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'Sense of belonging' enhances the online learning experience

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'Sense of belonging' enhances the online learning experience

Abstract

For the past couple of years Australian universities' enthusiasm for online learning has increased, following the lead of international universities in realising the potential of MOOCs to replace traditional face-to-face learning. While the number of students undertaking studies on campus has remained relatively stable over the past three years, the number undertaking online or a combination of on-campus and online education continues to grow.

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‘Sense of belonging’ enhances the online learning experience

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Many students drop out of online degrees because they don't feel a sense of belonging with the course or university.

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For the past couple of years Australian universities' enthusiasm for online learning has increased, following the lead of international universities in realising the potential of MOOCs to replace traditional face-to-face learning. While the number of students undertaking studies on campus has remained relatively stable over the past three years, the number undertaking online or a combination of on-campus and online education continues to grow.

The increase in online learning has taken place around the same time as a significant shift in the social and economic background of students. The implementation of the Bradley equity review of higher education has led to modest improvements in the number of university students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, regional/remote areas, indigenous students, students from a non-English-speaking background and students with a disability.

Drop-out rates for online learning are high. Why?

Online learning presents an opportunity to provide access to higher education for traditionally underrepresented groups. However, the combination of the new mode of delivery (online) and working with non-traditional students presents challenges for how to make education inclusive.

The attrition rates for online learning and for non-traditional students are both high, creating a risk that the factors that drive attrition among these groups may compound.

The reasons that students are more likely to drop out of online learning are complex. Some researchers have suggested attrition seems to be affected by a mix of personal, institutional and circumstantial variables.

Personal variables include things like previous academic experience, self-efficacy, ability to organise their study and motivation. Institutional variables include the balance between the needs of the learner and the institution, the availability of support and the nature of university processes and systems. Circumstantial variables cover the learner's interactions with the institution as well as the changing circumstances of their lives.

Much of the research literature seems to assume that the challenges of online learning are experienced by all students much the same. We looked at how students from non-traditional higher education backgrounds experienced online learning, and what teachers did to make their courses inclusive.

A 'sense of belonging' in online learning

We investigated strategies to support learning for non-traditional students in online contexts and found that "sense of belonging" was one aspect deemed to be important.

We interviewed 46 university teachers and 21 students from various discipline areas and geographical regions around Australia. Teachers and students were selected on the basis of having had experience with teaching or learning in an online course. Students were representatives of various equity groups including first-in-family to attend university, low SES, regional or remote, Indigenous, with a disability, carer, worker etc.

Participants were asked to discuss their experiences with online learning courses and strategies that supported learning for the diverse range of students in this context.

A key finding of this research suggested that where teachers were able to foster a sense of belonging in their course, students reported greater enjoyment, reduced anxiety and were less inclined to withdraw from the course.

How do you make students feel more included?

Online programs need to offer a balance of learning and socialisation activities where students can interact with each other.

Courses ideally:

Use online ice-breaker activities, such as online introductions at the start of the course, to encourage students to meet and interact in the virtual environment;

Make communication and collaboration between students part of assessment, such as group assignments and peer assessments;

Provide an online "student lounge" or encourage students to use Skype, Facebook or other networking sites to interact beyond the formal course;

Schedule and facilitate real-time learning sessions using virtual classroom technology.

Teacher presence also contributes to a sense of belonging in the online context. Teachers should:

Use introductory videos to introduce the teaching team to students;

Communicate regularly with students through announcements;

Engage in discussion forums with students;

Offer electronic office hours where real-time conversations can be initiated.

A sense of belonging was important to many students, though not all. For some, online learning presents an opportunity to avoid social contact in learning and this choice is to be respected.

The key is to design a learning environment with multiple layers for engagement and participation where learners can choose their level of interaction with others.