

Vlogging Campus Community Stories

Patrick Delaney, Researcher, Student Success and Retention □
Victoria Menzies, Equity and Retention Officer: Peer Programs, Equity Services
Karen Nelson, Director, Student Success and Retention □ Queensland University of
Technology

Abstract

Student voice is a powerful signifier for sharing the institutional habitus of a campus. With our new Caboolture Campus Community Stories initiative, we place students in the role of vloggers (video bloggers) to capture and distribute the stories, activities and events of the QUT environment. These stories present visual narratives through the eyes of students about university experience, academic practice and the transition from High School to first year, all intending to promote a sense of community and belonging, normalize academic practices and build an inclusive institutional habitus. These stories are placed on community websites and digital signage around campus as resources for first year students and prospective students.

Introduction

This paper describes a new initiative being trialed this year entitled 'Campus Community Stories'. The initiative is driven by the QUT Student Success and Retention program as a strategy to enhance participation and persistence at our Caboolture campus. We use volunteer student vloggers ('video bloggers') to capture stories and experiences of students on campus. The resultant vignettes are distributed across community websites and digital signage around campus to provide resources for first year students particularly. The content consists of visually rich and engaging interviews with a diverse number of individuals, featuring topics about study, support and engagement. We can therefore use student voice as a powerful signifier for sharing our *institutional habitus* (Bourdieu & Parrison, 1977; Thomas, 2002).

The paper begins with a background of the initiative, then discusses its relationship to institutional habitus and the role of video in instantiating these theories and assisting with student retention. The paper then discusses the role of students as volunteer campus vloggers and concludes with future directions.

Background

Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Caboolture campus is the only Higher Education institution in the Moreton Bay region. It services a significant number of students from the surrounding areas, as well as providing alternative entry to QUT courses for students with lower OP scores. The major disciplines offered at the campus are Education, Nursing, Business and Creative Industries, with the latter two comprising of large numbers of first year students. Creative Industries in particular is first year only, meaning these students not only must transition from high school to university at Caboolture, but also face the prospect of transitioning to a Brisbane city campus after their first year of study.

This combination of factors makes Caboolture a challenging environment to encourage the participation of students and for them to form strong ties and connections among an ever-changing cohort. One particular problem encountered is making students invested enough in the campus to attend classes and adopt the proactive academic behaviours necessary to succeed, which is problematic beyond first year.

QUT has a general set of priorities for student success and retention, these being engaging students in learning, providing access to timely support and establishing a sense of belonging¹. Existing issues for these at Caboolture include ensuring that academic and professional staff are approachable (particularly to non-traditional students), encouraging students to adopt proactive help-seeking behaviours, and making students recognize the value in attendance and being on campus. First year students in particular will benefit from a clear and visible set of these priorities.

Using vlogs arose from observations of nursing students filming their groupwork and assessment pieces such as constructing anatomical replicas, then uploading them onto social media to share with peers. These resources were useful in building collaborative learning and fostering a sense of community and belonging among the students. Videos containing lessons, advice and suggestions from other students are valuable artefacts in that they can remain useful for a period of time and can be redistributed to first year students as a tool for learning and involvement. The campus community stories initiative aims to build on this existing practice by providing students with the opportunity to create richer and more meaningful vlogs that will give them a stronger voice and level of involvement, and provide them with the means to visually capture and present institutional habitus that will assist academic and social inclusion of first year students.

Institutional Habitus

An 'institutional habitus' is the collection of norms, values and dispositions of a social system (Thomas, 2002). Bourdieu (1973) calls this collection *cultural capital*, which can function as a resource in the social reproduction of a habitus among its members. For example, for an educational social system to fulfill its essential function of inculcating, its habitus must be homogenous and durable enough for staff and students reproduce it through relations, and to 'pass it on' to incoming or first year students through regular patterns of interaction.

A major component of student success is the involvement students have with communities, both internal and external to the university (Tinto, 2006). Involvement, or *engagement*, is crucial to first year persistence. The challenge, however, is making involvement matter to students in different settings. Early student departure is a concern for all institutions, and particularly where – as at our Caboolture campus – there are students with alternative entries and non-traditional backgrounds. Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003) explain that when some students do not share existing cultural capital with the prevailing habitus, they can find themselves alienated by unfamiliar situations. For example, students from middle-class settings will be more adequately prepared for university in the sense that they can draw on cultural capital from their school or peers. At risk students on the other hand may feel that their cultural capital is not recognised or accepted, and exit the university system early.

Zepke et al (2003) state that two major retention practices education institutions can use are

¹ <http://www.fye.qut.edu.au/retention/fyeatqut.jsp>

integration or adaptation discourses. Integration discourse involves integrating the learner into the existing institutional cultural capital, while adaptation discourse recognises that learners have diverse cultural capital and that institutional processes must adapt them to meet diverse learner needs.

The diverse student cohort at Caboolture means a habitus must recognise and value the varying cultural capital while ensuring that the prevailing institutional habitus is clear and visible to students. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p. 59) state that “a habitus is fueled by a discourse that makes explicit and systemizes the principles of the habitus...which primarily obeys the requirements of the institutionalization of apprenticeship e.g. academia”

Creating an institutional habitus that accounts for all issues in this particular institution is complex. However, our observations of the students’ proactive use of video to foster collaborative learning gives us an opportunity to providing them with incentive and encouragement to make visible the institutional habitus while capturing diverse community needs. Researchers such as McEwan (2011) see the sharing of these artefacts through social media as an effective way to bridge social capital. First year students are likely to have weak initial connections when they first enter the institution, but resources such as video can “enhance first year students’ connection to the university community, engage them in specific behaviours related to retention, maintain their social networks and increase their sense of belonging and community” (McEwan, 2011, p.6).

As Prosser (1998) states, images function as “signifiers of a culture” - artefacts that contain particular information about a setting. Vlogging is a popular method of story capture and cultural artefact, with Burgess and Green (2009) estimating that roughly 40% of the most popular user generated content on youtube being conversational vlogs. These artefacts can generate dialogue and communicate knowledge about a wide variety of subjects – more importantly, they give the viewer a relatable cultural representation through the person featured. Vlogging on therefore enables students to more effectively communicate messages to others like themselves.

Video, Social Media and Student Success

Video is already used in higher education for a variety of activities such as learning and teaching and promotions and marketing (Kaufman & Mohan, 2009). QUT uses video for many of these different strategies with in-house productions from several departments, while external media being used by staff and academics to assist with classroom activities. At the student level, students from disparate disciplines use personal recordings related to university activities as a way to share and network, distributing these through Youtube, social media sites and sometimes on the QUT student blog.

Johnson and Aragon (2002) describe contemporary students as a group who prefer visual over verbal stimulation and relate to material such as video more readily. While video is already prevalent as a classroom and marketing artefact, we are only now implementing it as a resource to directly support student success and retention. Handal and Huber (2011), for example, reported on the Macquarie University’s new blended learning approach, in which students are encouraged to make their own videos to share stories with their classmates. Cashmore, Green and Scott (2010) implemented a video ethnography project in which students were given cameras and asked to record diaries of themselves. This gave them better insight into the first year transitions of their particular students, which then allowed them to

intervene into support programs and first year experience for subsequent cohorts.

The value of these initiatives is that they are student-centred. These videos involve students in active learning and self-reflection, making them feel valued in their first year. With the campus community stories initiative, we can widen this involvement, moving beyond singular self-reflection and into community-level communication and dialogue. This makes all students feel valued and recognized, and ensures social reproduction of cultural capital.

The videos will gather quick interviews with students, record interesting groupwork sessions, projects or campus activities, and paint a picture of the campus lifestyle and its institutional habitus. To do so, we recruit student volunteers as vloggers.

Campus Vloggers and Vlog Editor

Our vloggers and a vlog editor are recruited in the first week through advertisements in lectures and around campus. Ideally, campus vloggers come from each discipline area, so each can capture stories and activities that they are aware of within their faculty and classes. We used the term vloggers as it is a popular buzzword (e.g. Biel & Gatica-Perez, 2010) and is appealing to students. Each vlogger is provided with a weekly topic about curriculum, support services or a social event on campus and are encouraged to lead the creation of the vlog. Generally, their vlogs consist of 2-3 minute interviews with peers.

The specific aims of the vlogs are to: (1) normalize student behaviours such as attendance, group study and peer connections; (2) enable students to share their tacit knowledge and firsthand experiences; (3) raise awareness of student issues and concerns, and make transparent the role of peers, academics and administrators through appealing dialogues and (4) provide motivational tools to students through engaging visual narratives.

Using students as vloggers is due to the fact that they are more aware of important curriculum related events and activities within their classes, as well as the required support services for assessments and cultural happenings in the community. Vloggers are therefore actively engaged in dialogue with other students. This makes involvement multi-faceted, encouraging reflection and sharing that is captured on film and preserved as an artefact for the community to draw from. Vlogs capture institutional habitus from the student perspective, creating more sophisticated collaborative learning, communication and belonging.

The role of the vlog editor is given to a student from the Creative Industries faculty as the role requires skills in video editing applications. The vlog editor is responsible for managing video content and creating short eye-catching vignettes that are uploaded to websites and digital signage. This student has an opportunity to develop their skillset and resume, and – as they are first year – provides them with early involvement in the educational institution.

Future Directions

The video content from the vloggers and the vlog editor will: (1) provide us with footage that can be redistributed at the start of the semesters with first year students and (2) provide us with data to better understand students at Caboolture. While Caboolture is a small campus, it also contains a diverse student community, which gives us the opportunity to harness cultural capital and broadly promote an institutional habitus. Once the lessons from this initiative are understood, it can potentially be expanded to the larger QUT campuses in Brisbane.

Session Outline:

- Introduction to and background of the initiative (5 mins)
- Presentation of the vlogger artefacts and their relation to the institutional habitus (10 mins)
- Invitation for criticism and feedback of the artefacts (5 mins)
- Discussion of the benefits and further potential of campus vlogging (10 mins)

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