Learning for Life and Work in a Complex World

Volume 38

Refereed papers from the 38th HERDSA Annual International Conference

6 - 9 July 2015
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC), Melbourne, Australia


Published 2015 by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, MILPERRA NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 978-0-908557-96-7

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors’ names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and sub-themes, originality, quality and presentation. Following review and acceptance, this full paper was presented at the international conference.

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Layers of transition: the lived experiences of online distance learners

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Higher education is undergoing change, whereby technology is used to mediate learning for an increasingly diverse student population. Many choose flexible options studying online and at a distance to the university. Such policy directions have created an educational problem for students, namely how to manage this mode of learning while maintaining complex lives juggling work, home and study. This research forms part of an extended design-based research project studying the practical problem of health science students transitioning to online distance study. A subset of five students studying an undergraduate fully online nursing degree at a regional university was used to examine their engagement with an online orientation resource designed to smooth the transition to university study. Their digital footprints illustrating student access levels were combined with qualitative interview data to identify and interpret meanings about the way they encountered and constructed their study world. Findings indicated that technical aspects, lifestyle, interaction and academic supports created both barriers and enablers for this transition. The essence of the students’ experience revealed a complex study journey with multiple layers of transition. This involved adjusting to being a university student, managing the distance and online environment and re-positioning their occupational mindset. Their ability to manage these layers of transition was influenced by their self-regulatory skills. The variation in experiences evident through the eyes of these five students highlights the diverse patterns of engagement. Universities need flexible and varied approaches to enable successful transition for distance and online learners.

Keywords: Design-based research, student engagement, transition

Background

Expanding participation at universities in Australia with flexible, distance and online study options has led to a substantially different student demographic to those of previous generations (Norton, 2013). Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) enabling access to information anywhere anytime, mean that some students choose to manage a complex world mixing study, work and family responsibilities. Despite this there are reports of up to 50% drop-out rates by these non-traditional students studying in distance and online modes (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Research examining how students use technology indicates that while they may be adept at using it for informal personal use this does not necessarily translate to effective use of ICTs for formal study (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). There is wide generational variation in their ability to harness the potential of using ICT to support learning which suggests that each university needs to shape the way it supports student transition to the university learning environment. However, it is not well understood what
types of support would enable students to overcome initial barriers and lead to improved retention of online, distance learners (Brindley, 2014; Coates & Ransom, 2011).

One response is focusing on the first year experience as a crucial stage in transitioning to successful university study. Approaches so far have mostly considered the on-campus student experience (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). There is also a call to introduce strategies to improve transition into second year and overcome what has been termed the “second year slump” (DeAngelo, 2014), indicating that supports should extend beyond the initial entry to university. Recent analysis of the concept of transition suggests a three level typology (Gale & Parker, 2014). First “transition as induction” encompasses the range of strategies provided by universities to help first year students familiarise themselves with campus life. Second “transition as development” focuses more on creation of an identity, and third “transition as becoming” is a response to increasing diversity and multiple pathways into, out of, and back into university. Gale and Parker (2014, p. 734) recommend further research to “foreground the student’s lived reality” and “broaden the scope of investigation” beyond transition from school to university, with research at University of Edinburgh echoing this need to understand online, distance students’ experiences of such spaces (Bayne, Gallagher, & Lamb, 2014).

Dorish (2001) suggests that we should consider the technology place rather than merely its space (p. 149), and how users act through this place (p. 154) in human-computer interaction. Metlevskiene (2011, p. 149) also concludes that online learners need to be “informed, scaffolded, and modelled to engage in the process of re-membering the body online”. It is therefore important to closely examine the lived experiences of students who are managing a complex world of study, work and family life and build institutional responses to the realities experienced by such student cohorts.

**Overview of the research**

This research formed part of an extended design-based research (DBR) project where an online orientation resource was developed to smooth the transition of online, distance learners commencing university study (Wozniak, 2013; Wozniak, Mahony, & Pizzica, 2012). DBR helps to bridge the gap between educational research, policy and practice by drawing on theories of learning to inform the development of solutions to complex educational problems (McKenney & Reeves, 2012).

**Context and methodology**

The research described in this paper was undertaken at Charles Darwin University, a regional university delivering an undergraduate nursing degree online. The program attracts a non-traditional cohort of students, predominantly females over 25 years of age managing a complex lifestyle involving work and family responsibilities. The orientation resource Get Learning Online @ CDU embedded within the University’s Learning Management System (LMS) was made available to a large cohort of nursing students studying either a first or second year course 10 days prior to the commencement of semester 1 in 2011 (n=541). The resource aimed to build student confidence in using the LMS including how to navigate around an online course, understanding the demands of online study, and target support in the use of specific LMS functionalities. There were 11 practice activities addressing time management, communicating online, group collaboration, accessing a virtual classroom archive, navigation, quiz and assignment submission including using plagiarism software.
In this research the LMS is the *space* which enables a learner to become situated within the distance and online university *place*. How a student enters into, inhabits and acts within this *place* was examined in two ways. First data footprints extracted from the computer log files indicated the extent of student engagement with the orientation resource and second student interviews described the lived experiences of transitioning to this *place*. Students who volunteered were interviewed using Skype during July 2011 after the release of academic results which were not known to the researcher (HW) at the time of the interview. The students were asked open-ended questions about their experience of transitioning to online, distance study which enabled each student to branch into areas that described their personal journey.

Analysis of the overall engagement with the orientation resource has been reported (Wozniak, 2013) so this paper focuses on analysing the interviewees’ experiences. The sample is not representative of the whole population but it does offer rich contextual data to reveal meanings about the way they constructed their *place* of learning.

**Participants**
The characteristics of the five students (Emma, David, Natalie, Tammy and Anne) who gave their consent to be interviewed, mirrored the wider cohort in most attributes; 80% female (wider cohort 86%), mean age 36 years (33 years), and first time studying an online course 40% (41%). There was some variation in their mode of enrolment with 40% studying full-time (wider cohort 62%), 60% studying the second year course (47%) and all studying externally (76%).

**Analysis**
A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to analyse and interpret the interview transcripts by setting aside preconceived biases and extracting individual meanings from the ways in which the students encountered their world of online, distance study (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology has been advocated as a complementary approach to mixed methods research allowing analysis of data from different perspectives (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). In the initial analysis of the transcribed interviews “the essence” of the students experience was identified by highlighting sections of the interview transcripts (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Threads of commonality were then extracted by coding the data into themes which were compared to the literature describing the experiences of students studying online (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Further interpretation (Hycner, 1995) led to developing a transition framework that captured the essence of their online, distance learning experiences. The next section provides a brief overview of the themes then focuses on describing and discussing the emergent layers of transition.

**Findings and Discussion**
Table 1 outlines a summary of the demographic and engagement characteristics of the interviewees as well as key themes identified from the analysis. All students were managing a complex balance between work, home and family life with study commitments. Most (80%) were new to studying at a tertiary level including a long gap since secondary education, although two students had recent experiences working in the health care sector and had strong motivational reasons to upgrade their qualifications.
Table 1: Overview of interviewed students’ characteristics, engagement with the resource and key interview themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Lifestyle</th>
<th>Stage of study</th>
<th>Orientation resource access level</th>
<th>Academic semester result</th>
<th>Key interview themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>NSW urban</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Medic in defence force young children, working part-time, partner</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Accessed 2 times pre-semester</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>Flexible study option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>often away with work, provided with RPL</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>11 mins 70 pages</td>
<td></td>
<td>Changing university systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Qld regional</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Enrolled nurse, working part-time</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Accessed 2 times pre-semester</td>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>Learning curve to manage online systems (LMS &amp; library)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>15 mins 44 pages</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time poor so study planning important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Qld regional</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Working full-time, first in family to study at university, strong</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Accessed pre-semester and</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>Struggling to manage academic requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>motivation</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>during week 1 76 mins 267 pages</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self aware of expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>WA Urban</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Young children, working, started nursing degree previously at local</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Accessed 5 times from week 1 to</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>Flexible study option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>university but didn’t complete, no RPL</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>4 to 4 317 mins 236 pages</td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning curve to manage online study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Qld regional</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Children, working part-time, no prior experience of university</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Accessed 5 times from week 1 to 4 317 mins 236 pages Completed 7 activities</td>
<td>Distinction</td>
<td>Planning study time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>317 mins 236 pages Completed 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online interaction options very helpful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key interview themes**

- Flexible study option
- Changing university systems
- Learning curve to manage online systems (LMS & library)
- Time poor so study planning important
- Struggling to manage academic requirement
- Self aware of expectations
- Valued interaction
- Sought out support group of other locally-based students
- Engaged with literacy supports
- Flexibility
- Isolated & missed face to face interaction
- Struggling with academic writing
- Online interaction inadequate for needs
- Missed local support group of other students
- Flexible study option
- Learning curve to manage online study
- Planning study time
- Online interaction options very helpful
- Sought out supports with other students through social media
The level of engagement with the *Get Learning Online @ CDU* resource varied with two students accessing the resource in a limited manner and not completing any of the practice activities while the remainder completed several activities. The two first year students demonstrated much higher levels of engagement with an extended review of the resource (time). This diversity from full to limited engagement mirrored the findings from the wider cohort (Wozniak, 2013) and ensured that opinions about transition were gathered from students with a variety of engagement levels.

**Themes**

During the initial analysis four main themes emerged to encapsulate the students’ experience of transitioning to online, distance learning; technical issues, lifestyle factors, social interactions and academic skills. Sub categories emerged as either creating a barrier for their transition or attributes that enabled students to manage the transition. Figure 1 maps each theme as barriers (top row - italics) or enablers (bottom row). The word limits for this paper constrain a full discussion of each of these themes.

**Layers of transition**

A further interpretive lens was cast over the interview data to capture the essence of the students’ experience including how the students entered and participated in the online learning *place*. This uncovered varying attitudes to transitioning to study at university and informed an emergent theoretical framework where multiple layers of transition were visualised. Initially in some circumstances students needed to adjust to university study and its imposed expectations, then manage the fact that it was not a physical space. This constrained their ability to become connected to the online, distance learning environment. Finally students also needed to adjust their mindset and develop their sense of becoming a health professional. The data also revealed that the ability of a learner to adjust to each of these layers of transition was influenced by their coping mechanisms. Figure 2 illustrates each of these layers highlighting the themes that support defining each layer.
Figure 1: The layers of transition contributing to adjustment to online, distance learning

Adjustment to university
Students were managing a transition between home life and work life to that of academic study which necessitated managing a complex array of competing demands on their time. In order to cope with fitting university study into their lives, they needed organization and time management skills. Some students (for example excerpts from Natalie and David below) expressed frustration about the expectations of tertiary study including adjusting to academic writing and sourcing and appraising information. This layer of transition encompassed the academic and lifestyle themes from Figure 1.

To prepare for it and just be ready for – yeah, just to be ready that it is a big change if you’ve not done this before, and just get organised and your time management, you know, but that comes with practice too, the further on in your studies you get, the better you get at knowing what to read and how to read articles. (Natalie)

Although everything sent from university was exceptionally good for information for the course, it didn't actually prepare you for the amount of academic work and to the level that was needed if you like – it is very much a methodology to answering assignments and that took a fair time for me to pick up. I know I do the job if you know what I mean, but actually putting it into words in an academic way is a little bit difficult. (David)

Zepke (2013) although not referring specifically to online, distance study, confirms the notion that non-traditional students need to master aspects of the university environment. He contends that our current assumption that students need to fit university around their complex lives may need a reassessment. Such learners instead expect that university should fit around their complex lives and meet their individual needs, offering different study pathways towards achievement.
Adjustment to online

A second layer of transition is associated with adjustment to the online place which included the technical and interaction themes. This represents a number of adjustments from learning how to navigate the online learning management system, to developing an online identity, to feeling a sense of belonging within an online community. During the interviews all students regardless of whether they were new or continuing highlighted learning how to find their way around the LMS and needing to make yearly adjustments in response to LMS changes or alterations to other online systems such as the library catalogue search tools. Tammy and David explain below:

Knowing just where to find certain areas and if someone has commented on your comment, where to find that. (Tammy)

But they seem to have changed it the second year and that confused me because I thought oh yeah no problems, straight into it and I’m thinking oh well that’s changed and that's changed a bit, only slightly but it was a change. I think if you relied heavily on not being adaptable or you are not adaptable I should say, then you would have probably struggled a bit (David)

Students who did participate in the activities expressed the value in learning to trust the online environment by trying out tools in a non-threatening environment. Just as important is identifying the areas that these students did not mention in the interviews. The fact that internet access and development of computer skills was not mentioned in their comments, matches other researchers who have found that “going online” is more about how technology is used for learning and individual attitudes towards ICT (Dray, Lowenthal, Miszkiewicz, Ruiz-Primo, & Marczyński, 2011). Regardless of age or technical ability students who have a positive attitude towards technology are more likely to engage and interact successfully (Jelfs & Richardson, 2012). Emma explains below:

Usually every unit [course] has a Coffee Chat Room or whatever else, introduce yourself and find out who’s in your area, if there’s anyone in your area. Yeah, that was good just to read how far and widespread everyone on the course is as well and people that have been in similar situation. (Emma)

Research conducted by experienced online teachers (Savin-Baden, Sinclair, Sanders, & Second Wind, 2011) reported how they struggled when adopting the role of an online student. For example they initially adopted a lurking role, likening the online environment as being a silent and liminal space where learners may not know what to say or how to create their sense of self. The importance of guiding students to develop a learning identity has also been reinforced through work conducted in the Higher Education Academy in the UK (Sharpe & Benfield, 2012; Trowler & Trowler, 2010), although it did not differentiate between face-to-face study and online study.

Adjustment to distance

Closely related to the adjustment to the online place is adjusting to the distance between the learner and teacher. This refers to both the physical distance and also the transactional distance or psychological and communication space between (Moore, 1993). This was particularly noted in the interaction and academic support themes.
A common barrier was adjusting to the asynchronous nature of distance learning with its inherent time lag between posing a question, contributing to a discussion or submitting an assignment and receiving a reply or feedback on progress. Students grappled with this time delay and lack of instantaneous communication including face-to-face interactions with other students that enabled development of personalised relationships. All the interviewees valued the virtual classroom (known as Wimba) as it provided a more personalised interaction with the teacher therefore lessening the transactional distance. Even when students accessed the recorded audio and text-based dialogue archives of the online classroom sessions they still valued the sense of nearness to others that this promoted. Goel et al. (2012) evaluated the relevance of Moore’s theory of transactional distance and concluded that dialogue contributed positively to an intention to persist with online study. Natalie shared her experience:

It is really isolating sometimes but I think the Wimba, I thoroughly enjoy the Wimba ones….., even the ones that are archived so you’re not really interacting, you’re kind of just listening but you know you’re hearing voices, you’re seeing sort of the lecturers and that, so it can be, yeah, you feel like, ‘yeah, I am a little bit on my own here’. I’m not a fan of the discussion board …. it’s not an immediate response that you get, it’s more like an email isn’t it, then sometimes I read some of the discussion board and it just bores me what they’re talking about and to me it’s not relevant to the subject so I don’t – I sort of only go on when it’s compulsory to go on. (Natalie)

It was noted that students actively sought out other forms of support by forming and participating in study groups with students who lived in their local area or via social networks such as Facebook. Anne shares her example as follows:

The external students set up Facebook pages as well so we could talk to each other on there ….. Also because with the Facebook pages we’ve got not just the first year students, we’ve got second year and third year nursing students on there as well so if we had any queries about stuff we could always ask advice from them as well, so it’s been good with that, they’ve been very supportive with that stuff. (Anne)

The importance of these student chosen support networks has not been fully evaluated and requires greater investigation (Morosanu, Handley, & O’Donovan, 2010). Empirical data from the US has indicated the importance of first year students engaging in meaningful academic discussions outside classrooms to enhance study persistence and progression beyond first year (DeAngelo, 2014). This connectivist pedagogy (Siemens, 2005) posits that learners will strategically build networks of information, contacts and resources in order to stay connected.

Adjustment to the health care profession

A less visible transition with these early year students was the adjustment to becoming a health care professional. These students recounted their strong desire to gain a Nursing qualification; a motivational factor that enabled them to persist and overcome other barriers that the online, distance learning environment presented to them. Maintaining motivation is critical for student retention (Simpson, 2012) and initiation into a specific professional community is an integral component of student engagement (Solomonides, Reid, & Petocz, 2012). How to foster an online, distance student’s feeling of belongingness while studying also requires further study.
Role of self-regulation
It evident from this small number of interviews that there were different attitudes to managing these layers of transition. Some students demonstrated well-developed self-regulatory skills such as actively seeking out study supports (David and Natalie), while others expressed a sense of frustration with the learning experience and focused on exposing the shortcomings of the environment (university or teacher errors) rather than considering their own deficiencies and learning gaps (Emma and Tammy).

Just to make sure you look into it and that’s really what you want to do if you want to do it online because it is a lot harder than actually being in a classroom and it is completely different to another university that I have previously been at. (Tammy)

We considered that these attitudes were broadly a reflection of self-regulatory learning which considers how learners adapt to changing learning contexts and manage their situation to achieve their goals (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). Since online learners have more control over their time and how they engage, we contend that the ability of these non-traditional students to manage this transition may be as much about their own self-regulatory behaviours and their use of supports (both university and self-generated), which aligns more closely to the concept of transition as becoming (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Researchers are noting the importance of self-regulation and the need to explicitly raise awareness of this construct and scaffold its development, particularly for learners who have less experience with university study (Cho & Shen, 2013; Sun & Rueda, 2012). There is new appreciation of the importance of learner dispositions or the approach that learners take to solve problems in particular contexts (Deakin Crick & Goldspink, 2014). One concept being developed in the discipline of mathematics is that of “productive persistence” which focuses on developing an improved mindset, and is noted as being a key predictor of course completion (Bryk, 2013).

Conclusion
The diversity of these students’ approaches to transitioning to online, distance study highlights the flexible approach that universities need when coordinating their support strategies. The focus of support systems and structures may need to target different layers of transition identified in this research in a variety of ways, to offer more flexible just-in-time supports that embrace an extended transition journey beyond the early years of study. Using learning analytics to target support to those students most in need may provide new ways for online, distance learners to embrace this study place and help to improve student retention and persistence with study.

References


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