From "Loving It" to "Freaking Out" and Back Again: The Engagement of a Mature-Aged Distance Student in their First Semester at University.

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Abstract

Student engagement is a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their studies. Evidence suggests engagement is vital to both success and satisfaction at university. A conceptual framework of student engagement, developed from research in psychology, sociology, and education, argues that engagement does not occur in isolation; rather it is embedded within a complex network of antecedents and consequences. This paper presents a case study of a 47 year old solo mother's first semester at university. An interpretive analysis uses the framework to illuminate how student engagement changes throughout the semester and how the various university and student factors influence that process. Interviews at each end of the semester plus fortnightly video diaries were used to collect rich detailed data about the student's experiences. The embedded nature of student engagement is apparent, with emotion as a key mechanism by which student and university factors influence engagement. In particular, the student's interest in the topic triggers a high level of engagement resulting in deep integrated learning. At other times, difficulties with university processes and poor support from staff trigger negative emotions that reduce engagement.

Keywords: Student engagement, Mature students, Distance learning

Introduction

Student engagement has been the focus of considerable research, theory, and debate. While researchers agree about its importance and its positive relationship with student outcomes such as achievement and satisfaction (Trowler & Trowler, 2010), there is less agreement about the exact nature of the construct. Three approaches are evident: the psychological approach, which sees engagement as an internal psychological state incorporating behaviour, thoughts, and feelings (for a review see Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004); the behavioural approach, which argues engagement is both student behaviour and effective teaching practice (e.g. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008); and the sociocultural approach, a wider critical view that considers the importance of the socio-political context (e.g. Mann, 2001). A key limitation of these approaches is their failure to clearly define student engagement and to distinguish between engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences. The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, developed through a review of this literature, overcomes these limitations by incorporating the strengths of each, and depicting student engagement as an embedded phenomenon (Kahu, 2013).

Kahu's (2013) framework places the student at the centre and argues that student engagement is their emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to study. These three dimensions interact and overlap. But engagement does not happen in isolation, it is influenced by psychosocial and structural influences from both the university and the student. The framework also illustrates the positive academic and personal consequences of engagement. An important feature is the
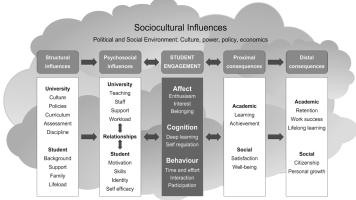

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu, 2013, p. 9).

acknowledgement that engagement is not the outcome of any one of these variables but rather the complex interplay between them, as shown by the bidirectional arrows at the heart of the diagram. A second key feature is the prominence the framework gives to the sociocultural context, highlighting the important role these wider influences play on the university as well as the student.

The framework illustrates the unique nature of the student experience, and therefore the importance of studying sub populations. Mature aged distance students, who combine study with complex lives, are one such growing population. In New Zealand, one third of all bachelor degree students are aged over 24 and one third of those study at a distance (Ministry of Education, 2011). In terms of the influences on student engagement as depicted in the conceptual framework, past studies have found differences in mature students' motivations for study (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009), academic and technology skills (Henderson, Noble, & De George-Walker, 2009; M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000), and life load (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, & Kilkey, 2008; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Zembylas, 2008). These students also have a greater capacity to integrate their learning with their work experience, an important influence on student engagement (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2013). However, the wider university culture, designed to support young school leavers, can lead to a sense of alienation and lack of belonging (Kasworm, 2010; B. Murphy, 2009; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003).

These differences highlight the importance of studying this group separately and taking a holistic approach, as recommended by the framework, to understand their engagement. Engagement in the first year is particularly important because mature students have high first year attrition rates: In New Zealand, 27% of those aged 25-39 and 32% of those aged 40 and over fail to continue after their first year (Ministry of Education, 2011). This paper is a case study of a mature distance student's first semester at university. It uses the conceptual framework to illuminate how student engagement fluctuates throughout the semester and how the various university and student factors influence that process.

The Study

The conceptual framework highlights the open and complex nature of the student experience and therefore the relevance of a critical realist approach. Critical realism argues that we cannot isolate components and study them under controlled conditions, and that rather than expect to make concrete predictions about a phenomenon such as student engagement, we must consider potential consequences (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). Different factors within the framework may increase or decrease the chance of a student being engaged depending on other elements at play.

The case study lends itself as a valuable research design, best suited to the study of complex situations such as this (Simons, 2009). As Ragin (1992) describes it, the extensiveness of research with a large number of cases is traded for the intensiveness of the case study, putting the case, in this instance the student, rather than the variables, centre stage. Thomas (2011) argues that a case study needs two elements: the case to be studied holistically, and the analytic frame "within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates" (p. 513). For this study, therefore, the experiences of a single student are used to illustrate student engagement as theorised by the conceptual framework.

Participant

Charlotte is a 47 year old solo mother of two children aged 9 and 14 who works part time. Her partner had a stroke two years ago and, while they do not live together, she is his primary support and advocate. She is taking one first year extramural paper with a longer term aim of completing a diploma.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to the semester, Charlotte took part in a semi structured interview focussed on her preparation, expectations, and motivation for study. She then recorded 5-15 minute video diaries approximately once a fortnight throughout the semester. In the diaries she talked about her study experiences, how she was thinking, feeling, and behaving, and commented on what she felt influenced those experiences. Video diaries have the potential to access a more honest and personal account than an interview or written diary. In addition, their real time nature captures details of the process that

may well be forgotten or viewed differently by the end of the semester (Willig, 2001). After the end of the semester a follow up interview explored in more depth the experiences and influences she raised in the diaries. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The interviews and diaries were analysed using an interpretive approach that was theoretical, driven by the conceptual framework, and semantic, identifying themes from surface meanings and accepting language as a simple and neutral expression of people's experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This article focuses on the fluctuations of Charlotte's engagement.

Findings

As shown in the framework, motivation is a key driver for engagement and in Charlotte's case much of that motivation was intrinsic, interest stemming from her experiences with her partner's rehabilitation. She also has extrinsic motivation: a qualification to help her gain a full time job to better support her family. The relevance of the course to her life led quickly to a high level of enthusiasm and passion for the learning. This triggered a strong behavioural engagement and deep learning even before the semester started:

> "I'm getting to integrate what I'm learning with my life first hand. Almost like on a daily basis. That I find quite fascinating and interesting. Certainly helps me with my learning because my brain is going "ok I've just read about this". So I'm making the link between what I am studying and what is actually in front of me, I can almost hear it in my brain, ticking away, when I'm faced with things."

This high level of engagement was sustained for the next two weeks as Charlotte developed her study routines, finding that the study absorbed her for hours at a time. The weekend before the semester, Charlotte attended a one day academic preparation course for first year distance students. Unfortunately, this was not a positive experience:

> "I went there feeling very confident about what I was doing and I left there feeling very unconfident. And feeling very, um, dumb actually (laughs). Not feeling very intelligent, feeling, yeah not good...I have an understanding about what I'm studying but, I'm really nervous about the technical side of things, you know like academic writing, command words, it's like my gosh, that's like nothing to do with the concept, that I thought that an essay might be."

This is her first low point. Although she understands the material, she now sees herself as "dumb". This leads to anxiety that impacts negatively on her behaviour:

> "I'm feeling a little, a lot more nervous about what's ahead of me. I've spent this morning, um, freaking out actually."

Despite this setback, Charlotte continued to work hard, completing her first essay. Once again, her interest in the topic leads to a high level of behavioural engagement and her ability to apply the knowledge leads to deep learning:

> "I am so hungry for knowledge, I'm loving, absolutely loving learning and, instead of it being, I don't know how most people are, whether it's a chore or not, I don't know, but I'm just, I look forward to it ... it's like yay I can study today. It's exciting; it's new; it's stimulating. And it's applicable to my life."

As illustrated in the framework, the benefits of study are both academic and personal. For Charlotte, confidence and credibility were important gains:

> "It's given me more confidence. Definitely given me more confidence. Because I feel like it's given me the credibility, I'm getting the credibility that I need which is going to give me the confidence. Already, I'm able to say I'm studying, not I'm going to study, I'm studying rehabilitation and people's response to me, I was thinking in particular of, I've already rung the Stroke Foundation head office and just being able to say that to them with confidence actually gives them confidence in me and we're already starting to establish a relationship."

At times of high engagement, the three dimensions of engagement influence each other and function together in perfect unison: her emotions of enjoyment and interest, the behaviours of spending the time, and the learning that she is experiencing. The self perpetuating nature of engagement, as represented by the bidirectional arrows at the centre of the framework, is also clear. High engagement leads to learning, confidence, and well being. These positive outcomes then increase motivation and self efficacy which triggers yet further engagement:

> "I'm still really enjoying it; in fact that's an understatement, I am absolutely loving my study... I'll be head down and bum up and rather than it being a chore, I just love it. My brain just needs feeding. The more I learn, the more I want to learn. It's like I'm addicted to it almost."

For all this pleasure, Charlotte's engagement dips strongly at times. Only one of those dips relate to Charlotte's home life when she reduces her study during the school holidays: "I feel a bit more pressure, on me, than normal, having to juggle, especially the 9 year old." The other downturns in her engagement all relate to university assessment processes. After being satisfied with her first essay, she was disappointed with her mark and could not access the feedback:

"There was no ticks or anything. It was just like, my essay. And I thought oh that's weird, that's weird. And I didn't pursue it, because I thought, I'm doing something wrong, I'm doing something wrong here or, my old computer isn't going to receive whatever it is … I was, Oh no I don't want to bug anyone. So I actually didn't get, I didn't, I thought that what I received for the feedback was it."

When the same thing happened with her second assignment she followed it up, and after repeated attempts the tutor managed to send her the file in a different format that she could access. Her low self efficacy around university processes is apparent in her tendency to attribute the problem to herself rather than to the university:

"I'm feeling really self conscious at this point that I'm constantly at this man saying, no, haven't got anything. And I'm feeling pretty dumb. I'm feeling pretty dumb. And thinking, what's wrong with me and I can't seem to, what ticks, I can't see the fricking ticks. Maybe it's me, maybe it's me (sigh) you know all this goes through your mind."

Once again, the university processes result in her seeing herself as "dumb". Despite this, she was determined to do better on the second essay and when she was happy with her work she sent it to the university pre-reading service for feedback:

"And it came back and it was just like, no, they said, no, you're off topic. I was just gutted. I'm clearly not understanding something ... I just don't know what to do. I'm doing the best I can, and I'm not on track. And it's quite upsetting because I really want to pass this, aside from the money I'm investing in it, I want to pass. I want to do the best I can."

Her low self efficacy for academic writing is once again reinforced and this leads to frustration and stress. The feedback did not tell her how to fix the problems and so she sought advice from a friend who had completed university study. She received marks of around 70% for both essays and was very disappointed. At the follow up interview, I explained that this was a B grade and she was very surprised. Two factors influenced her response: her own expectations of herself but also her lack of knowledge of university processes:

"Going back to school days, I'm used to being an A B student … it might have helped me if I knew that 70% was a B, that would have psychologically helped me, but 70% I sort of saw as a C anyway. I did see that as a C."

What frustrated her most of all was the feeling that it was the presentation of her work rather than the content that was lacking. She received feedback that related to the double spacing of her assignment and was angry that she should lose marks for this:

"I'm green, I'm new, academic writing is new to me and it shows. So that's where I lose my marks … what I call pedantic things like that and um, if I was marked down for those little things then that, I'm not very happy about that. Because I'm investing a lot of money."

The feedback's focus on writing skills and the difficulties she experienced clearly had a negative impact on her engagement with her study:

"I find I'm getting so consumed by the technicalities that the actual reason for being there to like learn and have an understanding of the subject sort of gets pushed aside because the focus is all on these things like this."

Charlotte felt good after the final exam: "I think it went really well. I haven't got the results back yet but I was pleased with the information that I knew and what was asked. I was really pleased with that." Her final grade for the paper however was C+, a mark she was not happy with: "I feel soooo disappointed because I put so much time, passion and energy into it". She emailed the course coordinator but the response was unhelpful:

"She wrote back and said that a C+ was an above average mark and it was just, it was all good for me to carry on with my studies. So I didn't really get an answer, I was looking for some guidance and some, something with a bit of traction that I could hang on to. I said, look this is a big commitment for me, I'm 47 years old and I'm in this place of what do I do? Do I carry on? Am I good enough for this and all that?"

The grade impacted severely on her self-efficacy and she concluded that it must be her writing skills: "Clearly I'm not packaging the information effectively for the expected standard." While she

did carry on for the next semester, her motivation and therefore her potential engagement had changed:

> "This next paper I'm not going to put as much into it, I'm going to be more relaxed and see if it makes much difference ...(my guess is it probably won't!)... I won't mind getting a C if it reflects my input."

Discussion

Charlotte's engagement is influenced by both student and university factors as illustrated in the conceptual framework. What is evident from Charlotte's experience, however, is that these two worlds can have very different and opposing effects: her own interest and passion lifted her engagement while the university assessment practices dragged it down. The key mechanism through which these influences impacted on Charlotte's engagement was emotion. Researchers increasingly argue that consideration of emotion is vital to our understanding of the student experience (Dirkx, 2006; Linnenbrink, 2006) and this is reflected in the framework where student engagement is conceptualised as incorporating cognition, behaviour, and affect. What Charlotte's experiences suggest is that not only is positive emotion a key driver of high engagement, negative emotion is a key mechanism by which experiences reduce engagement.

Interest is central to Charlotte's high engagement. According to Ainley (2006), interest is the "integration of cognitive, motivational and affective components" (p. 396). The role of interest is to motivate learning and evidence suggests that students who are interested spend more time and effort on their study, and understand and retain more of the course content (Silvia, 2006). Looking at adult students, Bye et al. (2007) found that both interest and intrinsic motivation predicted positive affect. As depicted in Figure 2, this is evident in Charlotte's experiences: The relevance of what she is learning motivates her interest, which leads
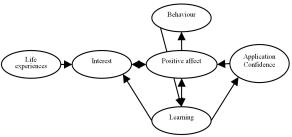

Figure 2. Depicting the impact of interest on engagement.

to enthusiasm and passion for the learning. This emotional engagement triggers both increased behavioural engagement in terms of time and effort as well as cognitive engagement in terms of deep learning. This finding, that positive emotions are central to engagement, is matched by Solomonides and Martin (2008). In their study, students saw engagement as emotional and personal involvement resulting in personally meaningful outcomes while staff perceived engagement as a cognitive process.

Mature students often have high levels of intrinsic motivation such as interest (Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009) and one source of that interest is their increased ability to integrate their learning with work (Kahu et al., 2013). The benefits of Wwork Integrated Learning (WIL) are increasingly recognised: enhanced learning for the student and work-ready graduates for employers (Patrick et al., 2008). What this case study suggests, however, is that WIL may be better conceptualised as life integrated learning to acknowledge that mature students such as Charlotte have a wide range of past experiences, not just work, that may trigger interest in the course content and thus lead to greater engagement with their studies.

The downturns in Charlotte's engagement are, except for the school holidays, all triggered by university practices relating to assessment. The emphasis on academic writing at orientation followed by the problems she experienced with the feedback and her perception of her grades led to increased anxiety and stress and a loss of confidence in herself as a student. While she was learning and loving it, she was not getting the grades she felt she deserved. The anxiety associated with a lack of academic skills is well documented with mature students (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000), but what this research highlights is how powerful those negative emotions can be in terms of their impact on student engagement and ultimately, on learning. Researchers examining the critical role that self efficacy plays in academic functioning conclude that self beliefs can have both beneficial or destructive effects; therefore it is vital that educators build both competence and confidence (Pajares, 2003). The university failed to do that with Charlotte – she repeatedly received the message that she could not do this, that she was not good enough. Academic writing is without doubt an important skill, but it should

not be allowed to override a student's engagement with the course content in this way.

Her final grade and the staff member's unhelpful response were the final straws for Charlotte. Grades have a powerful impact on students and the importance of valuable feedback and transparency around our assessment practices cannot be overestimated. Students should also be told the value of grades, and care must be taken to ensure they understand university processes – even the simple details such as assignment feedback. This case highlights the importance of open and empathic communication with students. Students do find help seeking difficult and they do feel "dumb" when they do not know things. It is vital that when students do take the step of seeking help that staff respond appropriately. Every time. It is easy when dealing with hundreds of distance students to forget that they are all individuals and that our response to their cry for help may make an important difference to their future student life.

Conclusion

Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) distinguish between procedural engagement, going through the motions, and substantive engagement, genuine sustained and deep engagement with content. Charlotte started the semester as the ideal student. When not distracted by the anxiety around assessment, Charlotte displayed all the signs of the preferred substantive engagement. In addition, she gained many desired outcomes from her study: her self-confidence increased, she gained academic knowledge of a subject that she already knew much about at an experiential level, and she used that knowledge to improve the lives of people around her and to trigger new work opportunities. So how is it possible that she ended the semester deciding that perhaps a less intensive procedural engagement might be better?

The framework for student engagement illustrates well the complex network of variables that impact on the engagement of mature aged students such as Charlotte. Such students bring with them powerful motivations, skills, and characteristics that serve to strengthen their engagement with their studies: a passion and interest in their chosen topic, a willingness to put in the time and effort needed to be a good student, and the life experience that allows them to integrate their learning. But learning to be a student is not easy. Others have described the process as

"a real roller coaster of confidence and emotions" (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008, p. 567). The current study suggests that many of the dips in that roller coaster ride may be triggered by university practices and processes and we need to ask ourselves what we can do to reduce those negative impacts so that students such as Charlotte can flourish.

Ella Kahu is a Senior Tutor in the School of Psychology at Massey University, Wellington. She is in the final year of her PhD exploring student engagement in mature aged distance students as they transition into university. This paper is an early case study from that project, a prelude to the more detailed analyses which examine structural and psychosocial influences on student engagement.

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