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Scaffolding Extracurricular Online Events to Support Distance Learning University Students

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Studies about effective practice in Higher Education (HE), student retention, progression and attainment suggest that student engagement is a major factor in success. A sense of belonging to a community of students and academics is seen as key to creating effective engagement. Such studies have identified interventions that have proved successful in traditional HE contexts; however, ideas of belonging and community are considered problematic in distance learning contexts. Preliminary work by the doctoral research author showed that many Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students were successful in their studies without identifying as a student or interacting socially with others, calling into question the extent to which belonging and community are relevant in part-time and distance learning settings. In 2014, The Open University developed a platform, the Student Hub Live (SHL), to facilitate academic community. This research focuses on the value of attending the live online interactive events at the SHL that support part-time distance learning students outside the curriculum, and relating to their studies. Using an ethnographic approach and grounded theory methods, chat logs of events were analysed and the emergent themes informed semi-structured interviews with six participants. The overall findings were that although the curriculum was often a primary focus for students, learning how to apply academic skills more generally and learning from other students is important in ODL. The findings are relevant to other distance and face-to-face HE providers that are keen to engage students in virtual extracurricular spaces to support learning.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the value that extracurricular live online interactive events add to the part-time distance learning experience. Community has been identified as important to student success in traditional university contexts, in particular for students to develop a student identity and feel a sense of belonging to an academic community (Thomas, 2002, 2017). However, in non-traditional contexts, specifically part-time and distance learning environments where students are not a homogenous group, student identity is not as evident to the same extent (Thomas, 2015). Furthermore, feelings of isolation are more common in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) contexts where students cannot easily and informally communicate with each other, share or compare progress. Additionally, part-time study at an institution like The Open University (OU) can take a long time—on average 6 years. Open access can also appeal to students without prior qualifications, and those lacking in confidence, and part-time provision appeals to students who

have other commitments. These factors can mean that some students, for a variety of reasons, find it challenging to develop academic skills as these are embedded within the curriculum and this can then impact on attainment.

Although the OU produces a variety of excellent supplementary resources to address these issues, which some students find useful, attendance at live online events that focus on developing knowledge and skills has been unusually high. Adopting a 'test and learn' approach to the development of such a programme—Student Hub Live (SHL)—prompted questions about why students appeared to value engagement in extracurricular events that offer community, and why time-poor students who can access similar digital information on their own, choose to come together, talk to each other and share experiences. Although the intervention and research context is specific to the OU, the value of virtual spaces where students can connect with each other and also learn will be applicable to other ODL providers.

This paper will address some of the issues of retention, belonging and community, and explore how they transfer to an ODL context. The specific nature of the OU SHL events, which are the focus here will be explained before describing and discussing this research.

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Student Hub Live

SHL is the OU's live interactive online engagement programme to facilitate academic community. There are two platforms by which events are delivered: broadcast events using livestream and an interface that includes chat and voting functions, and Adobe Connect, the interface through which online tutorials are delivered. SHL sessions are delivered by a range of academic staff, and although anyone is welcome to attend, most of the online audience are OU students. Initially designed in 2014 as a platform to welcome new OU students to the academic community with virtual freshers' fairs, the scope of SHL has expanded and now includes academic skills workshops, showcases of the curriculum, strategies for exams, and bridging programmes and writing retreats. The sessions are based on specific learning objectives that vary depending on the nature of the event, and range from dissemination of information about the curriculum or discussions about topical events to learning how to plan or structure an essay. During live events, participants can ask questions, share their views and have parallel discussions with other online participants. The events are all extracurricular, non-modular, entirely optional, and are open to all students, available both live and on 'catch up'. SHL was shortlisted for the Times Higher Education awards 2016 in the "best support for students" category, and was winner of the innovation category at the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) 2018 awards.

SHL was created and developed by the doctoral research author who produces and presents the programmes as well as designing and delivering the workshops. In addition to quantitative measures of engagement such as viewing figures (which are beyond the scope of this research), the chat logs and reflections on the success of events have been important in developing the learning activities and formats of events. Successive evaluations indicated that there was much to be learned about the ODL student experience of community and engagement and thus prompted the research presented here.

Open and Distance Learning and the problem of retention

Retention and progression are current challenges for many Higher Education (HE) providers, but are particularly problematic in open access and distance learning where the rates of student progression are typically lower than at brick universities (Simpson, 2004).

Most research on retention has been concerned with and carried out in traditional HE settings (Simpson, 2004), whereas the risks appear to be much higher in ODL. These risks are broadly based in two key areas: the diversity of the student body, and qualification structure and duration (which is specific to the OU Model). It has been widely acknowledged that students who study part-time, who enter HE with no or low previous educational qualifications and who learn at a distance are a diverse population that may be more at risk of withdrawal (Butcher, 2015; Simpson, 2004; Yorke, 2004).

Nonetheless, there are themes that have emerged in mainstream research literature on both retention (Simpson, 2004; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 2004 and student engagement (Thomas, 2002, 2017; Trowler, 2010, which provide some insight into ways of enhancing support for learners at open and distance providers, particularly through links with concepts of engagement and belonging. However, establishing community, and thus fostering persistence, is challenging in a distance learning environment when students have very limited opportunities to interact with peers and academics.

Community and belonging

Community is often conceptualised physically, for example a body or people or things, and in some cases behaviours like shared practices are also included. However, it would appear that students in part-time and distance learning contexts have difficulty in seeing themselves as part of an academic community (Butcher, 2015; Thomas, 2015). Indeed, the annual UK National Student Survey explicitly asks students to rate their engagement in academic community but The Open University performs poorly on this in comparison to face-to-face, full-time providers. Even when institutions have face-to-face or online options for the same course, the students who opt for the online option have lower rates of attrition (Barnard, Paton and Rose, 2007) meaning that this issue applies to distance learning contexts irrespective of the students' circumstances.

There are two different ideas about the way community is established, and both are relevant to the ODL context: physicality/temporality and shared values. Location and real-time communication have a part to play in establishing community (as discussed by Barnard, et al., 2007). The aspect of community associated with shared values and ideas is also important, and disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology suggest that communities do not need to be co-located in physical space. They can instead be based on shared values or practices and exist in virtual spaces.

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Anderson portrays nations as communities, proposing that they are fraternal, imagined and limited (Anderson, 2016). If communities are imagined, there is a jointly constructed conceptualisation about the nature of the community, and this provides a useful framework to interpret non-physical or virtual communities. The idea of community being constructed is also evident in other fields: McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe sense of community as a "*spirit* of belonging together, a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be *trusted*, an awareness that *trade*, and mutual benefit come from being together, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences that are preserved as *art*" (McMillan, 1996, p 315). Shared experiences and capital are also evident in discussions about virtual community, and Rheingold argues that there are different criteria for different communities, drawing on Marc Smith's (1992) idea about collective goods as evidence of the community's capital and that the collective goods bind the individuals to the community (Rheingold, 2000). These alternative perspectives on community are more useful in understanding how ODL students might experience community.

Community and belonging is important in all HE settings, and Karakas, Manisaligil and Sarigollu (2015)

consider this a particular issue at the moment for millennials. Based on the extent to which online interaction forms part of everyday communication, they argue that collaborative online spaces offer important opportunities for those who experience lack of concentration, engagement and socialisation.

Community in ODL settings can be seen in peer-to-peer spaces such as Facebook groups; however, in facilitating academic community at SHL events, an academic leader is required to moderate and guide contact. Setting the tone and agenda is particularly important in online contexts where visual cues and non-verbal rapport are not possible, and a community of enquiry framework developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) centres on the idea that the online learning experience is a function of three elements: social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence (He, 2013). The teaching presence in this context relates to the design of the session, cognitive presence to the ability to apply material to the given context, and social presence to peer-to-peer interaction.

Research focus
This research aims to understand the value of the experience of attending live online events, comparing these with other learning opportunities and physical and virtual alternative spaces. Notions of student identity and the importance of community are also explored.

Methodology
This research used a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) and ethnographic methods. The grounded theory approach appealed for a number of reasons; it accommodated the approach to thematic coding of the data and also included the reflexive contribution from the researcher. The iterative approach aligned with the new terrain of exploring how ideas about belonging translate to the distance learning environment. The chat logs demonstrated the nature of communication between participants; however, they did not convey the value of these interactions for the individuals involved and so interviews were also used. Thematic network maps were then created following the analysis of the interviews and chat logs to map links between the emergent themes and the student experience.

Data sources and participants
Two sources of data from participants who had attended SHL events were used: chat logs of discussion from four events and, based on the emergent themes of those chat logs, six semi-structured interviews. Chat log data from four different events were selected, including the freshers' orientation event, skills for study bootcamp and an event about the UK 2016 Referendum. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six participants who had attended the livestream events and/or an Adobe Connect workshop. These were then transcribed.

Method
First, chat logs were analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Line-by-line coding focused on actions and behaviours of individual

participants, and similar experiences were identified and compared. Based on those comparisons, emergent themes were identified. These outcomes, combined with initial material sourced in the iterative literature review, informed the areas of focus for the semi-structured interviews, which included the experience of the events, notions of identity as a student, and a comparison between SHL and other learning and social interactions with other students.

The same method was used to analyse the interview transcripts thematically. Finally, thematic network maps (Attride-Stirling, 2001), still in development at the time of writing, were created to provide a framework to understand how SHL contributes to the overall distance learning experience

Results
The feeling of connectedness to others was experienced in behavioural terms for ODL students: they valued a safe moderated live space to share and receive ideas; however, the structure and content of the sessions appears to validate attendance. The value of participation links to how events are designed to include multimedia formats and interactive activities, which appear to provide a trade-off between taught content that validates participation in the first place, and the space to share and receive ideas.

Chat Logs
The four themes from the chat that relate to the aims of the research all include a sense of belonging.

1. **Recognition**
   Participants at SHL events recognise others who they have met at previous events or in some other OU study context. This appears to create a common bond: when a student "knows" another student from a social media group, or finds out that they are on the same module or even the same level or qualification, there appears to be a connection to part of a group. For students studying alone, the connection with even one other person differs from the isolation they often experience.

   > Ah! [Participant 1], this is [Participant 74] that I was telling you about.
   > Participant 27 [Participant 74], [Participant 1] had a similar question to yours about TMAs.

2. **SHL can be compared to social media networks**
   The social nature of SHL is also compared to other social media platforms; however, the difference is that SHL is moderated by the OU.

   > Participant 28 WhatsApp is very distracting, isn't it Participant 60!!!
   > Participant 60 Yes Participant 28 loll
   > Participant 28 it's quiet now Participant 60
   > Participant 60 Haha coz we are here

   Although the chat log is a fluid and singular thread, there is some structure to the discussion, which is

based on the studio discussion; however, there is also scope for other conversations to take place.

3. **Interactive real-time participation helps to establish community**

   Sharing the same experiences, such as doing a quiz or contributing to a focused discussion, creates a sense of commonality and this leads to community. The interactive nature of the format (for example, printing off photographs that have been sent in an email) also reinforces the idea of sharing experiences in real time and the distinction between the studio and home environment is decreased.

Participant 34	this is really cool as I never tried this type of thing before anywhere else
Participant 36	I wish I could meet other students….. SHL is like the only thing I do with the rest of you guys

4. **In jokes and a collective sense of fun**

   Common practices and behaviours unite participants and enable newcomers to feel part of the group. Jokes and fun are based on behaviours that are linked to being a student (such as the use of highlighter pens for annotation of texts) and also being an individual (for example cake preferences).

Participant 10	Has everyone got their lunch boxes?! Haha
Participant 64	Guys I have a problem, think i made my Sticky toffee pudding a bit early and I might have eaten the portion i had earmarked for this session, Do i risk another portion
Participant 2	[Participant 64] ALWAYS!;)
Participant 12	food is a very good bonding topic xD

As the coding had focused on behaviours and actions, these shared experiences were identified as meaningful themes, and it appears student identity is conceptualised in a different way to traditional universities. Participants shared an experience because of the student behaviours they shared (studying and also attending an event) not because they were students. This idea formed an important part of the semi-structured interviews where concepts of identity were explored in more detail.

Interviews

There were three emergent themes from the interviews: moderation of online spaces, scaffolded procedural learning, and identity as a student that is conceptualised as a process of learning.

1. **The moderation of online spaces**

   Most OU learning events associated with a curriculum are moderated by the OU and there are informal social spaces set up by students. The interviews highlighted the value and importance to students of safe spaces and opportunities to learn from others. There seemed

to be a positive effect when students congregate at SHL events, as a greater number of students presents opportunities for similarities to be identified in terms of rates of progress and specific questions, which appear important to students in feeling less alone. One participant explained that they

"feel this empathy of doing things with other students. At this date and time you are doing things with other students in this room" [Participant 6].

Students explained that they find some OU spaces, particularly online, intimidating and unhelpful because of slow response times and little traffic. In addition to finding similar people, a critical mass means that questions can be answered there and then, and by a range of people. It appeared that this frequency and volume meant there was less visibility of single questions, which students can agonise over posting in a public space that is not frequently visited.

"When you are deep in study, deeply lonely, I thought, I'm going to switch on SHL and I'll hear your voice because I've got to know your name, and you might have people on saying yeah we are struggling, there is a rapport going on. I will be able to look there for some connection when it isn't available on the forum". [Participant 5]

2. **Scaffolded procedural learning**

   Participants were attracted to SHL sessions based on the content, although some participants attended any session because they enjoy connecting with others and learning. Much of the content at the SHL is available elsewhere in other formats, for example students can learn about a new curriculum from a prospectus, or read about how to write an essay, but the appeal of these sessions appears to be the balance between taught content that focuses on a specific area combined with the opportunity to share and learn from others. Borrowing ideas from psychology about the distinction between procedural and declarative learning, the SHL is analogous with procedural aspects as students learn how to apply concepts.

   "Be nice to have had guidance, but not be pointed at it. If you just give people the info they don't get as much out of it because they don't put as much time into understanding it". [Participant 1]

Many of the sessions are planned to deliver teaching content and then to enable students to internalise and apply that content to their own studies. This space, which is a key part of these live events, is not experienced when reading information in isolation.

The other aspect that adds value is the shared experience where shared practices and meanings create an environment where people can chat to each other and play. This informality appears to play a part

in creating this safe place where any question can be asked, and where students share their concerns, advice and tips with each other.

3. **Identity as a student within a learning community**
Finally, although it has been highlighted that identity as a student is important in traditional contexts, this research indicates that many ODL students do not identify as a student; instead, they talk about the progression of their studies and the outcomes they were hoping for. Feeling like a student was not important, and so there was no desire to feel a sense of belonging to a student body.

Participants spoke about behaviours and experiences instead, saying that they had all actively chosen to study, that they were all "bumbling along together" and had similar activities like assignments. One explained that there was no such thing as a typical OU student, saying that they were all the same because they were different. Talking to others inspired them that when life is challenging, if others can get through so can they.

"I'm sharing what I've learned. I'm sharing – some of the stuff I wished someone had told me, and I know how it helped me and it will help other people so that they don't need to struggle. It's good for me because I feel that I've learned something and can pass it on". [Participant 1]

Conclusion

Although the context is specific to ODL students and the intervention specific to the OU, the concept of online spaces that facilitate an opportunity to revisit skills, connect with others, and learn about non-essential aspects of studying has value for students in other contexts. It has been seen that extracurricular, collaborative, online spaces can be created that allow students to learn from each other, but that this is most effective when it is scaffolded by, in Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) and Swan et al.'s (2008) terms, an academic leader (*teaching presence*) with enough space for *social presence* preceding the application of ideas (*cognitive presence*). When students' viewpoints are included and there is an opportunity to answer questions in real time, a sense of community is established that is fun, vibrant and engaging, which allows students to feel part of something positive, even if only for the duration of the event.

Although identity is important to ODL students, the nature of studying at a distance means that a student identity is less imperative. Instead, sharing practices and ideas as well as connecting with others, has a value in normalising the ODL experience and learning from others in a similar position. It is also unsurprising that ODL students appear to value structured reflection time and opportunity to connect with others outside the core curriculum; however, a key driving factor in attendance at events like SHL ones is that they are developing specific skills or acquiring knowledge. When at events, the other aspect of interaction is evident: learning from and with peers relates to altruistic sharing and students gain confidence in having ideas accepted and validated by others. Learning together and applying concepts in a workshop environment provides a supplementary kind of learning experience to the core OU offering. Some key academic skills, which require revisiting many times, take more than just explaining: modelling and enabling students to apply ideas themselves in a short space of time can have more impact for some students than instruction alone.

Ongoing research

This work will inform the authors' ongoing research into student engagement in distance learning environments. The focus of research outlined in this paper has been qualitative, but additional quantitative research is also planned. The authors aim to understand more about the demographic cohort of participants, in particular the extent to which the OU is reaching students with widening participation characteristics through this initiative. Data from the Adobe Connect sessions about how students learned are also being collected, as is the value of the various aspects of each session such as the taught component, opportunity to apply ideas individually and discussions in small groups. These data are currently used to understand which type of student is attracted to each kind of event, and how specific events are beneficial. It is then used to plan future activities and also to develop structures that facilitate enough knowledge and reflection for useful group discussions, which can be challenging in virtual environments that require confidence and acknowledgement that students are not alone in their situation or thinking.

Next steps

This research is the basis of an EdD that is due for completion in 2019/20, and is in the final draft stage. Following this qualitative research, quantitative research on the student demographic is planned, and further analysis of the outcomes from the Adobe Connect sessions will inform the future development of those sessions, identifying sessions that are seen as most beneficial to students and considering the learning design of those sessions in order to apply them to sessions that are perceived to be less useful.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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