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SUPPORTING PART TIME STUDENTS THROUGH TRANSITION FROM FURTHER EDUCATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION: FOSTERING CONDITIONS FOR A CARING COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The aim of this ethnographical study was to illuminate the experiences of mature part time degree students in the use of online social media. The media was used as a means of supporting students in their transition from their respective Further Education (FE) colleges to their 'on campus' University (HE) year. The transition involved students moving between institutions to study in a new location and in new peer groups which had historically contributed to dips in confidence and performance and sometimes led to students withdrawing from the programme. The open access, online network (NING) was introduced to allow students to engage with learning activities as a stimulus for online discussion and dialogue with each other through a series of non-assessed 'blog' postings (Olofsson, 2007; Dawson 2008; Knight & Rochan 2012). Its purpose was to encourage both the students and the teacher to share their ideas and views and begin 'talking' and 'listening' (Crawford 2009) to each other prior to meeting in the new term. Noddings (1984), Garrison (1997) and Pring (2004) recognise the importance of strengthening positive relationships between students and teacher and advocate that this is an essential element towards fostering conditions for learning and building a sense of community face to face just as Olofsson (2007) and Yang (2009) noted about online learning. It also aimed to address Olofsson's (2007) suggestion for the design of online communities in the 21st century, that any pedagogical approach to online learning must rely on the '*...social and collaborative and ethical aspects of learning as a starting point for design*' (pg 28). A thematic analysis (Gobo, 2008; Bold 2012) was undertaken with the 'blog' postings over the course of the academic year, by a cohort of 35 students to identify signs of social ties, indicators of community, developing (Haythonthwaite (2005). This data was supported by conversational and thematic analysis (Bold 2012, Denzin 2000) of two video recorded focus groups, held at the end of the year with 15 students, to evaluate the online network and its effectiveness to support student's transition and develop relationships and community. Analysis suggested that students still stated issues of trust as being central to their level of engagement, however there was clear support for the informal and non-assessed nature of the online community. Students also spoke of an increase in their confidence to approach their assessed work.

Keywords: Social networking; Community; Transition

Context

The context of this study is within a degree programme that is taught in partnership with local Further Education (FE) colleges. The first year of the programme is taught 'off campus' at an FE college and the subsequent years are taught 'on campus' at the University. Students from four local colleges come together for their final year of study. The advantages of this model, is that it has demonstrated over the last 15 years that it has contributed to widening participation in Higher Education (HE). Through small scale and locally positioned short courses offered by colleges, colleges can gradually inspire non-traditional learners to engage in further education and then progress on to higher education. The students who took part in this study were mature students who had returned to FE to gain a certificate in education to enable them to teach in their vocational subjects in the post compulsory education system in UK. These non-traditional learners who often entered FE/HE with a variety of learning journeys and experiences and as knight and Rochan (2012) noted, needed the encouragement and nurturing to realise that they can engage with HE. The Certificate in education was entry to the HE diploma, the first year of the BA (Hons) Education and Training. Students study the HE Diploma year at the college before progressing on to the BA and Honours years on campus. Many of these mature

learners had not used online social media extensively in their previous personal, professional or educational experiences.

Introduction

The transition between all levels of education can be a difficult time for students. While there is a wealth of literature available to support children's transition from early education through to secondary school (Allingham, 2011; Edmond & Price, 2012; Howe, 2011), to overcome dips in performance and engagement by children, the literature is limited with regard to student's transition into from FE to HE within the same programme. However, it appears that concerns over issues of retention and performance in HE, against a backdrop of a culture of marketization and consumerism within education (Ball, 2008) are gaining more attention. Maunder et al (2009), in their study with full time undergraduate students, noticed themes such as 'preparedness for HE; confidence to progress and the development of social connections as key determinants of students improving their performance, satisfaction and retention. Knight and Rochan (2012) also recognised the importance of developing strong social ties between staff and students to aid a successful transition into HE. Their study, like this one, developed a NING network to be accessed by students prior to registering on their programme to encourage students to 'get to know one another'. They also recognised that the transition is of an even greater importance for mature students from non-traditional learning backgrounds however, Xie et al (2012) noted that older learners were more hesitant and had greater concerns about engaging in online media.

This paper is reporting on the introduction of a NING network that incorporated learning activities, chat room and blogging opportunities for a cohort of 35 part time, mature degree students. The overall aim was to give them greater access to transitional support and begin to develop a sense of a supportive learning community that would be encouraged and maintained both in and out of the classroom. The objectives of the NING network were three-fold,

- to strengthen social ties between the four separate smaller college cohorts prior to coming together as one larger group;
- to allow students to develop a sense of 'preparedness' for the academic study through module related and generic learning activities to support their transition on to campus;
- to encourage students to engage in critical dialogue in their community, as part of a pedagogical approach on the programme.

Pedagogical Approach

Students following this degree programme are in-service educators and practitioners across the secondary, tertiary and higher education sectors with the primary learning goal for them to critically and considerately apply theory to their practice. Kiss and Euban (2010) support this civic mission of HE as '*...equipping citizens with the moral ideals and specialised knowledge needed to solve the problems of an increasingly complex society.*' (pg 7). Choosing the appropriate pedagogical approaches that encourage students to critically reflect upon their practice, learn from others' practice and engage with theory that enables them to view their practice through a variety of perspectives is essential to helping students see the relevance of their academic lives with their professional lives and visa versa was also seen by Olofsson (2007) as an important consideration for teacher training and development. Students engage in face to face seminars for four hours, once a week where opportunities for dialogue and collaboration with peers and the tutor are created. Communities of philosophical enquiry (Lipman 2003) are adopted as a methodology to help students develop their reasoning and confidence in their judgement while supporting their peers to gain further clarity and reflection. Communities of enquiry take time to develop in face to face contexts, as individuals learn to trust their peers, their tutor and build their confidence to articulate and question their experiences as Ellis et al (2006) noted or as Gregory (2012) refers to it as being '*awake to the ethical and political meaning of your experience.*' (Pg 35). Due to the limited amount of time where students and tutors are together due to the nature of the part time curriculum, the development of weak social ties towards stronger social ties where students would share ideas and perspectives (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Knight & Rochan 2012) was seen as something that needed to continue outside of the classroom too. The NING network was seen as a way of starting this process early and aiding its progression throughout the programme.

Fostering conditions for community

The pedagogical approach that underpins the programme when it is taught face to face, is one of social constructivism (Dewey 1933; Lipman 2003; Ngambi & Lombe 2012). As the programme is professional development for practicing teachers, it is essential that the tutor tries to identify very early on what the student's experiences, interests, desires and aspirations are in order to be able to provide as Noddings (1984) Garrison (1997) Olofsson (2007) would advocate, an environment where acceptance and trust is encouraged and where the *'teacher is prepared to see both from her own perspective and that of the student in order to meet the needs of the student.'* (Noddings 1984, pg 67). Gaining this knowledge about the students to inform their teaching and development is reinforced by Grant's (2010) view that University education should also consider this a priority as well as compulsory education. She states that University educators must recognise that students arrive at University with already created identities and it is part of our role to identify where they stand in the developmental process. Knowing more about our students can only help our role as educators, in *'exposing students to ideas, values and beliefs that differ significantly from those familiar to them'* (pg 287). When we are creating situations where students can be listened to and share their ideas and concerns with peers and tutors, it is not mere sentimentality as Garrison (1997) argues, but requires an intelligent understanding of their needs and interest as students (Garrison 1997; Tompkins 1996; Noddings 1984). These views emerge from Maslow's (1971) theories of motivation and his view that by giving students a chance to express their views and be honest and *'tell what is really going on your head... discovering your identity and finding out your real desires and characteristics...'*(pg76) Would be the primary goals in an ideal college.

Olofsson (2007) stressed the importance of designing online communities with your social and pedagogical aims in mind and this was the case for this project also. It was essential to the success of the online site, that it was not seen as something separate from the rest of the programme, but another 'vehicle' for students to continue their discussions and sharing of ideas outside of the classroom in their wider community (Olofsson 2007, Etzioni 1993). Although, Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) suggest that norms and etiquette are different in online communities than face to face and that *'individuals are taking time to consider how they will enact their presentation of their self online'* (pg 23) The conventions of communication online would allow them to 'create' their online identities that may be 'edited' versions of their 'face to face' selves. By using the NING network as part of blended approach in the programme, it perhaps raised the question as to how different their online selves would be. Too much editing, or presenting no identity at all, if noticed, may hinder the community developing and may result in the network being more about knowledge transfer than learning together to create shared meaning (Ellis et al 2006; Olofsson 2007).

Etzioni, (1993), Noddings (2003), Pring (2004) Olofsson, (2007) Dawson (2008), refer to their perception of community as a space traditionally viewed both geographically and imagined. Shared morality, respect, spirit, feelings of belonging and trust, security and support are clearly defined and visible and describe strong social capital ties as being the aim of a community. While Haythornthwaite & Andrews (2011) and Haythornthwaite (2005) would not dispute these descriptions, they explain that the online community challenges the assumptions that communities need strong ties where the connections between people, their feelings of security and 'cutting both ways' (Olofsson 2007) are evident in the volume and variety of communication and the intimacy of the communication. In the online communities within educational contexts, communities are primarily formed with weaker ties and students will initially communicate with other students online as acquaintances and primarily for instructional or instrumental reasons (Haythornthwaite 2005, Dawson 2008) as students did here. With weaker ties they engage in fewer, less intimate exchanges and are less motivated to share information, but are able to have greater access to varying perspectives, beliefs and experiences and share with a wider group of contacts that they may never meet or speak with face to face (Haythornthwaite & Andrews 2011, Olofsson 2007). Both Olofsson (2007) and Dawson (2008) concluded that additional socialisation activities were necessary to strengthen relationships online to move learner interactions.

Methodology and Methods

The study has adopted an interpretive paradigm and has taken an ethnographic approach (Gobo, 2008; Madden, 2010) to explore the experiences and interactions of a group of 35 students following a part time degree programme. The aim was to enable reflection and evaluation of the use of social networks with a view to making recommendations as to how they can enhance the experience of the student's transition and development from the further education organisation to the higher education organisation.

The point of transition for these students is identified as being the end of their first year of their degree studies where they have been studying at one of four local colleges of Further Education. The colleges, working in partnership with the University, teach the programme up to level 5 with the University teaching the final stage of their programme, at level 6. Prior to re-registering with the University as university campus students in the Autumn, students are without access to the college or University Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) therefore an open access site was required. The NING network was chosen for this reason but also because there was a security facility where the tutor had to confirm the student's request to join the network, therefore 'closing' the network only to the invited group of students.

The programme tutor created the NING network with videos, reading material and links to related web sites with a view to creating a blended learning approach to the programme, where students would engage in pre-contact tasks online in order to gain familiarity with the forthcoming modules (N'gambi & Lombe, 2012) and each other (Knight & Rochan, 2012). It was not the purpose of this study to only use objective measures such as the number of contributions or 'hits', to show the impact of the network but to further understand how the NING network may have contributed to the wider aims of the programme for the development of student engagement and support. Conversational content analysis of their blog postings, and a focus group would provide a more subjective approach to data collection as appropriate (Bold 2012).

The decision to use focus groups in addition to the analysis of the site contributions was to continue in the vein of building community through a social process of data collection. Complimenting the pedagogical approach adopted to build and maintain a sense of community, the focus group was not intended to simply elicit people's 'real views' as Barbour & Schostak (2011) allude to this being problematic and not the most effective way, but to illuminate the depth of the sense of community created in the cohort.

'...the very condition for critical reflective dialogue...to provide the researcher with insights into the lengths to which they are prepared to go to defend their views...Participants may also individually or collaboratively formulate and revise their perspectives.

(Barbour & Schostak, 2011, pg 63)

Through the use of focus groups, students are able to co-produce accounts of themselves and their ideas by sharing their thoughts and experiences about the site. Madden (2010) highlights the need for ethnographic studies, interpretive in design, to be systematic and transparent about how and when the data was collected in order to alleviate anxiety about validity (pg 26). All students were invited to participate and purposive sampling was used in order to ensure that the focus group was made up evenly of students who had progressed from all four FE colleges and was manageable in size. A focus group of students 16 volunteered. Pre-contact tasks were created on 3 separate occasions over the academic year. The first one was created in July as their college year ended and they waited to register for the University year. As the pre-contact tasks progressed they required the students to engage in more depth.

Data collection: Online tasks - Access data

| Pre- Contact Task one (July – September) | Pre-contact Task two (December – January) | Pre-contact task three (March – April) |
|---|---|--|
| 12 responses in total <i>7 students</i> <i>1 replied more than once</i> <i>4 from instructor</i> Comments were statements primarily echoing the stimuli presented. No use of names but generally welcoming comments to the whole group. | 25 responses <i>14 students</i> <i>5 replied more than once</i> <i>1 from instructor</i> Comments more detailed, using names and sharing personal experiences to support viewpoints | 31 responses <i>17 students</i> <i>8 replied more than once</i> <i>0 from instructor</i> Comments drew upon wider sources to support views, an increase in informal 'chat' and 'familiar' language and tone. |

Pre-Contact task One – Critical Thinking

The first pre-contact task asked students to register with the network and after viewing and reading the stimuli, to “Share their thoughts” about the topic in their response. Data collected from this task showed that only 22% of the cohort posted a comment in response to the task and 90% of the comments were statements echoing the ideas presented in the stimuli.

Example of comments from Task one

'Well that certainly got the brain working again after the summer! Looking forward to meeting you all on the 26th.' (CM/Aug 28)

'Thanks for views already posted. This helped me tackle this mini assignment after a summer of very enjoyable time wasting'. (JH (3)/Sept 3)

'Having observed the given video's and perused the information I probably have more questions than answers however, my thoughts are...' (JH/Aug28)

'Hi everyone, it's been really interesting reading everyone's response to our given topic. Just thought I would put forward further thoughts...'(JH (1)/Sept 8)

One participant replied to another participant directly once. The instructor encouraged deeper reflection from participants by posting further questions and responding to comments directly on four separate occasions. One of these postings resulted in one participant commenting twice in reply to the instructor's question.

Pre-contact task two – Research in Education

Between September and December, in between tasks, the network was not used wither formally of informally and discussions were mainly held in class face to face. The second pre-contact/module task began in December over the Winter break and asked participants to view the stimuli and post an initial comment but to also comment upon another participant's comment. Data collected from this task showed an increase of 50% in responses with 5 participants responding more than once. The post showed 75% of the comments went beyond stating their own point of view and were building on other's points and using their names directly in responses. Many of the replies were sharing experiences and personal viewpoints.

Examples of comments from task two

'I agree with JK's response and feel that we all carry out some form of action research in daily life. Every session I teach involves adaptation based on previous experience. Where something is not

working well I feel larger scale research is often the best way to make effective change. I also found the lyrics to Man in The Mirror inspiring. The learners I teach often blame others for their situation rather than look at how they themselves have contributed and more importantly how THEY can make it better. I would like to use this in a session.' (GA/Jan 8)

'I strongly agree with JK and GA in that we all do some form of action research in our daily lives, where we are constantly evaluating what we have done or will do...(MF/Jan 16)

I too agree GA that the most exciting aspect in my profession is having the opportunity to play a part in the development of our students (young and old), my colleagues and of course myself. However I'm sometimes puzzled by the attitude of a few of my colleagues in their approach taking advantage of their own personal development. Almost viewing CPD as some form of punishment!' (RH/Jan13)

'PL, I here what your saying but, for me, Action Research enables those 'on the shop floor' to generate, discuss and plan small changes that will benefit themselves, their practices and the company without intervention from the outside. ...' (RP/Jan 10)

'And an interesting thing about Action Research? Well, we're in the middle of a research project now, and have been for a few years, improving our own learning about education and training to improve our teaching practices and benefit our learners (maybe it ticked that CPD box?), and I'm finding it baffling at times, but also really interesting...see you Saturday to continue the journey. (LB/Jan11)

There was also evidence on one occasion that the network was being used for sharing information not directly related to the discussion task but informal, personal or procedural such as

"I have used this piece of software to produce my assignment, I am attaching a guide.." (GA)

"Just wanted to let you all I became a grandma last night..." (JK)

Pre-contact task three – Theory and practice of management in Education

This final task was set prior to the spring break and students were again asked to view the materials and post their comments in response to a statement posed by the instructor. They were asked to form a response that either agreed or disagreed with the statements and offered reasons for the view. There was an increase in responses by 20% with 60% of the student cohort posting a comment. Although there was not a direct instruction to respond to each other, over 60% of the comments were directly responding to one or more of the comments posed by their peers both in agreement or disagreement with them and building or developing upon those ideas by giving their reasons. 40% of the comments were drawing on evidence, literature and wider sources that went beyond the stimuli presented by the instructor. 80% of the replies used their peers names in response and 50% of participants responded more than once (2 responded 4 times).

Examples of comments from task Three

'In response to EC's question 'Does the level of responsibility that an individual takes not come from within? Such as the values, beliefs and passion that one may have.' I feel that they only come from within once they have been put there, a quote accredited to Einstein states, 'Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.' Whereas DF lays the blame for the decline in values at the government's door, I feel that we must take some of the responsibility; start with the 'man in the mirror' so to speak...(RP/1Apr)

'I am intrigued by all the comments on this forum and now worry that with Saturday approaching I may be heading down the wrong path with my anti-liberalism, anti-competition in society route. I am obviously in the minority when it comes to agreeing/disagreeing with this statement and wonder why I sit on the alternative side of the fence. In order to help my own thinking I hope you may take the time to answer my questions...' (RP/19Apr)

" A Society built upon competition will help improve individual responsibility" (I disagree with this statement), and I do not believe you are going down the wrong path RP. I agree with your comments. In this day and age of materialistic objectiveness and a society that is driven by targets and competitiveness. The realisation is that there is going to be winners and sadly losers... (KM/19Apr)

'I tend to agree with RP and EC in that competition could be healthy if we have a balanced set of values and beliefs. However, as RP describes, it starts with the person in the mirror. All individuals are born free, free from opinion, free from competition, beliefs and values... (DB/17Apr)

There was evidence of other networks emerging between participants who were in the same class and perhaps had stronger social ties however, and there was an increase in informal 'chat' and 'banter' between participants who were not in the same class and only engaged with each other one Saturday per term and online.

Examples of stronger ties developing where the tutor did not need to prompt or guide.

'I started to write another two paragraphs, then reminded I've got some assignments to do, and in order to get the best marks I can, I'd better get a crack on...got to do my best to get good marks...get the best job I can....compete.....

See you in the library on Wednesday?

LB

PS EC - was facebook down?? X (LB/29 Mar)

'I'm voting for you RP!! Love the lyrical references too! Seriously though, you really made me stop and think there about what competition means to society. Thanks Smiffy! (GA/11Apr)

'Cripes RP are you a poet!!!!!!!!!!!! Vote RP not Labour, Lib Dems or the David cameron bunch i chose you hahaha!!!! (EC/17Apr)

'Just had a late night thought ... if, as a society, we could do away with competition then surely this would mean we could get rid of the Go Compare adverts. See, that is what competition has reduced me to, late night thoughts about the Go Compare man!!

AC, love the Depeche Mode Everything Counts reference ... and if possible can you ask your daughter if she can get a medium sized Superdry Jacket, preferably black, our Dan is after one. Thank you!!

Night all.(RP/20Apr)

Data Collection – The focus group

The focus group was held at the end of the academic year, in June. Students were invited to take part in the focus group and understood that their contributions would help inform the use of online social networking for future cohorts.

| Examples of Comments from focus group | Themes identified |
|---|---|
| <p>'I have used it a lot and it's useful to prepare you for the modules. The activity is limited beyond the instructed posting times and that's a shame'</p> <p>'I started very slowly on it and the more I got into it the more I enjoyed it. I liked reading other peoples ideas'... it's a strange thing when they 'see' the same things as me and some things you disagree with...it makes you think...'</p> <p>'I like that it is more contact with peers and tutors outside of the class. I would have like to have seen it develop more into a forum where students shared difficulties in the assignments but I have never felt comfortable yet to be the first one to show my ignorance, so to speak.'</p> | <p>Checking of ideas</p> <p>Acquiring ideas from others</p> <p>Security (lack of)</p> <p>Ownership towards regularity of use and informal use</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>'I have looked at everyone else's comments and the resources but haven't put any of my own up.'</p> <p>'I have used it mainly to check that I am on the right lines as everyone else. The resources help too as a guide as to what the module is about.'</p> <p>'I would have liked to be able to have 'put it out there' and say I am struggling with this module'</p> <p>'I clicked in a few times to see if anyone else was online that I could have a private chat with about assignments – rather than put it out to everybody'</p> <p>'some people put a lot of effort into their comments and it was interesting to read..'</p> <p>'I wasn't brave enough to put my ideas up there'.</p> | |
|--|--|

Analysis of focus group

The comments from the focus group triangulated with the analysis of the activity on the network. There were three main themes emerging from the focus group;

- Checking and acquiring ideas - Students felt that they used the site predominantly to check they were on the right lines with their understanding of the topic and module
- Feeling a lack of security (trust) – students held back from contributing and sharing their ideas from a fear of saying something stupid or looking ignorant
- Issues of ownership – students felt that the network was the tutor's and they didn't feel comfortable to use it outside of the instructed posting time and for reasons other than the pre-contact activity.

Discussion

During the course of the year, students engaging in the online discussions had increased, as did Dawson's (2008) from 20% to 50%. Similarly to Dawson's (2008) and Ellis et al (2006) research, the initial intentions for the interactions were limited in their analysis and evaluation and were social and introductory in content rather than reflective about the learning task. What is seen as essential by many researchers such as Ellis (2006) Olofsson (2007) and Dawson, (2008), in terms of designing online spaces to build a sense of online community, is the facilitation of additional socialisation activities outside of the online community to develop stronger relationships rapidly. This was supported in the classroom activities and pedagogical approach for the programme and is supported by Ellis (2006) and Olofsson's (2007) conclusions that a blended pedagogical approach is required. As the activity in the online discussion was limited mainly to the instructed posting times prior to each module, this could have restricted the development of relationships. However, in line with Dawson's (2008) research, with each online pre-contact learning activity there was evidence of increased learning and reflection in the interactions. Students were also showing signs of a developing community by sharing personal experiences related to their personal and professional lives, making humorous comments to each other and showing signs of empathy as Dawson (2008) also noted. In the final online task, students were driving and maintaining the discussions and required fewer

prompts by the tutor. It is interesting to note that students in the focus group still saw the network as being 'owned' by the tutor and did not view this independence as being their community that they were leading (Lipman 2003). Their reason for this was due to regularity of the interactions. As Dawson (2007) and Haythonthwaite (2005, 2011) both noted, students become engaged in online networks and discussions depending upon the level of activity and the quality of the activity. Students in this study noted that they would have benefited from an increase in activity and reported 'checking in' at times to see if anyone was online to help them with queries or questions outside of the learning task.

Although the comments enabled the tutor to gain information about the needs, desires and interests of the students as Garrison (1997), Noddings (1984) would suggest, it is important to note that only half of the group had shared their ideas in this way. Crawford (2009) had observed that many people using online social networks are 'listeners', they engage in networks with surface intentions to check ideas and acquire ideas, rarely do they offer or share ideas (Olofsson 2007; Ellis et al 2006). This was apparent in the focus group data and although the registration data showed that all students had accessed the network, not all had written or 'voiced' an opinion. They spoke of feelings of anxiety in doing so and a worry that they would say something that showed 'ignorance' or 'stupidity'. Primarily they used the network to confirm that they were thinking on the same lines as their peers and felt prepared for the next module.

Conclusion

Whilst the data was unable to show that the online network contributed towards student's transition between FE and HE, it was able to contribute to their transition and progression between modules and their confidence to engage with the programme as they felt prepared for new modules (Maunder et al 2009). It also enabled all students, those that 'disclose' and those that 'listen' (Crawford 2009) to gain the benefits that come having access to weaker social ties, such as new perspectives and different ideas (Haythonthwaite 2011). For future development it is suggested that the network is started in the FE college year so it can contribute fully to developing a sense of community more rapidly in the final year and support transition.

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