195

A gamification approach to enhance 'third space mobility': building a digital community and fostering engagement amongst culturally diverse students

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Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract

This paper draws from the authors' exploration of a 'third space' approach to fostering a 'third space mobility' to enhance the student experience in higher education (Bamford, Moschini and Tschirhart, 2022). The project has been designed to develop an inclusive online experience, with a particular attention to those student cohorts that might experience more difficulties in engaging with university life. This paper outlines and offers an analysis of data drawn from this participatory design research project which was aimed at enhancing 'third space mobility' both at home and internationally for participating students.

The London Met Digital Citizenship Programme is an active and playful online environment where students can enrol on a voluntary programme of activities - "missions" - and claim badges that contribute to the award of a passport. It is intended as a transformative intervention that addresses the potential barriers to engagement and success.

Full paper

This paper draws from the authors' exploration of a 'third space' approach to fostering a 'third space mobility' to enhance the student

experience in higher education (Bamford, Moschini and Tschirhart, 2022). This paper outlines and offers an analysis of data drawn from a participatory design research project which was aimed at enhancing 'third space mobility' both at home and internationally for participating students.

The project presented is based on an online digital platform created in 2019 to introduce an innovative and gamified intervention to improve students' engagement with the development of employability and life skills, as well as offering the possibility for virtual mobility with international partners. The intervention was further focused on designing an opportunity to enhance student belonging, which has been shown to be a key factor for success for students from underrepresented groups in higher education, (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015) through building their sense of community.

The 'third space mobility' centres around the transformative experience for participating students and the dialogic encounter that participating students experience. Whitchurch (2008) has identified the importance of the 'third space' in higher education as a space where boundaries are crossed in professional practice. The 'third space' draws on notions of an academic space which is not constrained by subject boundaries and the hierarchical relationships of the formal teaching space. Rather, intellectual development hinges on a dialogical and relational engagement with activities that students have co-created. This project has proven to enhance a number of different types of mobility: virtual mobility, where students engage with each other, the university and a virtual mascot in a digital space, and international mobility, where students engage with international partners through citizenship activities. These various aspects offer students opportunities to move across academic boundaries through extracurricular activities and develop a range of different skills, including employability, citizenship and overall engagement skills, offering a 'third space' for students outside subject and discipline boundaries. This paper explores further the relationship of these activities, building on Burns et al. (2019) work of including partnerships with students as falling under the umbrella of the 'third space'. We have seen through past research, (Bamford and Pollard, 2018; Pollard and Bamford, 2021)

that students from underrepresented groups can struggle to make the social transition to university, with busy lives and local community links outside of university. This impacts the ability for institutions who have large bodies of commuter students to maintain a community environment to learning spaces. Recent research by the Student Futures Commission (2022) has shown that the pandemic has resulted in increasing numbers of students becoming susceptible to mental health issues and feeling isolated and disconnected from university. As the pandemic resulted in all academic activities being delivered remotely and online for students in the university, this digital platform became a very useful tool to allow students to maintain a connection with the university and with each other. Gamification and playful initiatives (James and Nerantzi, 2019), especially when designed in collaboration with students and with a focus on enhancing motivation and participation, can offer effective opportunities to increase and enhance student engagement and allow for a new form of digital mobility.

The participatory design aspect of the project has focused on the development of digital tools that will allow for portable activities to also be shared with international partners (Bamford, Moschini and Tschirhart, 2022). As part of the design the data includes data received from international partners' feedback to the Citizenship tool. The research project aims are seeking to evaluate how the intervention impacts the learning experience through exploring whether it: develops and builds civic responsibility and community; enhances career prospects and social mobility; creates possibilities for international and virtual mobility; enhances student co-creators skills to enable their mobility from their studies into professional roles and fosters a third space culture amongst students, academics and professional services.

The research methodology is structured as a case study approach using a mixed methods design for the collection of data. The design and production phase of the project was based on a participatory design approach and included co-design workshops and usability workshops with students. The evaluation phase was also conducted in partnership with students co-researchers and was based on questionnaires and focus groups with students held over a three year period. The key outcomes are designed to inform educators about

the development and understanding of co-creation, student participatory design and the benefits and challenges of a gamification approach to enhancing mobility skills at a number of levels, defined as 'third space mobility'.

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