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Belonging and diversity: the role of digital media and new forms of learning interactions (0178)

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Belonging and diversity: the role of digital media and new forms of learning interactions

This paper reports on the first phase of a study investigating how digital technologies are influencing the engagement of non-traditional and under-represented students whilst studying at university. It aims to build understanding of these students' experiences in university and of future strategies that might be used to support them. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to support the students they admit under a widening participation (WP) brief - as Tinto suggests, "access without support is not opportunity" (Tinto 2008). Whilst there are many university-led support mechanisms, far less is understood about how informal networks and interactions amongst peers might contribute to WP students' integration and successful participation in Higher Education.

Students must become confident and successful learners and integrate into the culture and practices of university life. Recent research suggests that engagement is not just involvement in activities or normative requirements for students to exhibit particular behaviours but is about commitment and belonging. This research emphasizes the importance of peer to peer relationships and meaningful interactions between staff and students in fostering engagement and belonging (Thomas, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2009.). Whilst, Crozier, Reay & Clayton (2010) have also emphasised the importance of commitment to university life, they found that learning identities were more fragile in working class students and because of other commitments, their engagement was often more sporadic. This suggests there are challenges for universities in supporting more diverse students in their university lives.

Many studies have shown that students are increasingly using digital media as part of their learning lives for research, knowledge production, communication and collaboration (e.g. Ellis & Goodyear 2010; Crook 2011). Technology has a critical role to play in reconfiguring what learning *is* and in opening up possibilities for new thinking and new knowledge (Saljo, 2010). However, some evidence of peer initiated practices is beginning to emerge (Selwyn,2009). In previous research, Timmis (2012) found that undergraduates using instant messaging tools as part of informal studying practices supported peers through exchanges that are private and longitudinal, dipping in and out of conversations over time. However, being at university also involves participation in many contexts and settings including online and digital media, not all of which are academic. Timmis (ibid.) also found that conversations offered mutual support and help and continually crossed the boundaries between studying and social topics.

Typically, however, studies of undergraduate experiences of using digital media for learning do not focus on particular groups of disadvantaged students and tend to suggest universal applicability. This study focuses attention on the use of digital media by students from underrepresented backgrounds. It investigates the potential and constraints of digital media for offering additional means of support

for these students and the experiences of groups for whom the new economic landscape may have greater impact on their university lives and academic progress.

Obtaining authentic accounts of students' experiences using traditional data collection methods is challenging because of the personal nature of some of the data and the potential for intrusion (Yee & Andrews, 2007). This is particularly the case if the research investigates communications or personal experiences such as collaborations or studying practices which might take place in a variety of different online or physical settings and in particular may occur outside of institutional walls. For this reason, the project is working in a collaborative community of inquiry, in line with recent work on undergraduate involvement in research (Brew, 2006) where students have been involved as co-researchers using visual methods (Timmis & Williams in press). Our study investigates students' experiences and relationships with peers over the course of one academic year and focuses on their detailed learning interactions. Moreover, we are also focusing on informal learning interactions that take place outside of formal settings.

In this paper we will be reporting on the first phase of the study. It will present the results of a survey sent to students in the second year of study at the University of Bristol and a review of early findings from the first tranche of video diaries provided by the student co-researchers. We will report on how students develop and maintain interests, friendship groups and the creation and maintenance of a range of social and online networks. In particular we will consider the role of digital media in their learning, interactions and communication. We will also report briefly on the challenges of working as a collaborative community of inquiry. Finally, the paper will offer our reflections on student's lived experiences of higher education as reported in the first phase and will consider multiple conceptions of belonging and unbelonging and how this is contributing to our understanding of the development of new or complex hybrid identities in relation to student engagement and retention.

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