



Student experience at New Zealand Tertiary College in changing from traditional to online distance learning

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There are certain tensions in moving from a traditional distance learning mode to an online mode as revealed in the online distance learning study this poster reports on. Students unfamiliar with the concept of discussion forums found that the onus seemed to remain on them as individuals to 'get the job done,' so that discussion of ideas was seen as an 'add on' at best. The value of the tutor above the value of their peers was another preoccupation of students who were very used to working from a one to one perspective. This antipathy to their peers was exemplified by a possessive approach to learning and their knowledge. Sharing and building up trust between students was not seen as a priority and students largely oriented towards acting strategically in their approach as individuals rather than as members of communities.

Background: The strategic learner

It is widely accepted that online learning offers rich dialogic opportunities for interaction and CMC or computer mediated communication (Dysthe, 2001; Goodyear, 2005). Research by Stansfield, McLellan and Connolly (2004) identifies a number of constraints that have led to learners acting strategically in their approach to online learning, in particular how over time they avoided attempts to discuss and work collaboratively despite opportunities and encouragement to do so. Stansfield et al.'s research draws on two related bodies of work. The first sets out the characteristics of deep and surface learning, and extends this to the notion of a third category, the strategic learner who actively organises themselves to obtain best possible grades taking account of what they can manage (Biggs, 1979. cited in Stansfield et al. 2004). The second notes that student efforts are actively targeting what they believe are the perceived preferences of lecturers (Entwistle, cited in Stansfield et al. 2004).

In a two year longitudinal study, students at New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC) were interviewed about their experiences when switching from traditional Distance Learning mode to Online Distance mode. In the 2008 cohort 21 students were interviewed by three staff for 30-45 minutes. These interviews were made by telephone and were recorded with permission at the outset of and at the completion of the study. The students, who were from all over New Zealand, had opted to take the course online as part of an ongoing pilot project. All the students were working full time whilst studying and all had already completed a diploma through traditional distance / correspondence type delivery. The interviews were semi-structured and were analysed according to a constructivist grounded approach (Charmaz, 2005).

Aim of the study

Broad research aim: To document the experience of students moving from distance learning mode to online mode of study.

Specific aim: To document student reflections on their experience of the change from traditional distance mode to online mode.

Specific aim: To analyse according to the constructivist grounded method the manner in which student learning changed or not from traditional distance mode to online mode

Question: To what extent did change occur in the way students did or did not engage in learning online?

The analysis of the interview scripts focused on six areas:

1. Learning buddies – to what extent did the students utilize others in their learning prior to the project
2. Strategic learners – to what extent were the students more focussed on the tutor and less inclined to get involved with others online and share or take advantage of the discussion forum
3. Discussing ideas – the level of dialogical engagement on the part of the students
4. Utility – how confident the students were in using the online tools
5. Discussion forums – what the students felt about the discussions and how they developed in their dialogue with each other
6. Managerial relations – how relations in the early childhood centre were reflected in positions taken in the discussion forum.

Results

The interviews with students showed that a significant proportion remained 'strategic' in their approach to their 'online' distance experience. Strategic learners were identified as showing: (i) disregard for the online discussion forum, (ii) a reliance on the online lecturer as opposed to open discussion, (iii) a fixation with only doing what is to be marked and (iv) a lack of trust toward other students. This follows studies by Dysthe (2007) and Goodyear (2005) who have pointed to the difficulty that many students face in shifting from an individual to a more shared concept of learning. With the opportunity provided for engagement over time the student body responded showing evidence of building a sense of trust and openness – a marked contrast to the interchange at the outset of the online project. While the students in the final interview were convinced of the value of the online learning the question remained for the research team as to whether the conceptual 'design' functioned to oppose connectedness and collaborative online learning.

Student response to the online mode of learning at the outset included the following comments.

I'm so busy trying to get everything done that I've got to do, that I can't stop to help someone else out...but then I know that's what we're supposed to do!
Whenever I go online I look for a lecturer...I know that's sort of like gospel. It's the right one. They know what they're talking about.
I feel there's too much gossip on the discussion forum. Basically at the end of the day you're going to do what you're required to do to get through. Just getting it done is the aim – studying is about getting essays done.
I don't want to share ideas. After all why should you make the effort just so others can steal what you've worked on?

Establishing a community of learners

The change that occurred in the latter half of the study was most particularly seen in the 'multicultural perspectives' paper. Students were asked to reflect on aspects of their own culture. Here the openness of the exchange changed and a sense of engagement within the group was clear. The understanding was not 'what can be done for me' but 'what can I do to enhance the community.' As Goodyear observes: "Human-human interaction, through computer mediated communication or CMC, is an essential part of networked learning. Networked learning is not necessarily distance learning." The experience of getting to know and trust each other was necessary in reaching the point where a more open engagement could be forthcoming. "As time goes by, these connections move... reflecting increasingly fluent use of media and communications methods and novel distributions of collaborative activity" (Goodyear, 2005). This has now informed the next stage of the research, which will consider the value of introduction and induction into an ethos of learning online based on mutual respect and shared knowledge formation.

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