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BUILDING RAPPORT AND MOTIVATING REMOTE STUDENTS

THROUGH TECHNOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

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Abstract

Having rapport with and being valued by others within their learning cohort is a critical motivational element for many students. To achieve that while being geographically separated from others in their cohort presents particular challenges for educators. This paper explores the need for educators to develop strategies that can build personal bridges with their remote students. A case study dramatically illustrates the positive effects that can be achieved by utilising technology for such purposes. The findings from this case study have wide applicability as they suggest that students are more likely to complete their studies if they have a sense of commitment to others with whom they have bonded throughout the course of their learning experience.

Keywords

Motivation and self concept, Information and communication technologies

Introduction

There are a large numbers of distance education students enrolled with Australian universities. Many of these students rarely, if ever, visit their university's campus. This absence of regular, ongoing interaction with their fellow students and tutors limits their opportunity to develop feelings of affiliation to the same extent as do their on-campus counterparts. A distance student is then more likely to experience feeling of isolation and an undeveloped sense of being part of a learning community.

Major advantages do arise from the experience of completing a course on-campus as part of a cohort of peers. The development of the student's understanding of what it is to be a student and the feeling of belonging to the educational institution provide some of the foundations for academic success. Opportunities abound for the on-campus student to benefit from serendipitous interaction with fellow students and staff. These social contacts, both in and out of the classroom, build cooperative attributes. Engagement with others in the same course constantly differentiates and priorities study obligations from other interests and responsibilities. Those with less well developed organisational skills or personal motivation towards their studies can be pulled along by their peers in a slipstreaming effect.

Some students have more dependent and social learning styles which are better met by interpersonal educational structures. Indeed Palloff and Pratt (1999, p.11) have argued that for many students it is probably just as important for educators to meet the learner's need for social connection as it is to meet their content-oriented goals. They argue that tutors need to understand that developing a sense of community as part of the learning process helps create an empowering and rich learning experience. For the student who is remotely located to the institution and to the community of learning, the weakness of these bonds increases the propensity to drop out. Indeed, the first Vice-Chancellor of the UK Open University, Walter Perry (1976, p.113), many years ago highlighted the predominant view among adult educators that mature-aged people studying by distance education needed a great deal more supportive help, in areas divorced from their academic studies, than do on-campus students.

While attrition from distance education courses tends to be relatively high (Tait & Mills, 2001) it is also multi-casual (Garland, 1993) and a weakness in the relationship between student and university is a significant contributing factor in many cases (Retention Project Team, 2001). While there has been considerable investment in devising successful learning experiences for the asynchronous distance students, there has been less emphasis placed on fostering the climate to support their learning. It is contended in this paper that improvement in this area has the potential to reduce some of the gap between on-campus and off-campus course completion rates. This contention will be explored through the presentation and analysis of a case study.

An initial experiment

The building of a sense of affiliation among their asynchronous distance learners must then present fertile opportunities for providers. It is reasonable to expect that institutions and individual tutors who improve in this area could well be rewarded by higher completion rates. For some of those students who may be hovering on the brink of withdrawal, workable initiatives in this area can be expected to tip the balance towards them persisting with their studies.

In a deliberate attempt to improve completion rates by building a greater sense of community and affiliation among students at a distance, a lecturer at the Orange campus of the University of Sydney implemented a small project. Distance learners in the lecturer's particular financial management unit of study have no face-to-face contact sessions at all. The unit is presented in an asynchronous manner to off-campus students who generally rate the unit highly in their evaluations; the medium used is printed study materials. The presentation strategy seeks a low level of affiliation by sending a series of personable letters to the students at intervals throughout the semester.

The first attempt at developing a stronger bond between the lecturer and the students involved the lecturer initiating an early supportive personal phone call to each student. While it was felt that the students responded positively to this initiative and appreciated the personal contact, the exercise was particularly arduous for the lecturer. It involved the lecturer making many unsuccessful attempts to achieve telephone contact, the leaving of messages and calling back, the investment of a great deal of time and, as the majority of calls were over a long distance, it proved to be expensive. It was concluded that one successful call to each student was not sufficient to build meaningful bonds and that the logistical and other problems meant that another less resource expensive approach needed to be found.

The lecturer remained strongly committed to developing a better sense of belonging among those studying at a distance in his unit. The tools of information and communications technologies (ICT) appeared to offer some potential and were chosen as the medium for the next round of experimentation. The lecturer viewed this as an opportunity to provide the factors necessary for high quality support for distance learners as cited by Cowan (1994); namely, timely prompting, encouragement and facilitative interventions.

A subsequent application using ICT

The WebCT platform had become available and its strategic use offered this lecturer the opportunity to interact with his students in an ongoing manner. The goal was to use the technology astutely to achieve social engagement for those who do not otherwise have it and thereby improve the quality of their learning experience through building a greater sense of community and affiliation.

The distance presentation utilising printed study materials was supplemented by the use of the WebCT platform. This supplementation was made available to all students over three consecutive years but only a minority was able or chose to make use of it. In the first year 11 of the 51 enrolling students participated, in the second 15 of the 59, and in the third 19 of the 60.

The lecturer regularly sent group messages throughout the semester when the unit of study was on offer and generated at least one such message each week. These messages frequently were focussed on facilitating the achievement of the learning objectives associated with the technical area of study. In addition other more personal types of messages were sent. The nature of these varied and included matters such as requests for students to respond with details of their study progress, general items of news around the campus and in the life of the lecturer, notification as to when the lecturer would be away from the office and difficult to contact, and progressive assessment performance details over the whole unit so that individuals could monitor their own performance against the total enrolment. The tone of all messages was conversational and students were encouraged to send their own group messages.

Each time students responded to a group message or else initiated one themselves, the lecturer sent them an individual encouraging response to ensure they registered that their contribution was received and appreciated. Students who did not reply to a group message requesting a response were followed up by email on a private and individual basis until they did reply to the group. Additionally the lecturer initiated enquiry messages to individual students when they were later than expected in submitting their assessment items or when he had not heard from them for a while. He would also send personalised messages of encouragement to students who had done particularly well or particularly poorly with their assessable work.

Other facilities available through the WebCT platform were utilised, such as asynchronous forum discussions whereby challenge questions were posed, synchronous chat sessions, models and links. The thrust of the project however was to have frequent, regular, personalised interactions between the lecturer and the student. Some management features were:

- the lecturer assigning this task sufficient priority to enable the checking of the site at least twice each day. Rapid response was regarded as a quality issue in this project.

- monitoring of visits to the site to identify students who had not been in contact for some time. The lecturer would send them a personalised message, either enquiring about some aspect of their study progress or following up on a previous interaction.

The outcome from building this affiliation and providing ongoing personal contact was startling and is summarised in the following table.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Total students enrolled	51	59	60
Completions	43 (84%)	44 (75%)	32 (53%)
of which:		15	19
Web supported enrolments	11	13 (87%)	16 (84%)
Completions	11 (100%)		
Other enrolments	40	44	41
Completions	32 (80%)	31 (70%)	16 (39%)

Over the three year period of this study, 89% of those who were in the Web supported group completed the unit of study while only 63% of those who did not participate in this support

process completed it. When subjecting this data to formal analysis using generalised linear models, it is concluded that the proportion completing is significantly higher for students receiving Web support. This occurs each year of the experiment and when summed over the three years a Pearson chi-squared value of 5.37 with 1 df is obtained and the probability level is 0.021.

Student impressions

At the end of the semester, an independent third party evaluated the experience of each of the participating students. Students in all three offerings overwhelmingly responded that they enjoyed the online interactions with their lecturer and looked forward to them. They acknowledged the relatively low level of interaction between students but were not particularly concerned about this.

Of particular interest is the fact that the students found their interactions with their lecturer motivating. They commented that, because of the relationship that they developed with their lecturer, they made time for their study when they did not think they had any time available. They said that the regular contact kept them on task and prompted them to maintain their study as a high priority among competing obligations.

Students responded positively when asked whether or not the online interactions contributed to their sense of affiliation. They commented that the experience removed the loneliness associated with being isolated and gave a sense of belonging to a learning community with other students and staff. Several volunteered the opinion that they would have been unlikely to persist had it not been for the regular communication they received.

Conclusions

Australian universities have been encouraging their staff to make more use of ICT for educational purposes. However, it is easy to become enchanted with technological developments and forget the human factors associated with learning. It is paramount that educators develop implementation strategies whereby they make use of ICT to engage with their students and create effective collaborative learning environments for them. Thought needs to be given to addressing the social dimensions of learning in association with curriculum issues.

Despite Lentell (2001) lamenting that tutors in distance education remain unrecognised and unheralded, there can be little doubt that tutors can build positive relationships with their distance students by means of regular, personable and committed use of ICT. The case study discussed in this paper shows that this approach clearly can have value for students who avail themselves of it and can be rewarding for staff who enjoy the challenges that teaching in a distance learning environment at university bring. The survey of students in this study revealed that they felt that they mattered to the lecturer, benefited from his intervention, and considered their bonds with the institution were strengthened. Quite clearly the quality of the distance education experience for these students was elevated.

One aspect of this study was that there were far fewer interactions by the students with each other than occurred between the students and their tutor. A higher level of interaction among students may have served to improve the experience for students even further. Boud et al (1999), Salmon (2000), and Morgan and Kinross (2002) are among those who have suggested strategies that can be employed to facilitate student interactions with each other.

An outcome of having more satisfied students is that the university can enjoy the consequent advantages of stronger student/university bonds. It also appears that the social

bonding that can develop between students and staff, and to a lesser extent among students, may lead to higher completion rates. By taking a personalised approach when using ICT, the tutor's involvement with each student can have a positive influence on study activity and perseverance.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) claim that to implement a successful personal approach through online facilitation, the tutor needs to develop an electronic personality that is recognised as honest, responsible, relevant, respectful, open and empowering. To engage with students personally and effectively may involve collecting information on the student's personal backgrounds, interests, life experiences and current employment, then referring to this when giving performance feedback. It may involve communicating with students regularly. It will involve frequent viewing of class online submissions and commenting on common problems. Such management by the tutor ensures prompt feedback on issues raised and on assignments submitted electronically, and should also lead to students sensing that they are being noticed, cared for, and valued. If they sense this then they are likely to be more motivated, feel as though they belong to a community of learners, and complete their studies.

To create and administer intensive online support that achieves high completion rates can be demanding on the tutor's time. Unfortunately, as Rocklin (2001) points out within this context, university teachers are unlikely to be able to devote a lot more effort to their teaching than they already do. Thus the realities of contemporary academic workloads will probably limit the capacity of many tutors to provide the commitment required for learning enhancements such as that outlined above.

As this study indicates, the rewards for those who are able to make these commitments can be the gaining of more satisfied learners and higher persistence rates. It takes a considerable commitment by the tutor to spend the time needed to connect with their absentee students by utilising the technological tools to build and maintain bridges with them. Committed educators who take a personal approach when using technology can expect to be rewarded. They need to understand that it is worth their while to invest their energies and skills to build these bridges with their students - they will make a difference.

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