

# Life integrated learning and assessment: Strategies to connect mature-aged distance students with the course content

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## Abstract

Nearly a third of mature-aged students (over aged 24) in New Zealand study by distance so they can fit study into their full lives. Past research suggests these students enjoy and cope well with distance learning, but also have a high first year attrition rate. More is needed to identify better ways to engage these students to ensure their retention and success. Part of a wider project on student engagement, this paper explores how older distance students connect with the course curriculum. Nineteen first year distance students, aged from 26 to 59, took part in pre and post semester interviews and completed weekly video or email diaries throughout their first semester at a New Zealand university. Findings indicate that life integrated learning and assessments are key tools to engage these students. Students were enthusiastic about course content when they saw connections with their past, present, and future selves. This triggered a positive spiral, motivating them to spend time on study and making it easier to understand and learn content. These connections were not limited to work, suggesting that the current focus on work-integrated-learning is missing important opportunities to engage students. Assessments were a second key trigger for cognitive engagement. While enjoying learning for its own sake, the students were strategic and prioritised assessment tasks. Effective assessments do not just grade the students, they also engage them. The use of digital tools for content delivery and discussion was beneficial at times and problematic at other times. The findings highlight the need to design courses carefully and to enable students to find connections with their interests, experiences, and skills.

## Introduction

Thirty-two percent of bachelor degree students in Aotearoa New Zealand universities are mature aged (over 25) and over a third of those students choose to study by distance (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Older students who stay at university have key strengths and generally do well (Sheard, 2009). They tend to be more motivated and committed than their younger counterparts (Kasworm, 2010). They also tend to use deeper learning strategies and are motivated primarily by the desire to learn rather than assessments and grades (Burton, Taylor, Dowling, & Lawrence, 2009). Distance study suits older students as it offers the flexibility necessary to fit study around family and work, and research suggests they are satisfied with online learning (Ke & Xie, 2009) and handle it better than younger students (Ransdell, 2010).

However, despite these strengths, this population has a high attrition rate with more than a quarter failing to complete or return after their first year (Ministry of Education, 2013). Two common

reasons are financial challenges and role pressure (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001). Other less tangible challenges faced by older students centre on a lack of belonging (Kasworm, 2010) and the difficulties of taking on a student identity (Askham, 2008). In addition, the increasing use of technology for course delivery means that lower computer self-efficacy can be a challenge for older distance students (Garcia & Qin, 2007).

Student engagement, a student's connection to their study, is an important predictor of retention and success at university (Kuh, 2009) and is therefore a useful construct for exploring the experiences of mature-aged distance students. Engagement is a contested term; this study uses Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework as the underlying theory of engagement. Here engagement is seen as a multidimensional construct: Emotional engagement is the student's interest and enthusiasm for course content; behavioural engagement includes time and effort as well as other behaviours such as class participation; and finally cognitive engagement is the student's self-regulation and use of deep learning strategies. The framework recognises that engagement is embedded within the sociocultural context and influenced by a wide range of university and student factors. In distance learning, one important influence is the digital tools used in course design and delivery with mixed findings as to the benefits and risks for different students (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Holley & Oliver, 2010). A recent comparison of student engagement by age and mode of study found older distance students had high levels of satisfaction and learning, but a different pattern of engagement than younger campus-based students (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2013). In particular, for both older students and distance students, work integrated learning and deep learning strategies were identified as strengths.

This literature suggests that a key strategy for engaging this cohort may be through the curriculum – the course content. The current paper aims therefore to explore the experiences of a group of mature-aged distance students in their first semester to discover how they cognitively engaged with the course content, the material they were learning. Understanding how content triggers engagement can lead to a better understanding of how institutions and teaching staff can better connect with, and therefore retain and graduate, these students.

## Study design

Nineteen first year distance students, 15 female and 4 male, were interviewed prior to the start of their first semester at university, completed weekly video or written (two students) diaries throughout the semester, and then were re-interviewed after the final exams. The students were varied in terms of: age, from 25 to 59; ethnicity, 15 European New Zealanders, 6 Māori/Pasifika, 2 Asian; family structure, 12 had partners and 12 had children; study load, 4 full time, 12 half time, and 3 doing a single paper; and paid workload with 9 full time, 3 part time and 7 with no paid work. Their final results were also varied: nine successfully passed all their papers, four withdrew from study, four failed all their papers, and two had mixed results. The initial interviews focussed on expectations and motivations and in their diaries participants talked about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in relation to their study, and commented on things that were influencing their engagement.

The students were enrolled in courses from a wide range of disciplines. The course designs ranged from predominantly print materials to a mix of print and digital resources including a few with synchronous webinars. All courses had asynchronous discussion forums, although the level of usage

by staff and students varied. A few courses included an optional two to four day campus based session.

The interviews and diaries were fully transcribed and returned to the participants for approval. Analysis was a theoretical interpretive approach, identifying themes from surface meanings, viewing language as a simple expression of people's experience, but paying heed to social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A range of themes were identified with the focus of this paper on how students talked about their engagement with the course curriculum, the material they were learning.

## Findings

Two key elements triggered cognitive engagement for these students: life integrated learning and assessments. Students' emotional engagement, interest and enthusiasm, was triggered when they saw connections between course content and their past, present, or future selves. This triggered behavioural engagement: motivating them to do the learning tasks; and cognitive engagement, deep learning which made the material easier to understand and retain. The connections were sometimes work based, for example theory illuminating work experiences; sometimes interest based, a topic they found intrinsically fascinating such as Daniel who loved history; or sometimes life based, such as Melissa applying rehabilitation theories to her family situation. Melissa explained: "I'm getting to integrate what I'm learning with my life first hand... I find it quite fascinating and interesting and certainly helps me with my learning."

Assessment practices also connected students to the curriculum. Students prioritised assessment tasks above course reading. At times this resulted in a shallower connection, rote learning facts and figures, but at other times assessments triggered that life integrated learning by enabling students to apply theory for example. For instance, Bernadette found essay writing invaluable: "The essay actually gave me more insights about financial reporting. If it were plain textbook and lectures it will be really hard to comprehend. Too theoretical. But after doing the research and writing the essay, it improved my understanding of the topic."

The use and perceived value of technology to deliver the course content (videos, discussion forums, online readings etc.) varied dramatically by course and by student. Discussion forums in particular triggered contrasting responses. Other people's questions could be either useful for clarification and or could cause confusion. Many students felt forums were filled with trivial questions and so a frustrating waste of time. One was disappointed there was not more active discussion of course content. The use of other digital tools varied across the courses. Those with access to recorded or synchronous lectures found them valuable for understanding the content. At times however, technology was a barrier; through not knowing how to use the tools, disliking working online, problematic internet access, sharing a computer with family, and fear of posting and being seen as "stupid". These all caused frustration and inhibited cognitive engagement.

## Discussion and conclusion

These findings highlight strategies educators have available to cognitively engage these students. Student engagement occurs in what Kahu and Nelson (2015) term the educational interface, the dynamic space between the students' personal identities and experiences and those of the institution. Both life integrated learning and assessments occur in that interface and are more

effective when there is alignment between the interests, skills, and experiences of the student and the learning, be it a course reading or an assessment.

The benefits of work integrated learning are well established in higher education: enhanced learning for the student and work-ready graduates for employers (Patrick et al., 2008). The current findings highlight that life integrated learning may be a more valid term, recognising that students connect to their study not just through work applications but also through life experiences and personal interests (Kahu, 2014). Life integrated learning is an example of how positive learning occurs in the educational interface. When the student's past, present, or future self aligns with the curriculum, interest is triggered. Interest involves concentration, attention, and alertness (Ainley, 2006). It is a central component of emotional engagement and the findings of this study highlight that it triggers both cognitive and behavioural engagement. This aligns with other evidence that interest predicts persistence (Sansone & Smith, 2000) and intrinsic motivation (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007).

Assessments also occur within the educational interface. If a student has high self-efficacy for the task and they find it interesting or relevant, they will be more engaged and therefore will work harder and learn more. Assessments are a useful way to trigger life integrated learning for distance students. Campus based students have opportunities to make these connections through examples and discussions in lectures and tutorials but distance students are often limited to course readings. While distance students can theoretically share thoughts and experiences in discussion forums, as discussed below this can be problematic. Despite their love of learning, lack of time means mature-aged distance students need to be strategic and so assessments are still given the highest priority. Educators therefore need to design assessments that engage students through encouraging them to connect the learning with their own experiences or plans, reflective blogs or reading journals for instance (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 2007).

The impact of technology on students' cognitive engagement was variable, highlighting the need for course designers to exercise caution. Some students are not comfortable with technology, some do not like to learn that way, and some do not have access to the right tools. Previous experience with computers and online learning predicts success at distance study (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006) and this is potentially particularly challenging for older students (Garcia & Qin, 2007). The design of forums is also important. Older students post more substantive comments and questions in forums (DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010) and staff need to encourage and support this type of discussion to enable deeper learning, while providing a separate space for more trivial procedural questions.

Overall these findings highlight the critical importance of connecting students with the course content. It reminds us of the importance of communicating the relevance of what students are reading or doing and of giving students structured opportunities to apply the learning to situations of their choice.

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