

The inside–outside university: diversity, participation and empowerment in digital spaces across local and global boundaries (0257)

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Main abstract

This paper is about widening participation in higher education, boundary crossing, and online social networking practices amongst undergraduate students. Increasing participation and equity in higher education are critical to the expansion of higher education globally and to changing international economic and social contexts (Obsbourn, 2003; David, 2010). This has meant that widening participation research is placing an increasing emphasis on the participation within widening participation and what happens to students after getting into university, their experiences and the challenges they face (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Yet, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the role of informal networks and interactions and the relationship between the social life and academic life of university students both online and offline and how online informal networks might contribute to under-represented students' successful participation in HE.

Online social networking through social media is a global social practice, including within universities contexts. Social media sites (such as Facebook) allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded space, share connections and establish group spaces for specific purposes. Within higher education, research in this area tends to concentrate on the potential for formal academic activities (e.g. Sanzhe et al, 2013) or focuses specifically on social interactions amongst students

(e.g. Madge et al 2009). However, participating in higher education involves informal as well as formal academic activities. Increasingly this includes online and offline interactions as students cross the boundaries between physical and digital spaces as part of their daily University lives. These different time-space configurations can also help students in managing social and cultural transitions (Author 1 & Williams, 2014). Further to this, Säljö (2010) argues that the Internet acts as a social memory which challenges institutional expertise by offering alternatives to accepted forms of academic knowledge. However, digital technologies are not always positive influences (Selwyn, 2011) and online social networks can reinforce existing inequalities and exclusion and may replicate the types of social divisions that exist offline (Hughes, 2009; Boyd, 2011).

This paper explores the potential and challenges for students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds in exploiting online social networking practices for supporting their participation, belonging and studying. It draws on Holland et al (1998)'s work on agency and identity in cultural 'figured worlds' Figured worlds as social encounters (such as universities or connected networks or groups) where the positions of those taking part matter. Developing a figured identity within a learning community involves agency through improvisational acts that help to overcome cultural and historical constraints that powerful structures and positions embody (ibid).

This paper draws on a study investigating under-represented undergraduate experiences over one academic year at a research-intensive UK university. Thirty-one 2nd year undergraduates from under-represented categories took part in the Digital

diversity, learning and belonging (DD-lab) study. Under-representation was defined through first generation to go to university and state school attendance, black and ethnic minority, mature and local student community membership. The project investigated informal studying practices, in a variety of different online or physical settings and outside of institutional walls. Students documented their informal studying practices and the use of digital technologies, and online spaces using an iPad to upload documentaries (including text, screenshots, photos, video, audio files) to illustrate and comment on their accounts throughout four-week periods. These were complimented by individual interview sand focus groups. Qualitative data analysis identified different 'genres of participation' (Ito et al, 2010) based on the level and nature of engagement with digital technologies.

Setting up informal studying spaces through Facebook allowed students to mobilise support (resources, fellow students) especially when struggling or lacking confidence. This included family members or friends at other universities acting as mentors outside the university who would offer advice and support on a regular basis through Skype for example. Social networking spaces, especially Facebook also allowed sharing across a wider group, which helped in particular with large cohorts where students reported feeling anonymous or reluctant to ask tutors for help. Such spaces allowed them to ask 'dumb' questions, check things and seek reassurance less conspicuously.. Students also used such spaces to canvass whole group opinions and for challenging academic decisions. Social networking was also reported to help in sustaining connections to home, distant friendships and networks. Equally, being away from university but still 'present' online helped maintain social interactions for those with part-time jobs or living further away. Paradoxically 'local' students often

lived some distance from the university and reported that they felt less included and more like outsiders. Equally some mature students felt less socially connected to their peers and less included in the prevailing 'Facebook' culture, both on campus and also online, in part because of travel times and distances, but also through differences in priorities. .

It can be argued that online social networking activities in HE offer potentially more than just social connectedness or 'social glue' (Madge et al, 2009). Such activities can establish alternative 'figured worlds', and the development of social and cultural capital for mutual academic support. Digital spaces also offered opportunities to seek help and expertise beyond the walls of the university and show how students can use the Internet and social media as mechanisms for enhancing their agency in overcoming some of the challenges they face. However, not all those in the study felt empowered or included in online social networking. The stronger the integration of social and academic lives, the more challenging for those not party to the socialising culture of campus life. Whilst these practices are not necessarily different for students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds, it can be argued that they are more critical and potentially empowering for those whose academic identities may be more fragile or for whom a sense of belonging is more complex (Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2010). The paper concludes that online networks and social networking practices can potentially support the retention and success of more diverse students by helping to integrate social and academic endeavours led by students themselves, and thereby expanding modes of belonging participation and the mobilisation of educational capital.

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