

Are we comfortable yet? Developing a community of practice with PhD students at the University of Melbourne

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The development and initial implementation of a peer support network and online course for postgraduate (research doctoral) students at The University of Melbourne is aimed at increasing the success of these students in achieving confirmation of their candidature (the first formal PhD milestone) by enabling them to have ready access to skills tutorials, resources and ideas. The provision of an online community of practice environment with opportunities to collaborate, interact and form supportive networks is intended to support them in the transition from conventional learning modes into a community of independent learners, reflective researchers and practitioners. The paper describes the development of an innovative online course for postgraduate students at the University of Melbourne and suggests some possible directions for future development. It report on the initial delivery of the courseware.

Keywords: community of practice, postgraduate education, peer support

Introduction

The University of Melbourne is committed to:

Sustaining a diverse, harmonious scholarly community committed to equity and merit as fundamental principles encouraging and assisting staff and students to realise their full potential. (The University of Melbourne, 2003)

Undertaking doctoral studies is a huge shift in attitude and activity for most students. Lipson summed up some of those shifts

The process of postgraduate study involves looking within yourself to assess your hopes, fears, goals, and your ongoing experience of learning (Lipson in, Elphinstone & Schweitzer, 1998).

Fanger (1985) identified the “normal” but confronting problems likely to be faced by postgraduate doctoral candidates:

Because the writer of a dissertation is almost always engaged in that activity for the first time, he or she is likely to believe that the awful problems which surface along the way are unique and unprecedented, and they must be signs of something gone alarmingly wrong...Most problems even (or especially those that seem exclusively psychological) are perfectly normal, common, standard. I have in mind depression, panic, tedium, and the sense of being locked into what Hegel called “a bad infinity”. (Fanger, 1985)

These issues matched the thoughts expressed in the first pilot of Postgraduate Essentials in the asynchronous and synchronous discussions and added weight to the argument that the online course should be more than a ‘correspondence’ course, and offer opportunities for participants to develop networks and communication skills with their peers.

Factors prompting the development of innovative support structures for University of Melbourne doctoral students include the increase in research PhD enrolments, funding incentives and penalties relating to

completion time, and increased diversity in the general postgraduate student population in terms of age, sex, and geographic origin (Larcombe, 2004).

To assist postgraduate, doctoral students in reaching their full potential and becoming leaders in the scholarly community we created a product that was multifaceted - an online course, a community of practice, a networking activity, and also a multimedia tutorial, called Postgraduate Essentials.

Overview

Postgraduate Essentials is an online course aimed at equipping research students with the research skills and management tools considered essential for the first 6 months of candidature and beyond. The interactive course addresses the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds, and offers the facility for student peer support and interaction with University advisers. The online coursework environment enables the development of a community of practice for beginning researchers (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

A cross organisational project team from the School of Graduate Studies, Language and Learning Skills Unit and the Information Division developed Postgraduate Essentials. The course focuses on the generic skills as identified in the University of Melbourne's graduate attributes (SGS, 2004).

Graham Gibbs (1998), referring to the British research quality system, mentioned several aspects were important to achieve high standards cost effectively. We chose to place our emphasis on training researchers and an emphasis on 'going public' sharing knowledge, building on past knowledge, and providing platforms for both debate and peer esteem.

The course provides an integrated transition program for new PhD students from the beginning of candidature to Confirmation. In addition to these skills and short term objectives the online coursework environment promotes communication, collaboration and establishes relationships and patterns for peer networking and support that we believe are essential for knowledge workers in the 21st century where rapidly evolving and transformative technology is generating new opportunities, new resources and new challenges (Gurstein, 2001).

We hope that we would be empowering these doctoral students to better equip them in developing learning and research independence, and eventually into more effective and reflective research practitioners (Schon, 1987).

Unconventional courseware design and development

The original application for funding to develop this program came from a group of committed support staff who had rarely worked online before. The large group of project stakeholders comprised members from across several departments: School of Graduate Studies, Language and Learning Skills Unit and the Courseware Development Group in the Teaching Learning and Research Support unit of the Information Division. They were challenging not only their own comfort zones but also the comfort zones of the University - and achieved funding for a project that involved non-academics, a not for credit course, online in a strongly on campus oriented institution.

This was not a conventional candidate for funding through the Courseware Design and Development Program (Hirst, Brooks, & Riddle, 2004). Unlike the usual innovative multimedia product that supports learning in a recognised subject or programme this online development was not for credit, targeted postgraduates, and was not lead by academics in a specific discipline. Further, it fundamentally changed the relationship of the students with each other and with the institution through the development of a peer support network and community of practice.

The course consisted of six modules about topics pertinent to beginning PhD candidates. Various 'experts' or 'advisers' were invited to participate in designated weeks relating to their expertise such as specialist literature searching techniques and academic writing.

The development consisted of a “course” running over 12 weeks with various multimedia and online resources and a peer support network assisted by 10 small group facilitators communicating online using synchronous and asynchronous tools. The whole course content could be accessed and completed at any time. We anticipated students would commit 4 hours a fortnight to using the courseware. Student uptake varied from minimal (1 or 2 log ins) to high usage (> 50 logins) with multiple posts, profile editing, note taking, quiz completion and chat sessions.

Outline of coursework

Starting your PhD	covers issues such as settling into the new department, finding out who, where, and what; calendars and checklists
Getting Organised – tools and strategies	includes time, information and selfmanagement tools and strategies
Working with your Supervisor	introduces developing a working relationship with the supervisor, different styles of working, roles and responsibilities, negotiating expectations
Searching the Literature	demonstrates high level searching strategies, using specialist libraries and databases
Writing a Literature Review	includes copyright and plagiarism, procrastination, and an interactive EndNote tutorial
Preparing for Confirmation	preparation for the written report and oral defence of the research proposal

Communication tools

We used a variety of online communication tools in the in-house developed course management system NEO.

- Asynchronous discussion boards: for the whole group and private discussion boards for each small group.
- Synchronous chat: which indicated who was online at any time, and recorded the transcript of each chat session.
- Profile: each student completed a ‘profile’ and could upload a photo or develop an avatar, add contact details and a short biographical note. This profile also recorded their participation - number of logins, recent views and so on and could be viewed by others in the course.

Discussion prompts inviting participants to reflect on their learning and experience were built into the courseware. The small group facilitators and participants initiated small and large group discussions and chat session to encourage informal social interaction and to explore issues raised by the coursework.

The forms of online communication were a surprisingly big discomfort factor for many of the participants as it was the first time that they had used discussion boards or chat. The small group facilitators displayed natural aptitude in some cases and overcame enormous personal blocks in others. A training program for facilitating online groups based on the work of Salmon, Bonk, Collison and others was implemented. (Salmon, 2002)(Salmon, 2000) (Palloff & Pratt, 1999)(Bonk, 2002)(Collison, 2000). Mentoring by an experienced online facilitator (Claire Brooks) was provided to the course administrator and the small group facilitators.

Before the course was finished there were more than 300 posts with over 6,000 reads of those posts. Chat transcripts were recorded for dozens of chat sessions in the small and large groups.

Trial delivery

The initial delivery in Autumn 2004 was aimed at isolated postgraduate research University of Melbourne students working at small metropolitan, regional and rural campuses, research centres and hospitals external to the main Parkville campus.

This first delivery was not to the anticipated 15-20 people but to half of the more than 160 people who applied to undertake the course! Clearly there was a huge demand for the course. This large numbers necessitated a rapid reconfiguration of the student support mechanisms and processes. A training program for additional small group facilitators to enable better social and informal communication was implemented and a mentoring process for the course administrator was set in place.

Initially the course developed as a distance education course to support off campus students however, we were uncomfortable with remaining exclusively confined to the distance mode. It was not enough to provide the information about dates, timelines, and campus based resources for students to achieve a successful Confirmation. The course needed to be something that acknowledged the achievement of a PhD as more than just academic/scholarly aspects. We regarded the PhD process as a confronting personal development program that situates learning as a social and collaborative activity, strengthening the researcher as learner and reflective practitioner through networking and peer support.

We acknowledged how easily students can experience a sense of disorientation caused by a rapid shift from an ordered and familiar environment to one of considerable freedom (Ramsden, 1992). The provision of three months online coursework gave participants a framework for commencing the traditionally unstructured PhD process. Tools and strategies for managing themselves, and the information and data they were using, were provided in a timely manner. These tools remained available online for review and ongoing use. We provided role models and examples for peer support in the form of the small group facilitators, and opportunities for online and face to face interaction with guest advisors. This interpersonal interactivity was the basis of the community of practice.

Course or community

The trial implementation of the project combined the twin goals of being an online course and initiating an embryonic community of practice.

The materials created are of very high quality. They include:

- personal real life accounts, on video, by existing or recent PhD students, supervisors and support staff
- Short self assessment quizzes and polls that illustrate aspects of the participants demographics
- interactive tutorials for example EndNote tutorial with demonstrations and voice over
- didactic text
- an animated version of the “PhD Calendar”
- a game of *PhroggerD* where student overcome barriers such as lack of time, heartbreak, money worries to achieve PhrogD status.

Some of these materials can be regarded as stand alone learning objects and re-used in a variety of settings. These aspects comprise the “course” aspect and could be made available as an independent learning program online or on CD ROM.

As Gurstein (Gurstein, 2001) notes some community based “learning” that takes place externally to the formal institutions is frequently “invisible” to outsiders or those more accustomed to understanding learning as only that which is undertaken in formal structures. Postgraduate essentials combines both invisible community based learning, and more formally structured skills teaching

Although the trial implementation of the project fused the dual goals of course and community, there are some emerging dichotomies between the coursework nature of the current course design and the development of a learning community. Gurstein identified one factor being the degree to which the control over the content and the institutional delivery context of the learning resides within the “community” which the learning is meant to directly support (Gurstein, 2001).

The move from a “course” to a community of practice necessitates change in the relationship of the students to the institution. It is unclear exactly how much of this change will take place over the lifetime of the course. For example although one group of participants rapidly wanted to promote peer networking with a view to developing improved English language skills, they were also initially reluctant to move away from the imprimatur of the institution. They also sought more personal support from the institution than was originally anticipated or planned. An example of the lobbying for their specific needs is this post:

I have chat with S, from china and part from our group. We got the same conclusion for our problems (English Pronunciation) we have suggestion and we hope we will get input from everyone. As post graduate community have different cultural, background and language,

we need to be more integrated with other Australian students and community. We suggestion to establish English group meet 2-3 times per week, every time discuss new subject, general with attends from our Australian friends, UMPA and SGS and anyone would like to help, talk for one hour without shame to say wrong and get feedback from our self about what i have to say, how i pronounce this words, what is the best expression in that occasion. This idea and I would like to see yours ideas to improve my idea and make it real we can meet during our lunchtime, just we need to start and i am sure it will help all of us and increase our friends number. WE NEED YOUR INPUT AND RESPONSE AND HELP!!!!

In response to this, there were a number of online chats (text based, face to face meetings, and some discussion about existing support options for international ESL students).

There were many positive comments from participants about their hopes and desires for the course posted to the discussion board. One participant responded to the invitation to join the small group conversation with

...am in total agreeance with you A. I think this is a great idea and an excellent opportunity to extend our resources. We are all in the same boat, so we may as well share oars! Great to see you have already found someone who you can help out, hopefully someone can return the favour to you.

Another commented

...Muddling through
I hope we can be supportive of each other. I'm into month 13 and about to start working with a bunch of psychiatric nurses...

Others nominated the online coursework as the main asset:

All of the modules were of great benefit to me as I am not especially computer literate and have never written a PhD thesis before. Moreover, I found that the PGE course was particularly useful to provide a systematic framework with which to approach the writing of the thesis. The Literature Module provided a fantastic means by which to prospectively and interactively track the vast number of resources gathered over the research phase of my PhD. I am yet to complete the Confirmation Module, but I hope that it will also provide a framework with which to approach this important part of the PhD process.

Some revealed considerable emotional intensity in their responses

That feeling of anxiety has been with me for the last three months (since I enrolled). I came from work as an RA which was always demanding, but I just seem to permanently worry now

While others were more sanguine

My name is C. I've just started my PhD after working in industry for 7 years. It is a big change for me to be back studying but so far so good.

And

From your mugshot it looks like you have attended the Tuesday night History seminars so perhaps we could chat more then.

Or

Listening to comments of other colleagues as well as of Supervisors was very useful.

Developing participation in the community of practice

The notion of legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991) in a community of practice - the practice of being a postgraduate student - was strengthened by the input of small group facilitators who were mainly or had recently finished their own PhD studies. The small group facilitators were able to draw n their own recent or continuing experiences to illustrate some of the problems and issues that participants would face throughout their candidature. This 'storytelling'

and anecdotal reminiscence was a potentially powerful way of modelling problem solving skills. It also normalised the anxieties and fears participants might be feeling.

The large group of participants was randomly broken into smaller groups of 10. The small group facilitators were chosen from staff in the School of Graduate Studies. They had varied backgrounds in online communication and postgraduate research. During the trial delivery the facilitators' commitment to Postgraduate Essentials was anticipated to take no more than 3 hours per week and was undertaken as part of their usual job role in supporting postgraduate education.

Their task was to support the small group interactions through undertaking various online facilitation roles such as those documented by Salmon (Salmon, 2000). The major function in this environment was to assist in the cognitive process by promoting conversations about the topics covered by the course, and to assist in building networks and social interactions amongst the group. In turn, the facilitators were supported by the course administrator, Dr Jeanette Fyffe, via regular email newsletters and in face to face workshops.

Prompts from other students and supervisors addressing specific aspects of the PhD experience on video provided real life examples. As there was a mix of experience amongst the small group facilitators and community administrator, the participants could begin to place themselves somewhere in a continuum closer or further from the core of the community.

Future directions

A new 'comfort zone' is being developed: one that melds online and offline support for postgraduate students, one that enables and empowers postgraduates to find their own networks, and hopefully a supportive environment that allows them to explore issues of identity as they arise. The course is now tried and partly tested. The course materials and the initial group can continue to access the resources and communicate until decisions are made about the development of an ongoing, sustainable model or alternative ways of providing ongoing support to, and for postgraduate students.

We have already unpacked some of the learning objects for reuse in face to face, online and other teaching and learning situations. The online communication environment and resources remain accessible.

In the next iteration of the program we hope to more clearly develop the community of practice, to support the development of the network and commonality of being part of a group of postgraduates at The University of Melbourne. Different strategies for support peer support will be encouraged such as forming discipline specific small group cohorts rather than randomly allocated small groups. Postgraduate Essentials alumni will continue to access the coursework and succeeding cohorts will be encouraged to join a larger online community. Support structures, training and mentoring for the community facilitator role may be further developed. A research objective will be to investigate sustainable practices for developing peer networks and communities of practice. We will continue to support the twin objectives of course and community for postgraduate students at The University of Melbourne.

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