

Eyes wide open – Using student voice to prepare for the online learning journey

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Despite the exponential growth in online learning, student retention rates in the online environment remain a concern to educators. Online learning @ UniSA is a learning object aimed at laying foundations for online learning for prospective students. It uses the voices of student peers to explore the qualities needed to succeed. Through the insights of four students and their facilitator, prospective online learners can make an informed choice about whether online study is likely to be suited to their own situation. Preliminary data supports our hypothesis that the site has allowed prospective students to undertake online study with eyes wide open.

Introduction

There's much more of a commitment than just a standard uni course. Because you are online, you are doing things constantly. You can't just sit back and wait for each assignment to come – each week there's discussion to participate in and a new media quiz ('Nick' in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Online learning has, in part, been created as a way to cope with the massification of education. It is seen as a way to open classrooms to more learners, allowing students to 'learn and earn' (Nunan, 2005) and fit their study into the jigsaw of work/family/life (Khoo, 2003; Clarke, 2000). Students increasingly expect the online environment to play a role in their learning (Murray *et al.*, 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) as technology helps meet their lifestyle needs.

Student retention rates in courses utilising online learning environments are a growing concern to Australian educators as retention rates now feature as an aspect of new government funding arrangements. Students may withdraw as they do not have the skills which enable them fully participate in online learning. Educators are therefore entreated to provide well-designed online environments which integrate student support (Thorpe, 2002; Tait, 2001) to minimise student attrition.

Students who are using the online learning environment for the first time can be equated with students making the transition to university from school. They must come to terms with different teaching styles, study skills, time management, group work and information technology competence (Lowe and Cook, 2003). New online learners may experience 'isolation, disconnectness and technological problems' (Willging and Johnston, 2004). They also grapple with emotions such as fear (of the technology and new forms of assessment), anxiety and apprehension (about technological hiccups) and shame and embarrassment (about not being able to use the technology) (O'Regan, 2003). Lowe and Cook (2003) emphasise that successful transition to new study environments relies heavily on realistic expectations on the part of the students. They stress

students who come with unrealistic expectations are less likely to succeed educationally and socially, so preparation and induction is vital to retention (Lowe and Cook, 2003).

To be adequately prepared for what they are about to commit, students considering making the transition to the online learning environment need to appreciate that this will require a distinctly different set of study skills or 'qualities' to those in other types of learning environments. These qualities include being highly organised, being able to reach out to 'invisible' class mates and teachers, patience (with sometimes problematic technology) and the necessary skills to engage with the tools of online learning. The aim of this project was to develop a resource for students to become aware of the implications of studying online before they made a commitment to it. This would mean they could embark on their online learning journey with their eyes wide open to the benefits, potential pitfalls and personal qualities required for success in online learning. An accessible online learning object was conceived as the most appropriate approach to reach the numbers of students requiring this induction. The learning object was called *Online learning @ UniSA* (Duff and Quinn, 2004). A key design criteria for the learning object was that students needed to be independently motivated to interact with it.

Background

You definitely need motivation. You need to be able to...I suppose...create some sort of program yourself to be able to get the assignments done on time because there's no one there actually monitoring your progress [on a day-to-day basis]. You don't have tutors to actually speak to at a designated time...so if you've got a query you have to ask that before [the] assignment deadline because you might not get an instant reply...if someone doesn't check their emails straight away...It definitely takes a different degree of motivation to keep ahead. ('Melissa' in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

To foster motivation, Wlodkowski's framework for motivating adult learners was employed. According to Wlodkowski, for adults to stay motivated within learning environments they need to feel included, see the learning as personally relevant and engage in challenging and thoughtful learning experiences (Wlodkowski, 1999). Wlodowski (1999) underlines the importance of incorporating student perspectives and values and engendering participants with feelings of competence within their learning environment.

To incorporate this framework into *Online learning @ UniSA*, the core element of the design was the inclusion of student voices to tell the 'transition story' from the face-to-face to the online learning environment. The use of student voice is linked to notions around peer assisted learning which is 'a form of study support whereby experienced students...support the learning experience of other, less experienced students' (Chapstick and Fleming, 2004). By providing student accounts of their experiences – rather than a lecturer-generated didactic list of 'what to do in the online environment' – *Online learning @ UniSA* provides authentic peer-to-peer accounts of online learning experiences.

Through recorded interview, four experienced online students (Nick, Melissa, Adam and a fourth anonymous student) and a facilitator (Andrea) 'meaningfully interact with other students' (Ramsden in Peat, Dalziel and Grant, 2001) providing unvarnished accounts of the challenges and potential pitfalls of online learning by taking a cross-institutional slice of their experiences at UniSA and the Open University of Australia. Images were used to depict a circle of learners with a level playing-field between teacher and students (see Figure 1). This was in keeping with a learning framework that emphasises inclusion and develops sound attitudes to learning through creating meaning and engendering competence (Wlodowski, 1999).



Figure 1 *Online learning @ UniSA* 'circle of learners'

Measuring the impact

Then there's also benefits of staying at home and if it's an online subject, I've got all the information there and it doesn't matter where I am, I can always get to that information. Say you're stuck at your Grandma's house or babysitting your friends' kids or something – you can [use their computer] – it's all there. ('Adam' in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Our hypothesis is that the learning object, *Online learning @ UniSA*, has allowed prospective students to make an informed choice about undertaking courses which utilise online teaching and learning, via engagement with the practical experiences of their peers. To test this hypothesis we have looked at quantitative and qualitative data in relation to website accession data, student and staff experiences and student retention.

Website accession data

Despite its area of specialisation, *Online Learning @ UniSA* was produced as a generic learning support resource and therefore it needed to be given prominence in order for thousands of prospective students to find and use it. The resource was built in a non-password protected area of the teaching and learning server at UniSA (UniSAnet). This would mean anyone could access it – inside or outside of the University. Links to the resource were created on every course home page under the heading 'Support resources for this course'. A link was also created in the student support unit (Learning Connection) website. The site was launched and marketed during student orientation sessions which took place just prior to the first semester in 2004. Hit rates for the front page of the learning object are almost 13,000 over an 18 month period. Hit rates, which are the number of times a web page has been viewed, can be only used to give an approximation of the use of websites. They do not provide information about where the learners are coming from, how long they stayed on a page or what they read. Counter programs cannot determine if the 'hit' was from a small number of users visiting many times, or many users visiting a few times (Stout, 1997). It is plausible however, to compare this hit rate to other resources that are similarly placed and marketed. In comparison, UniSA's Report Writing Style Guide had approximately 12,000 hits over a similar time period. This comparison supports the hypothesis that *Online learning @ UniSA* was marketed successfully and accessed frequently, however more advanced tracking services and web file analysis would be required to fully understand how learners are interacting with the learning object.

Staff and student experience

Anonymous surveys were embedded into the learning object to collect user feedback about student learning experiences and suggestions for how the learning object might be improved. This type of optional feedback mechanism often captures small amounts of feedback and often at the 'extremes' (Kelly and Marsh, 1999). That is, people who take the time to respond are usually those who have a strong position about their experience. To date, responses to the embedded surveys have been small (n=15) and mostly positive. The low response rate is a concern as it may indicate that users did not fully engage with the resource to the point that they felt obliged to contribute to its development. However, if the users are primarily novices, they may not feel that they are in a powerful enough position to make judgements and comments on the learning environment. Respondents indicated that the learning object was 'engaging', 'exposed issues' and 'built confidence'. These responses aligned well with Wlodkowski's framework that describes what adults require to be motivated to engage with learning, namely to feel included, to see the learning as personally relevant and meaningful and engender competence. Interestingly, approximately 10% of respondents wrote that, after engaging with the learning object quiz, they were not suited for online learning. In their responses they indicated that they would not enrol, or would need to consider their decision to enrol in an online course more carefully. This indicates that there has been a filtering of students prior to enrolment as their eyes have been opened to the expectations that will be made of them as online learners.

Student retention

A coincidental source of data that provides insight into the effectiveness of the use of student voices and experiences in *Online learning @ UniSA* is retention rate. Australian universities provide the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) with annual data on the retention of students in university courses. This data can be cut in various ways including by internal and external enrolments, and by program. Table 1 shows the change in retention rate in external courses across the University and in the Bachelor of Arts program (MBAR) from 2002 to 2004.

The embedded student voices used in the learning object were mostly drawn from the MBAR program, so they would be most meaningful to those students contemplating online courses in this program. A 44% increase in retention of externally enrolled MBAR students was detected in 2004, compared to 2003. A smaller increase in retention of all externally enrolled students at UniSA was detected in 2004, compared to 2003 (9.9%). The external student cohort in this data would include online students and other students studying by more traditional distance modes. As such it is possible that this increase in student retention could be attributed to changes in retention of non-online student cohorts. For this reason, we have referred to this observation as 'coincidental' data. Retention of external students, including online students, can be influenced by many factors, however student support and preparedness for learning in this mode are known to be significant factors (Thorpe, 2002; Tait, 2001). In further studies we plan to study the retention rate of selected online courses that explicitly use *Online learning @ UniSA* as a pre-enrolment resource.

Table 1 DEST-reported retention rates of UniSA students studying externally over the period 2002-2004 for the University as a whole and in a targeted Bachelor of Arts program (MBAR)

Retention rates of external students

Year	University wide	MBAR
2002	61.09	50.00
2003	61.13	54.55
2004	67.17	78.57

Conclusion

When I first began [to study online], I was anxious and resentful... The anxiety and resentment have been replaced by a sense of confidence. I DID it! I conquered my luddite-based fear of a new form of media!...learned to work with the technology. There were times I nearly threw the footwear at the computer....but no system is perfect. I will even go as far as to say I enjoyed working online! ('Anonymous student' in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Students need to be well prepared for online learning. They need to enter their online learning experiences with a realistic view of the study and technological requirements to enable them to succeed. Their attitudes and perceptions will influence their decision to enrol; their motivation to complete and their engagement with either a deep or surface learning approach (Biggs, 1987). Preparing students to be successful in online courses can be tackled in many ways, but approaches such as *Online Learning @ UniSA* are an economically feasible means to reach and prepare large numbers of distant students. Placing the resource in an online mode (rather than in a printed mode) offers potential students an opportunity to become competent with unique aspects of online study such as navigating through websites, listening to sound bytes and participating in quizzes and surveys.

The choice to use the voices of student peers within this learning object was a philosophical one, which drew on Wlodowski's framework for inclusive learning environments (Wlodkowski 1999). Wlodkowski's framework was conceptualized for face-to-face teaching and learning environments. To our knowledge, this is the first time this framework has been applied to the design of online learning environments. The qualitative evaluation data from users of the learning object indicated that the incorporation of experienced student voices help to connect novice learners to the expectations and attitudes they need to be successful. This opens their eyes to what is required of them as online learners. Based on this, further application of Wlodkowski's framework for adult learning in different online environments appears warranted.

Online Learning @ UniSA aimed to open the eyes of potential students to the realities of online learning. Evidence suggests it has allowed students to judge for themselves whether they were in a position to study online – thus sparing them the pain, embarrassment, feelings of inadequacy and financial loss of withdrawing at a latter date. This was perhaps the most positive outcome of the *Online Learning @ UniSA* project. By using tools such as *Online Learning @ UniSA*, universities may be able to have a significant impact on student retention rates in online courses in the future.

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