That's what friends are for

An experiment in the use of
social media to increase engagement
in first year
@jennaprice #jprice #ascilite11

She doesn't have a facebook page

But in terms of social networks in a university setting, no-one compares to Denise Bradley, author of the Review of Australian Higher Education, which she conducted for the Australian Federal Government.

The Bradley review recommended:

- Students will have a choice of where to study at recognised institutions

- Funding will follow the student

- Institutions will be allocated funds on the basis of performance against specific targets for teaching and equity

So on January 11 this year

- I had an email which let me know that we would have more students this year

- "We have made more offers, so expect an extra tutorial or two."

- In 2010, 128 students started 58110 Introduction to Journalism. This year, we enrolled 262.

Challenges for first years

- As Craig McInnis said nearly ten years ago, students expect university to fit into their lives.

- Undergraduate students now have many more choices about when, where, and what they will study, and how much commitment they need to make to university life.

- They shape their own timetables

But we can't give up on them

- McInnis also says: To meet the challenges of this generation, universities have to understand these motives, values and expectations, but they also need to reassert their responsibility in shaping the experience of students for the benefit of students and society in the longer term.

Who calls them natives?

- Increasingly using information and computer-based technologies— but not necessarily in ways that enhance their engagement with the learning experience or with the learning community.

Negotiated engagement

- McInnis calls for what he calls negotiated engagement.

- Kuh, who appears to be the godparent of the scholarship of student engagement in the US, says students who self-report a lack of engagement in first year are ten per cent less likely to finish their degrees.

How to keep students

- As Stephen Billett said in a teaching and learning keynote at UTS this year, we need to deal with students who are "time jealous"

- So we need to invite students to engage with the process of higher education, to develop their own personal epistemologies, what Billett describes as the basis of what they construe and construct from their own experience

The research on students and facebook

- All I needed to know to prompt me to use facebook was the knowledge that all students use it – nearly 90 per cent of uni students

- Plus this, from Sally Kift. She says when we widen participation we need to recognise that our students will have varied entry level skills and knowledge but most importantly

  - differing cultural capital

The 2011 journalism cohort

- 15 mature-age students; five indigenous students; 20 students who transferred from other unis, the greatest diversity since 2006.
- Needed to build an inclusive peer network through the use of social media and by doing that, reduce attrition

Some busy work

- The UTS Journalism 2011 group was set up on Facebook the night before UAC made offers.

- http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_191932757499080

- Students were advised of its existence through boredofstudies, twitter and direct emails.

What else?

- Student mentors, recruited from older years.
- Interaction on Facebook began immediately
- By the start of the semester, first years had already spent one month on Facebook; and of 262 students taking up their offers, 248 joined. By the end of the first week of the group, all but four students had enrolled in the group #userfail

What students said:

- [Matthew](#) Well in terms of you communicating with us, not to mention us comunicating with each other/helping out/teamwork etc, Facebook has been a godsend.

Student response

- [Hannah](#) I agree. I probably wouldn't have done 1/2 of what I have without the facebook group. It's been my salvation a number of times. I think it's brought us together as a group as well

Student feedback

- [Eleanore](#) On the other hand I've found it can have the effect of creating mass panic - someone will say something possibly wrong and send all the students crazy. What is said on the page is given a bit too much authority when students should be referring to the subject outline/tutors

My favourite bit

- It's all very one for all and all for one.

And more

- [Danielle](#) What I found extremely useful was if something was posted, for example something regarding an assignment or the blogs, we could converse about it with teacher's input. This was useful when teachers would email something but then also post it here and we all had a chance to ask a few things, clarify and share other helpful insights.

Did it work as a community builder?

- The majority of the 1700 posts from January to June were generated by first years with the major coordinator (who is a regular Facebook user) and mentors answering questions where necessary - but there was growing evidence of first years using their own experience to answer as the semester progressed.

The payoff

- By HECS census date, attrition was limited to 3.1 per cent or under in majors which had implemented this innovation, compared to nineteen per cent in the major which did not proceed with this innovation.