Taking the distance out of distance learning: Using online and new technologies for student engagement (0366)

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The Open University are using live-streaming technology and bespoke interfaces to engage students in a series of online interactive events. Under the umbrella brand 'The Student Hub Live', Freshers' events for new starters and interdisciplinary conferences have been run. In addition to the benefits of early engagement with an academic institution (Alsford and Rose, 2014), the role of informal online interaction has benefits when there are formal requirements to engage in collaborative group work online as part of assessment (Anderson and Garrison, 1998). We are evaluating these events using frameworks that have been developed by the Institute of Educational Technology at the OU based on Murray Saunders's RUFDATA evaluation approach (Saunders, 2000; Jelfs and Kelly, 2007). Now, in the second official evaluation, we discuss the effectiveness of this format as a way to use new technologies to engage students.

New technologies are an integral part of providing distance learning. Using live-streaming platforms with bespoke interfaces and widgets has enabled The Open University (OU) to create an engagement format that takes the distance out of distance learning. "The Student Hub Live" brand runs live-streamed interactive, online events that enhance students learning, facilitate an academic community, and enable peer-to-peer support. These began as Freshers' events, welcoming new starters to the University, and have now developed to include interdisciplinary conferences, faculty events, and scope to change the way we engage with our students at a distance. Evaluative studies conducted by the OU's Institute of Educational Technology enable us to measure the effectiveness of such events in terms of student engagement.

About the OU

The OU is the largest academic institution in the UK, and the vast majority of its students study in a distance-learning environment. Globally, the OU works with 20 curriculum partners in over 23 countries. It is the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities, and has an open admission policy that helps thousands of students achieve their potential. While the majority of students study part-time and work as well, there is an increase in the number of younger students with 30% under 25 years of age. This can lead many students feeling isolated in their learning journey and hence it is important to establish a community for those who want to engage.

Integration into university life

The Student Hub Live aims to encourage, enthuse and integrate students into their studies so that they feel part of a university community that is facilitative and supportive. It is envisaged that this sense of belonging will contribute to successful study completion. There have been various theories supporting the concept that

integration into a social network can facilitate learning, retention and, ultimately, progression.

Tinto's (1975) theory on social and academic integration into university life remains powerful despite some criticism in suggesting that students who feel part of a student community are more likely to remain within the system. Therefore anything that would enable students to feel part of a community of learners should encourage participation and engagement with the University. It could be expected that The Student Hub Live events are a catalyst for this kind of integration and engagement.

Student engagement

Within The Student Hub Live, student engagement can be seen as the interplay between the student and the programme of interactive events. The events occur before the start of the academic year as well as during it, and the timeliness and pace of these events are important. It has been proposed that reaching students at the beginning of their academic year has benefits (Alsford and Rose, 2014), but also that in developing a community there needs to be some sense of consistency and opportunity to interact with others during the calendar year.

One way to encourage that engagement is by reaching students either prior to the start of their academic year or within the first weeks. Some researchers have found that better pre-arrival information with more social activities and contact have increased a sense of 'belonging', as well as the improvement in meeting student expectations when they arrive at traditional "brick" universities (Alsford and Rose, 2014). This is echoed by Ribchester *et. al* (2014) who found pre-induction social networking also attributed to a greater feeling of 'belonging' to the university and gave the opportunity to develop friendship networks.

Furthermore, working as part of a collaborative team can develop skills around employability and many modules require online group work as part of the assessment strategy, so being able to work together in a non-assessed and non-modular environment has benefits in terms of students' confidence to perform these tasks. Anderson's (2003) "Modes of Interaction in Distance education" provides a model that considers both the formal and informal context of online interaction, and the Student Hub Live addresses this informal networked learning opportunity.

Methodology

The methodology for the evaluation of The Student Hub Live events is loosely based on Murray Saunders's RUFDATA evaluation approach (Saunders, 2000; Jelfs and Kelly, 2007). RUFDATA is the acronym used by Saunders to frame an evaluation and outlined here is how it is being used;

● **R**easons and purposes - the quality assurance and development of Student Hub Live. The technical and human presentation quality. These aspects were analysed using qualitative data including questionnaires and accessibility reports.

● **U**ses of the evaluation - to improve academic integration for new and continuing students and reports to OU management on value and further development needs. These aspects involved survey information and feedback questionnaires.

● **F**oci – the views of all stakeholders including students, academic staff, support staff and the Library. This was analysed using qualitative data including backstage questionnaires and interviews.

● **D**ata & Evidence – There 4 forms of data collection: website analytics; interviews, live chat feed and questionnaires.

● **A**udience – the University, participants, senior managers and students. Interviews, quotes from the chat and survey information assessed how the audience responded to this event.

● **T**iming – to evaluate the provision in time to make changes to Student Hub Live for the future. Analytics are being used to explore peaks of traffic and user interaction.

● **A**gency – to provide the stakeholders with feedback using self-evaluation processes. This happens in the form of debriefs with stakeholders considering all of the above evidence.

Overall, the evaluation demonstrates a range of benefits of this new technology. Firstly, students are able to engage in large numbers at a variety of levels, from presenting at the events, submitting videos, and blogs to attending the event either during the synchronous delivery or on the catch up service.

Creating an academic community has been seen as important to these students who engage, and, in addition, it is valued by the academic community who are also establishing new connections in departments that would not usually communicate.

These events will continue to be evaluated, and we are hoping to establish a longitudinal study with some of the participants. We are also considering other methods of capturing data to map onto other interventions that are used to support students so that we can establish the effect that engagement has on their overall learning journey.

References:

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