That's what friends are for: creating an online community of, and for, first year students to increase retention

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Research has demonstrated that involvement in learning communities is important for student engagement and retention (Bailey and Alfonso 2005). This paper describes the use of Facebook to create an online community for first year students in a Journalism course that had recently increased in size and in terms of student diversity. A Facebook group was set up one month before the beginning of semester. New students were invited to join the group, which was supported by the subject coordinator and student peer mentors. Students participated throughout the semester and showed very high levels of peer interaction and engagement. The paper describes the outcomes for students, including a substantial improvement in student retention.

Keywords: online community, Facebook, engagement, first year experience, student retention

Introduction

If Denise Bradley had a Facebook page, she would have thousands of followers. Not the academics and the students who already have access to Australia's universities – but the others, those who are locked out of the kind of education which gives them access to power, money and longer relationships.

Why would Bradley suddenly be 'friended' by young Australians who don't move in her academic circles? Because the new chair of TEQSA, who wrote the Review of Australian Higher Education for the Federal Government, recommended that students should have a choice of where to study; that funds should follow the students; and that institutions will be allocated funds on the basis of performance against specific targets for teaching and equity. ,

The Federal Government, on Bradley's advice, has demanded a significant increase in university enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds, who currently are one-third as likely to participate in higher education (Universities Australia 2008). In other words, universities are being called upon to expand their horizons when it

comes to recruitment, enrolment and retention.

Retention is already a challenge for universities. ACER (2009) reports that regular first year attrition is around 20 per cent although peer mentoring has been reported as successful in countering this (reference). Vincent Tinto (2006) points out that substantial gains in student retention have been few and argues that in early analyses of student retention, blame was often placed on the student who dropped out: "this is what we now refer to as blaming the victim"..

Recently, attention has moved from this narrow approach to a more wide-ranging one that examines the social and systemic factors that influence student retention. Bailey and Alfonso (2005; cited in Universities Australia, 2008) have researched literature on 'persistence' program effectiveness (programs aimed at raising the retention of underprivileged groups) such as advising, counselling, mentoring and orientation programs; learning communities; developmental education programs for academically under-prepared students; and college-wide reform projects. Their findings show that the most successful programs are those in the style of learning communities where students are in a single cohort.

Central to the model of keeping students at university is "the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year" (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). By other members of the university, Tinto singles out academic staff. Thus it is academic staff who need to develop explicit ways of increasing interaction with students – and between students – in learning communities.

Facebook as a site for building learning community

Facebook is a social networking site used by one in 13 people on the planet (http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/facebook-statistics-stats-facts-2011/). Importantly, for the purposes of building communities, 48 per cent of users aged 18 to 34 check their Facebook profiles on waking; and more than half of those do that before they even get out of bed. What Facebook itself describes as the college [tertiary sector] age group – 18 to 24 – is the fastest growing sector of users. Digitalbuzz, which researches Facebook use, reports that 57 per cent of people say they talk more to people online than they do in real life.

As an academic trying to build a learning community, these statistics were very appealing to me. Further, I discovered that within Facebook there is an apparently very useful toolthat could facilitate discussions between students and academics: the Facebook group. According to Facebook, Facebook groups cater for specific interests:

> Create a private space. Have things you only want to share with a small group of people? Just create a group, add friends, and start sharing. Once you have your group, you can post updates, poll the group, chat with everyone at once, and more. . . .
>
> share different things with different people. Groups let you share things with the people who will care about them most. (Facebook, 2011)

As Sebastian Valenzuela et al (2009), write in their study which used data from a random web survey of college students across Texas around use, attitudes and behaviours on social network sites, by partaking in online social networks, individuals seek to maintain and increase their real life social networks. So an academic working to increase student retention may well consider that participation in an online community may improve student retention rates. Valenzuela argues that:

> By making users feel connected to a community and increasing their knowledge of other members, sites such as Facebook can foster norms of reciprocity and trust and, therefore, create opportunities for collective action. (2009 p. 882)

Valenzuela et al's study sought to show, using survey data collected at two different US campuses, there exists a positive relationships between intensity of Facebook use, intensity of Facebook groups use and students' life satisfaction, social trust, and civic and political participation. Their results show that indeed positive associations do exist (also see Tinto, 2006; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

As Sally Kift (2004) argues, when we engage in widening participation practices we need to recognise that students have varied entry level skills and knowledge but, most importantly, differing cultural capital. Facebook is useful here because, as Valenzuela points out in his 2009 study, students' socioeconomic backgrounds do not have a direct relationship with having a Facebook account.

Craig McInnis (2003) points out that students are 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. The case study outlined here was one intervention aimed at readdressing this imbalance.

Building a virtual community with tangible effects

At the beginning of 2011, the faculty in which I am employed made extra offers to students. The first year cohort for the BA (Communication) went from approximately 550 to 900. The faculty, through its head of undergraduate programs, asked for academics to develop retention strategies.

In 2009 the BA (Communication) degree had an attrition rate of 18 per cent; most who withdrew did so before the HECS census date. While this attrition rate was consistent with ACER findings (2009) it was clear that more could be done. Thus in 2010, a peer mentoring strategy was put in place and attrition dropped to 12 per cent. However, this was still considered too great a number, and other innovations were called for.

Given that nearly 90 per cent of university students are known to use Facebook (Hepburn, 2011) the social software seemed a logical tool to consider deploying to further improve the attrition rate. The intention was to build an online learning community. While this in itself is nothing new, the intention with Facebook had an

added element: to encourage not just scholarly collaboration but also emotional support.

The UTS Journalism 2011 group was set up on Facebook the night before university offers were made. Students were advised of its existence through the niche social networking site boredofstudies (www.boredofstudies.org), as well as through Twitter and through direct emails, where possible. In addition, more senior student mentors were recruited. These students had (minimum) distinction grades in their journalism subjects. They attended the first day of class and were assigned new student groups of six; from then mentoring took place either in small meetings or online. Three final year journalism students were appointed as 'metamentors', to answer queries if the lecturer was unavailable.

Outcomes

While no particular style of interaction was prescribed on the Facebook group it was clear that it was a space in which to discuss university-related issues. Interaction began immediately. Before teaching started the first year students had already spent a month in the Facebook group(of 262 students taking up their offers, 248 joined the group).

Throughout semester there were 1700 original posts and several thousand responses to those posts. The majority of the 1700 posts from January to June were generated by first year students. While the major coordinator (who is a regular Facebook user) answered questions where necessary there was growing evidence that students were using their own experiences to respond to each other as the semester progressed.

Towards the end of the semester, in the absence of a formal feedback mechanism for this project at this stage of the year, I posted a question on the UTS Journalism 2011 asking whether students had found the page useful. About a dozen students posted responses but on Facebook, it is not possible to be anonymous. That did not stop students from posting both negative and positive comments.

When asked about their experience of the Facebook group at the end of the semester, students were mainly very positive:

> Well in terms of you communicating with us, not to mention us communicating with each other/helping out/teamwork etc, Facebook has been a godsend. (Student 1)

> 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 2)

> 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. (Student 4)

This underscored the way in which students were able to operate as a group – and the unifying effects of such a group. However, some students posted their concerns about the Facebook page.

The facebook group was not without its complications. One student pointed out that:

"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. (Student 3)"

I learned from this that it was important to intervene or to prompt other students to intervene. I plan to post a link to the subject outline if UTS guidelines permit this.

One of the most enlightening student observations was "It's all very one for all and all for one" (student five), a comment attesting to the strength of the community that formed and its strong interactive and supportive functions.

Students' appreciation of the work of the Facebook group is important but equally important is that by the HECS census date, attrition from this cohort was dramatically reduced to three per cent. This outcome is even more significant given the much larger and more diverse cohort. Although only a small sample, other majors at the University also implemented this innovation, with similar attrition rates of 3.1 per cent or less.

There was one major which did not choose to use Facebook groups in this way.It experienced an attrition of nine per cent.

Conclusion

More research is called for into how Facebook and other social software tools might serve to encourage engagement and retention for first year students. While attrition is an issue that is impacted by multiple variables, this small case study points to a promising future for the integration of Facebook into other blended learning approaches.

As Craig McInnis (2003) wrote 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. Many students even shape their own timetables – so how can universities integrate themselves into what students perceive as multiple competing priorities? McInnis argues that to meet the challenges posed in educating this generation, universities have to understand that students often have conflicting motives, values and expectations. I suggest that when academics become administrators and moderators of Facebook groups, they gain unique perspectives on the motives, values and expectations of students.. These insights can then by deployed to serve more general learning and teaching goals, an outcome in line with McInnis' arguments that universities need to reassert their responsibility in

shaping the experience of students for the benefits of both students and society.

As Stephen Billett argues, students are increasingly "time jealous". In order for them to engage with the process of higher education, they need to develop their own personal epistemologies construed and constructed from their own experience (Billett UTS Teaching and Learning forum, 2011). I suggest that this construal and construction will embed more thoroughly if academics make the process congruent with the experience of students in their non-student roles, which is why Facebook is so useful.

Facebook may work as a Trojan horse, embedding academic values while appearing to be fun. Don Tapscott, quoted in *The Facebook Effect* (2010), writes: "Social networking has become social production [but] this is not just about friendships." In the case study presented here, it also proved to be useful in creating a learning community among first year university students, and that, in turn, improved student engagement and retention.

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