

A juggling act: Exploring student narratives of learning online

Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative case study set in Dublin City University which explored student experiences of studying online. The project adopted a case study approach, following twenty-four online students over one academic year. The setting for the study was an undergraduate sociology module on the BA (Hons) in Humanities, an online programme delivered through DCU Connected at Dublin City University (DCU). Following an open and distance learning philosophy, DCU Connected aims to afford educational opportunities to adult students.

The research question for the study was: How do online students construct their narratives about learning online? Data was collected from participant generated learning portfolios and semi structured interviews. Two instruments were developed: a learning portfolio instrument and an interview schedule. Participants were interviewed with their learning portfolios, which were used as stimulus during the interviews.

A circular model of data collection and analysis was followed and data analysis was an ongoing and iterative process. The analysis followed a data-led thematic analysis approach based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phases and comprised of several cycles of coding, theme generation, refining and reviewing themes. Through this analysis process five themes were constructed with reference to the research questions, literature and theoretical framework. The findings were constructed into five themes: motivation, peer community, module supports, studying while balancing life commitments and my approach to learning.

Findings indicate being a successful online student was impacted by the challenge of lifeload issues such as balancing competing demands of family, work and illness. In addition, the findings suggest that the learning portfolio gave online students a personal space to evaluate their own learning, to process their thoughts and experiences and to document their lives and learning in an authentic and meaningful way. Online students' learning portfolio gave a unique window into their learning experiences where they documented the development of their highly personal approaches to studying. Another important finding was that participants placed a high value on the peer communities they formed.

Keywords: online students; online learning; student voice; qualitative research

Introduction

This case study set out to explore online student experiences of studying online. Online education is the fastest growing areas of education worldwide because it provides access to educational opportunities in a flexible manner to students from diverse backgrounds and geographical regions who often can't access higher education by other means (Delaney & Fox, 2013). Typically online students in an Irish context tend to be older and from lower

socio-economic backgrounds and some are educated and upskilling, many are second chance learners or have delayed participation (Delaney & Brown 2018, Brunton, Brown, Costello, Farrell, 2018). Online learning is more affordable as students can earn as they learn and travel costs are reduced. However, online students are more vulnerable to attrition, therefore it is crucial that the needs of online students are understood and addressed in order to facilitate their success in higher education.

Successful studying online

Online learning degrees have lower rates of retention and graduation than full time campus based undergraduate courses (Woodley & Simpson, 2014) There are a number of factors reported in the literature which affect online learning student experiences and retention, which are: time management skills, the ability to balance work, family with study, autonomy, community, sense of belonging, motivation, course design, and support structures at institutional, programme and teacher levels (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, Smith, 2015; Buck, 2016; Holder, 2007; Zembylas, Theodorou, Pavlakis, 2008).

Students with more developed time management skills are more likely to continue on an online course (Holder, 2007). This involves establishing a sustainable study routine which can adapt and account for problems (Brown et. al. 2015). In addition to time management, strong organisational skills and the ability to keep on task are key to being a successful online learner (Buck, 2016). However, many online students struggle to follow a regular study schedule due to the challenges of balancing work, family and study (Brown et. al., 2015; Blackmon & Major, 2012; Buck, 2016; Zembylas et.al. 2008). Trying to fulfil multiple roles and juggle professional, family, social life, and study can cause online students to feel considerable stress (Brown et. al., 2015; Kahu et al, 2014; Zembylas et. al. 2008).

Being an online student involves greater autonomy than traditional campus based higher education (Comer, Lenaghan, Sengupta 2015). Online students have to be able to work independently and there is an increased need for self-regulation and self-discipline to meet the course requirements (Thompson, Miller, Franz, 2013). This greater need for autonomy can cause frustration, confusion and discomfort in some online learners (O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty 2015).

Feeling that they belong to a community of learners has a significant impact on the learning experiences of online students (Buck, 2016; O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty, 2015). The two factors that can support the development of a sense of community and belonging in students are establishing social presence and high levels of interaction in the course (Buck, 2016; Veletsianos, 2012). Developing social presence in the course gives students a greater sense of connection to each other, the teacher and the course (Veletsianos, 2012). Interaction and social presence can be promoted through course design which promotes active communication between students and instructors using asynchronous discussion forums and synchronous online classes (Buck, 2016). Community can also be fostered through informal student interaction such as social media, study groups, and email (O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty, 2015). In a study conducted by Andrews & Tynan (2012) informal student networks were most beneficial for participants in terms of sense of community. Informal student networks can enable online students to form positive social relationships and close ties with fellow students (Zembylas et.al., 2008). The emphasis in the literature on building community is in response to the feelings of isolation often experienced by online students (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010). Fostering a strong sense of community among students in

online courses and establishing social presence can decrease students' feelings of isolation and disconnection (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Study habits of online students

Although they are studying online, the study habits of online students follow traditional study activities such as reading, note taking and writing assignments and are similar to campus based students (Cakiroglu, 2014). There are a number of key study habits which contribute to successful study online; organisation, taking responsibility of learning, creating a positive study environment, time management and effective note taking, reading and assignment writing strategies (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Brown et. al. 2015; Buck, 2016).

Creating a positive study environment with a dedicated and quiet study space is an important organisational aspect for online students (Buck, 2016; Cakiroglu, 2014). A further organisational aspect is the necessity to plan and structure their study around their other responsibilities effectively, this can result in unusual study patterns which are highly individual such as studying late at night or early in the morning (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Buck, 2016).

One major point of difference from campus based study, is that much of online students learning takes place outside of the teacher's view as they typically have on demand access to the learning resources of the course (Watkins, Corry, Dardick, Stella, 2015). In spite of this difference, there are some empirical studies which investigated the study habits of online students. In a study of new online students in Australia, Brown et al. (2015) identified three study approaches in the cohort: active-strategic, active-deep and passive-surface. Active-strategic online students were task oriented, thorough, effective at managing and planning for study and spent a lot of time working on assignments. Active-deep students were motivated by self-development and passive-surface students lacked independence, had unrealistic expectations of higher education in addition to no previous experiences of university (Brown et al. 2015).

Effective note taking is an important self-regulatory skill which is one of the most common activities in a face to face class, but is equally important for online students (Watkins et. al., 2015; Cakiroglu, 2014;). However, Watkins et. al. (2015) found that online students were less likely to take notes if they had not been prompted unlike in face to face classes where students spontaneously take notes.

For some students learning how to use the technology that is necessary to learn effectively online is a struggle (Brown et. al. 2015; O'Shea et. al., 2015). Other students are comfortable in the online environment and are increasingly using online resources such as videos, open educational resources, and wikis to aid their comprehension of course content (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, Aston, 2015). In a study of student perceptions of digital technology in Australian universities, Henderson et. al. (2015, p.1567) found that students found the most useful and supportive aspects of digital technology were the "watching and re-watching video lectures, and preferring to look at diagrams, animations and images as opposed to engaging with the written or spoken word".

In summary the literature identifies a dearth of research on the experience of online students in Irish higher education.

Methodology

A qualitative case study grounded in the constructivist paradigm was designed with the aim of exploring online student experiences of studying online. This research was part of a larger qualitative case study that explored the experiences of online students at DCU (Farrell & Seery, 2019). This study was framed by the following research question:

How do online students construct their narratives about learning online?

The setting for the study was an undergraduate sociology module on the BA (Hons) in Humanities, an online programme delivered through DCU Connected at Dublin City University. The study followed twenty-four online students over one academic year studying for a humanities degree with DCU Connected at Dublin City University (DCU).

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the case study, twenty-four online students consented to take part in the study. Data was collected from participant generated learning portfolios and semi structured interviews. Two instruments were developed: a learning portfolio instrument and an interview schedule. Participants were interviewed with their learning portfolios, which were used as stimulus during the interviews.

A circular model of data collection and analysis was followed and data analysis was an ongoing and iterative process. The analysis followed a data-led thematic analysis approach based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phases and comprised of several cycles of coding, theme generation, refining and reviewing themes. After a number of iterations of reviewing and refining, a thematic diagram was created and each theme was defined and named. Themes constructed through the analytical process are discussed in the findings below.

Findings

Five themes were constructed during the analytical process, they were as follows: peer community, module supports, studying while balancing life commitments, confidence and my approach to learning, see figure 1 below.

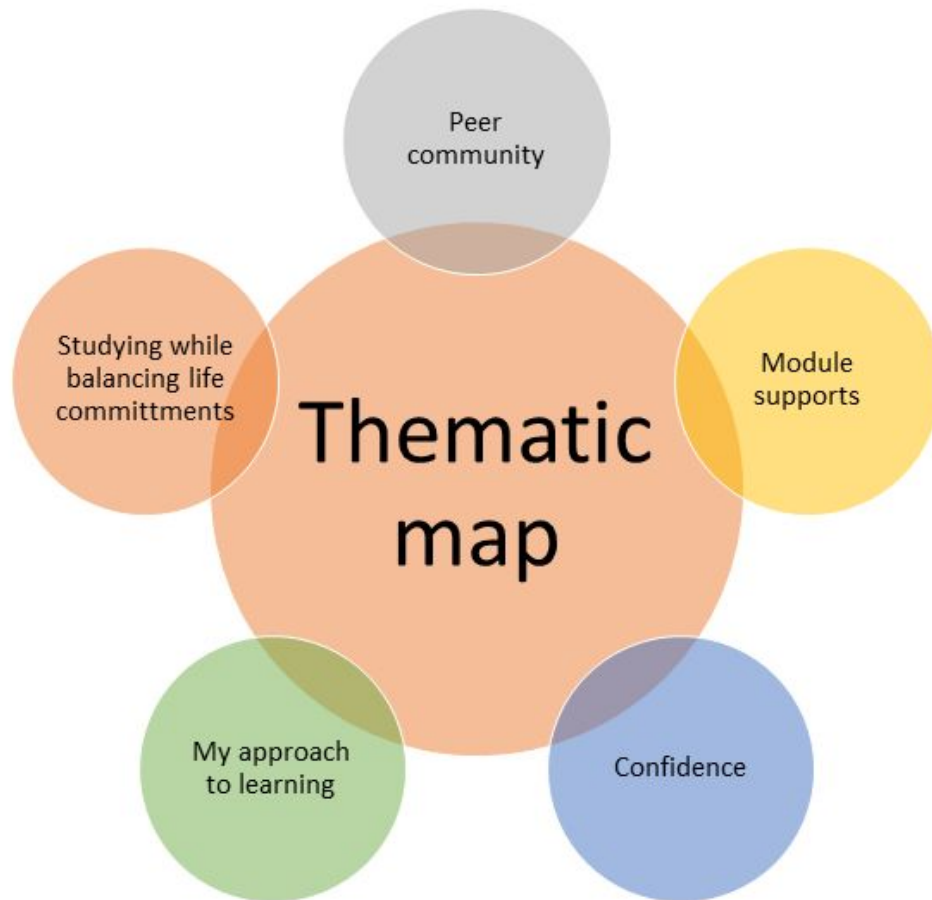


Figure 1. Thematic Map

Peer community

Participants placed a high value on the peer communities they formed over the course of the academic year. Three types of formal and informal peer communities were formed. The official institutional community which interacted on the Loop discussion fora, the student generated and student led class community which interacted on WhatsApp, and smaller cohorts of student generated study groups which interacted on WhatsApp and Facebook.

These peer communities were perceived by participants to be an essential source of support, reassurance, encouragement and human connection.

I: Ok that's interesting. And then evidence 2 is your WhatsApp group.

P19: I need those women, that's my cohort. We are in contact most days supporting one another. Like when I was feeling down and I was thinking I do not want to do this course anymore it's too much, they were like you're great and you're smart. I read your post, your post is really insightful. If I don't understand a concept we can discuss it. If WhatsApp isn't sufficient we can ring each other.

I: So your study group is really important.

P19: It's not a study group. My sister when she did her they give you a cohort you do all your classes together. You do all your study groups together, projects together. There's something about that approach that makes you feel like you're part of a supportive group.

I: You're in something greater than yourself?

P19: Yeah (P19 Interview 1)

This means that for participant 19, the peer support group was an integral part of their approach to learning in the module.

Module supports

Participants placed a high value on the support offered by their module tutors both in synchronous online sessions and asynchronous discussion forums. Attending and participating in tutorials was described by participants as fundamental to their learning, socialization and progression in the module. Tutorials provided them with reassurance, interaction with peers and clarification of difficult concepts and theories.

"However, since then I have completed the postings for Assignment two and have attended another online tutorial. The tutorial covered the codes, conventions, theories and perspectives of Social Order. As I had been studying these subjects in the unit notes, it was very useful to have a structured discussion on them. When our tutor gives real life examples of the application of these, it makes everything easier to understand and remember. I thought that tutorial was particularly useful, as there was good interaction among the group. We were in the middle of our postings for assignment 2 at that time. X (Tutor name) gave us useful pointers for the assignment, among which was to try to focus our examples on Irish society." (P8, eportfolio entry 4)

The importance and centrality of the support provided by the module tutors was very clearly articulated in participant narratives. Although the mode of study of online distance learning is largely self-directed, the reassuring and supporting role of the tutor still remains very significant to the learning experience of participants in terms of clarification of concepts and assignments, encouragement, guidance on reading and approaches to study.

"One of my main difficulties in gathering my work for the first assignment, was my block on getting over what the definition of power is in sociology. When we had our first face to face tutorial with X (tutor name) it made more sense and I was actually surprised at how much power was evident in everyday life, in our relationships with people and in our interactions with pretty much everyone." (P5, eportfolio entry 1)

Studying while balancing life commitments

The most challenging aspect of being an online student is studying while balancing work, family and caring responsibilities, this is very clearly articulated in the participant narratives. Balancing competing demands while finding sufficient time to study, and write assignments, put participants under severe pressure. As the students are already time poor, issues such as illness had a domino effect on participants' ability to keep on track with their studies. One or two unexpected problems in their personal lives can cause students to fall badly behind with their study and assignment work, thus impacting their learning experience

“For the first time since taking up third level education again, I found it very difficult to juggle my work demands, assignment demands and minor ill health. However, the first three assignments were all due in November rather than December this year and the first sociology assignment, as well as the first psychology assignments, coincided with annual parent teacher meetings. As a primary school teacher, my job is my priority and I had prepared for the clash of assignment and meeting dates. What I couldn’t prepare for was getting sick at the same time. It is fair to say that I felt very overwhelmed with everything happening all at once.” (P7, eportfolio entry 2)

The issue of time management is very strongly articulated by participants in their narratives, the pressure of finding sufficient study time, the stress and worry they felt about falling behind, was a persistent difficulty faced by participants throughout the academic year.

“I’m beginning to worry that I won’t have time for a more in depth look at everything in this section, before having to move on to Crime and Deviance in advance of Assignment 2. It all comes down to time management, which I remember was an issue at this time last year. With all the extra pressures of Christmas from a work and family point of view the study can get squeezed. I may have to do less(no?) housework to facilitate my learning this month. This idea has not been negotiated with my partner and may have to be revised! Perhaps a self-imposed ban on TV for the month is a more acceptable strategy. However, all work and no play!” (P20, eportfolio entry 2)

Confidence

Many participants expressed feelings of self-doubt, fear, apprehension, uncertainty and lacked confidence about own academic abilities and approaches to studying.

“I am very happy to see that over the past few months my reading skills have vastly improved. Before I started my journey of third level education, my reading skills were below average at the best of time, I had a lack of confidence in myself and I could not abstract information from a text on the best of days.” (P15, eportfolio entry 3)

Some participants grew in confidence as the module progressed. Getting good assignment results and positive feedback validated their perceived abilities, and enabled them to overcome their feelings of uncertainty.

“Previously, I was unaware that self-doubt affected new writing challenges such as the SOC3A A1 article review. However, I was aware of a drive to learn and demonstrate knowledge of sociology to myself. I believe the grades validated my ability and I was no longer distracted or made anxious by self-doubt. Therefore, I have discovered growth in my confidence impacted my study habits and did not uncover contrary study habits.” (P19, eportfolio entry 3)

My approach to learning

In their narratives, participants described their highly personal approaches to learning, this provides a detailed insight into their study techniques, when, where and how they learned. As the majority of study was self-directed, participants had to develop individual techniques to aid their understanding of the sociological content, theory and concepts. These

techniques were varied, and innovative, and were heavily orientated towards online resources such as YouTube videos, online lectures, podcasts, glossaries, online articles, and watching recordings of previous online tutorials.

“I find if I cannot grasp a piece of information through one format, i.e. reading a text, sometimes watching a YouTube video regarding the topic can really help me comprehend the material better.” (P2, eportfolio entry 3)

The challenge of fitting study time into their busy lives was described by participants when detailing when they studied. At the weekend, every evening, in the morning when the kids were at school, early morning before work, on days off, between shifts. Finding time to study was a recurring challenge for participants, which required developing creative strategies to try and carve out study time in their already busy lives.

“My learning process is still haphazard and I struggle to block off sufficient time to study. I have dealt with this to some extent by spending longer hours in my office in work to catch up on my modules. The downside of this is I am available to work colleagues even though I am technically finished work and situations often arise that require my attention.” (P3, eportfolio entry 3)

In addition, participants reported studying in a wide range of places. They studied at home, in the library, on their phone while commuting to work, in cafes, in work, and sitting on the side of football pitch. In their eportfolio entries, many participants included images of their study spaces, for example participant 18 evidenced his study space in the image in figure 2 below, which he described as “the view from the window of my attic office” (P18, eportfolio entry 5)



Figure 2: The view from my attic office. (P18, eportfolio entry 5)

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that being a successful online student was impacted by the challenge of lifeload issues such as balancing competing demands of family, work and illness. This is consistent with previous research on the lifeload challenges experienced by online students (Brown et al., 2015; Kahu et. al., 2014; Zembylas et al., 2008). Further, the findings suggest that the learning portfolio gave online students a personal space to evaluate their own learning, to process their thoughts and experiences and to document their lives and learning in an authentic and meaningful way. Online students' learning portfolios gave a unique window into their learning experiences where they documented the development of their highly personal approaches to studying. This finding supports Penny Light et. al. (2011, p.8) theory that learning enables students to represent their own learning by providing a "window into the lived and experienced curricula". However, there is only one empirical study carried out by Shepherd & Bolliger (2014) which has touched on the documenting of the lived experiences of online distance learners. Shepherd & Bolliger's (2014) study of online graduates' students found that learning with eportfolios personalised the experience for students and increased feelings of connectedness. However, no studies have examined learning portfolios as a window into the lived experiences of online students, which is an original finding of this study.

Another important finding was that participants placed a high value on the peer communities they formed. This finding is consistent with previous research on peer interaction in online courses carried out by O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty (2015) and Andrews & Tynan (2012). In addition, the value of informal student networks for online students has been evidenced by Zembylas et al. (2008).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore how online students construct their narratives about learning online in the Irish higher education. The findings of this study indicate that being a successful online student was impacted by the challenge of lifeload issues. Although this study is a small in-depth qualitative study, its findings provide insights into how online degree programmes can support online students to achieve successful and fulfilling learning experiences.

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