content with contacting his lecturer exclusively via email, while others preferred to make no contact whatsoever. Emma resolved to schedule a meeting with her lecturer but later admitted that the meeting never eventuated due to her own laziness. Similarly, the self-sufficient initiated barely any interaction with fellow students. They had mixed views about the benefits of discussion forums on Moodle and the role that these played in their learning experience. Many preferred only to read and observe the Moodle discussion fora. It emerged that, for some, good intentions to contribute did not manifest because they feared their contributions would leave them exposed. Nathan offered the explanation that social confidence was a major factor, saying:

[Moodle] is available but people's base fears of putting something out there and being wrong... it's very different to leaning over to a peer and checking for immediate reinforcement.

Learning approaches

Active approaches

An Active Approach was apparent among a minority of participants. One aspect of an Active Approach was deep learning when participants embraced study, not so much as a task but for personal self-fulfilment. Interest alone did not guarantee success but it certainly arose as the starting point for moments of deep learning. Nathan and Olivia were rare examples of participants whose study was relevant to their field of employment and who sourced evidence above and beyond course expectations. The most common characteristic of an Active Approach was strategic learning. They gave careful consideration to assignment questions

long in advance of the assignment deadline, which enabled them to take a steady and reflective approach to the reading and writing process. They allowed enough time for their work to be reviewed by partners, friends, colleagues and even the university's assignment pre-reading service. In terms of their time management, they established a sustainable study routine that accounted for predictable as well as unpredictable distractions and, in the face of adversity, they demonstrated resilience with conviction. For example, when Ian's assignment earned a B-grade he reflected:

Obviously it wasn't a masterpiece so I learn from it for the future but I'm not withdrawing my plan [to achieve A grades]; I still think it was good what I did.

Passive approaches

The most common approach can be described as a Passive Approach. The data would suggest that 75% of participants struggled with passive tendencies for prolonged periods of time. The knowledge that 'C's pass degrees' was comforting in these times, as Fiona described:

I found about 10pm that night that it [the assignment] was only worth 6% so I wasn't enthused for it, which was a bad attitude but that's what happened.

The reasons behind participants' passive approaches were complex but frequently perceived by participants as beyond their own control. A sense of dependency (e.g., waiting for someone else to solve their problems) was particularly common (although not universal) among participants with little or no prior tertiary experience and/or those returning to study following a prolonged absence. These participants invariably reflected on a genuine desire to engage strategically — if not deeply — with their studies but appeared to be inhibited by relatively traditional conceptions of study. In other words, these students were somewhat syllabus-bound (Anderson, Lee, Simpson, & Stein, 2011) and unsure how to source support in the university academic environment. This sense of dependency was frequently compounded by procrastination. For example, Jack was inhibited by academic confusion and full-time employment but, upon taking annual leave, he confessed that he had become lazy and that his study routine was terrible. Kane confessed to procrastinating during the course of his weekly diary but simultaneously cited winter sickness as justification for missing a deadline. Deborah was another who procrastinated from the outset:

It's Sunday. I went to buy printer paper. I've been disorganised. I forgot semester started on Monday... I'd like to get more organised and set aside a set time every day rather than procrastinate... This afternoon was good. I wrote a to-do list.

Discussion

The current research drew on phenomenological data gathering methods to capture the experiences of students during their first semester of distance learning. Participant data illustrated how digitally mediated distant spaces *can* foster effective learning places. In concurrence with Guri-Rosenblit (2012), technology theoretically provided virtual spaces that rivalled campus-based spaces for the dissemination and co-construction of knowledge with others. While some participants adopted these virtual spaces with enthusiasm, the sample was not homogenous. As reported by Jones, Ramanau, Cross and Healing (2010), some participants were truly engaged in a wide range of digital activity at frequent intervals, while others rarely utilised the digital resources at their disposal. For example, many participants

relied solely on traditional email correspondence with their teachers, which aligned with the experience of mature aged distance students reported by Poskitt et al. (2011). In other words, it cannot be assumed that distance students will maximize the opportunities afforded by digital technology to transform their living spaces in to effective learning places.

One of the reasons for this was that participants experienced pressure associated with dependents and earning an income, as previously reported by Tyler-Smith (2006). Video data revealed that distance study frequently became the weakest link when there were competing demands in student's immediate environment. In part, virtual spaces were out of sight and easily slipped out of mind. Furthermore, many participants translated distance learning to mean condensed learning. This perception had led participants to enrol in more papers than they had the capacity to study. At the time of enrolment, it cannot therefore be assumed that potential students adequately understand the actual demands of distance study and how much it can compete with other responsibilities in the distance space.

Video data also indicated that curriculum design may not have been consistently attuned with the needs of participants operating in a virtual space; as distinct from a campus space. This problem can be related to limited digital infrastructure but also to the design of digital solutions that are not soundly informed by effective pedagogy. In concurrence with Crampton et al. (2012), poorly executed digital solutions wasted participant's time, which might have been better spent on traditional learning tasks. In shaping purposeful curricular activities, institutions need to be attentive to the digital spaces where formal and informal learning occurs; especially given the extensive potential of the online environment. To this end, Thornberg (1996) proposed four metaphors to assist critical and creative thinking about spaces that support the distance learner experience:

- Caves are spaces where students find time to reflect; in other words, come into contact with themselves. However, a solitary space will not necessarily become an active learning place. Findings indicate that solitary spaces are easily distracted by thoughts and feelings relating to daily life and frequently become places for procrastination. In this environment, video diaries can become purposeful caves — a dedicated place for reflective learning that supports student success, completion and retention.
- Watering holes are informal spaces where students gather to share common resources, discuss information and create meaning with their peers. Students who participate avidly in digital forums can find cyberspace as rewarding as physical meeting spaces. When digital watering holes become places for lurking, students struggle to find alternative avenues for the co-construction of knowledge in distance spaces.
- Campfires are formal spaces where students can listen to engaging stories from which they construct knowledge from those with expertise and wisdom. Findings indicated that participants tended not to pursue campfire experiences and many perceived residential courses as relics from the era of correspondence. For the meantime, however, many teachers are ill equipped to provide campfire experiences in the digital environment.
- Mountain tops simulate real life spaces where students apply their knowledge; particularly in front of an audience as a means to reinforce their confidence. Video data indicated that participants tended to be deeper learners when their working place was a

mountain top learning place — thus affording them all the benefits of an applied and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience (Coll & Eames, 2004).

Conclusion

The paper concludes that institutions should not take for granted that students who choose distance learning spaces are intuitively able to transform them into effective places of learning. Looking to the future, institutions need to help potential students understand more about expectations on their time and the digital demands of studying by distance; both of which are critical factors in the translation of a distance space into an effective learning place. Curriculum design must also give due consideration to the types of digital spaces that are conducive for learning.

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