

Belong and engaged: first year students' experiences of discipline-focused retention and success interventions

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Abstract

This paper engages with issues related to building student engagement and belonging in higher education. It provides insights into first year students' experiences of starting their degrees and interventions in 3 disciplines at the University of Brighton. It is based on findings from an ongoing qualitative study, which is part of the HEA-led 'What Works?' Student Retention and Success Programme.

Introduction

Student belonging, engagement, retention and success are at the heart of higher education (HE) policy discourse at a time of profound sector-wide change (Trowler, 2010, Thomas 2012). The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, in collaboration with UK Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Action for Access, recently initiated a national programme, What Works?, aimed at fostering student retention and success in HE. This academic year, as one of 13 participating universities, the University of Brighton (UOB) developed retention and success initiatives involving first year students from three disciplines. Retention interventions included: active learning learning linked to personal development plans and human resource management through the use of technology to capture milestones for Business Management; an extended induction that incorporated a pre-entry course, mentoring and blended learning for Applied Social Science and; a pre-arrival and extended induction for Digital Media disciplines.

This paper reports on qualitative research findings from focus group discussions conducted in Autumn 2013 and Spring 2014 at the UOB. These formed part of an institutional evaluation of the interventions encompassing a survey led by Mantz Yorke, in which several universities are participating, and the UOB led qualitative study. The concepts framing this research, drawn from literature are briefly highlighted. Then the paper goes on to: describe the methods applied; present the key findings; discuss the overarching themes and implications; followed by a brief conclusion.

Retention, Success, Belonging and Engagement

Retention, the extent to which learners remain in HE to complete a programme within a set period (Jones, 2008), has been closely associated with student success. While the term success has varied connotations, the current UK emphasis on student success has been retention. Thomas (2012) suggested that a strong sense of belonging was an important factor in students' completion of their courses; and that student belonging is associated with academic and social engagement encompassing: students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers), and feeling part of classroom life and activity.

Belonging as engagement emphasises collectivism, collaboration and social participation as key motivational, cognitive and behavioural components to students' successful learning and student experience. Thomas (2012) argues that students' positive human experiences are crucial for academic success – finding friends, feeling confident and feeling part of a course and institution. Gun and Fisk (2013, p 23) cite 'affective characteristics, evidenced by forms of psycho-social interaction in the teaching spaces with students' as a key facet of dynamically engaged teaching practice.

Although some curricula design assume learning is an individual process, Wenger (2009) argues that learning has to be placed in the context of lived experience of participation in the social world. Tinto (2003) concludes that students tend to learn better together and describes some collaborative pedagogies and curricular structures of learning communities. Hence, universities might consider how: curricula could be reorganised to provide for sustained engagement between teachers and students; teaching can be organised to create student learning communities; and how to convey the message to students that they belong (Thomas, 2012).

Wenger's social theory of learning (2009) provided a relevant conceptual framework to situate our research as it advances a multi-dimensional view of learning. Wenger (2009) argues that learning is based on social participation, involving students actively participating in social community learning activities, constructing identities within these communities and meaning-making within this context. This theory integrates various interconnected components (see Figure 1) to characterise social participation as a process of learning and knowing.

Figure 1: Components of Wenger's Social Theory of Learning



Source: Wenger (2009, p 212)

The learning communities concept is also central to Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning, and its' underlying collaborative pedagogy is based on principles of shared knowledge, knowing and responsibility (Tinto, 2003). Wenger (2009) argues that HE membership of communities of practice involves learning practices that are personally transformative, where students must engage and contribute. Tinto (2003) found that students in learning communities tended to: form self-supporting groups beyond the classroom; spent more time together out of class in more supportive ways than students in traditional stand-alone classes and; were more actively involved in classroom learning even after class. This enabled students to bridge the divide between academic classes and social conduct that characterises student life, where they tended to learn and make friends. Participation in learning communities thus enhanced students' quality of learning. They perceived themselves as more engaged academically and socially; and persisted at a substantially higher rate than students in a traditional curriculum.

Closely associated to the concept of Learning Communities, our conceptual framework is also informed by the concept that a sense of belonging is central to student success (Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2013). Thomas (2012) suggests that student belonging is achieved through peer learning and support, including: positive working relationships with students and staff that help to build students' identities as successful HE learners; and HE experiences that relate to students' lives and future aspirations. Yorke (2013) proposes three interlocking spheres (academic, social and professional services) to instigate a sense of belonging, which maximise the potential of student retention and success and his model for evaluating belonging focuses on four conceptual themes (motivation, a sense of belonging, confidence and engagement).

Wenger's model examines the complexity and interaction of these diverse factors related to students' learning and engagement. It also aligns with Yorke's conceptual themes in that it describes and conceptualises the community, practices, meaning and identity dimensions that are imperative for fostering motivation, nurturing a sense of belonging, building confidence and engaging students. Combined, the two conceptualisations offer a powerful framework for both designing targeted pre-entry, induction and upon entry programme activities; and evaluating them qualitatively.

Method

As part of the wider HEA-led What Works project, the UOB qualitative study aimed to investigate students' perspectives and experiences of starting their degrees including new retention initiatives introduced in three disciplines at the UOB (Business Management, Applied Social Science and Digital Media). For Business Management and Applied Social Science, 1½ hour long focus groups, were conducted in two stages in Autumn 2013 and Spring 2014. There was a single focus group for Digital Media in 2014. This paper presents the findings of the first focus groups with 9 Business Management students, 7 Applied Social Science students, and 8 Digital Media students.

An Appreciate Inquiry (AI) approach was applied to the focus group discussion design to elicit both positive and negative experiences as well as propositions for improvements. AI typically involves stakeholders, including students, in the development of their institution through group discussion. In the context of this study, the moderators posed semi-structured questions to group participants, which focused on beneficial aspects of retention interventions that they experienced. Participants were able to build on their positive perceptions and experiences of interventions, as a means to explore possibilities in terms of the future development (Fitzgerald, Murrell and Newman, 2002). AI enabled opportunities for participants to talk about problems. As Bushe advises (2007) when negative views did emerge during focus groups they were explored with the objective of eliciting suggestions for positive change and solutions to problems. Appreciative Inquiry research participants, such as UOB students, feel valued and empowered when they are sharing ownership of organisational development (Boyd and Bright, 2007). Hence, AI was considered an appropriate research approach with which to engage students in the context of this project. General themes for the AI focus group discussions were drawn from recent literature including the Student Retention and Success report (Thomas, 2012) and Mantz Yorke's What Works survey questionnaire including: motivation, belonging, confidence and engagement (Yorke, 2013).

Data was initially categorised within the AI phases of discovery (positive aspects) dream (envisioning future developments) and design (consolidation). It was then analysed thematically highlighting aspects of students' experiences that were beneficial, including elements of interventions that were working effectively, and aspects of interventions that may be enhanced. Cross-sectional content analysis was adopted to establish recurring themes within and across focus groups. In presenting the data we refer to the conceptual work of Wenger (2009), Yorke (2013), Tinto (2003) and Thomas (2012). The following findings are presented as three discipline-specific case studies, followed by a discussion of overarching cross-disciplinary findings and implications.

Findings

Case study 1: Business Management

Background

At the UOB, current first year Business Management students are enrolled on a 'Developing Academic and Employability Skills' module, which aims to support and enhance students' key skills necessary for success in their degrees and future employment. In this context, as

part of the What Works programme at the UOB, an intervention was introduced in 2013 including a blended learning Mahara web resource, 'My Uni Course', which aimed to foster students' sense of belonging and motivation. As a part of this intervention students were required to write reflectively on their experiences and learning linked to 10 separate milestones; and to create a webpage that included milestones that they have achieved.

Benefits...

Linking back to the intervention's aims, some focus-group participants highlighted the following benefits of using My Uni Course milestones, including:

- Opportunities for self-reflection
- Building blocks for learning
- A record of learning development
- A means to receive feedback from staff
- A safety net for students

Issues...

However, most participants discussed the following demotivating aspects of the web resource. The first milestone relating to early settling in experiences at university was described as insufficiently challenging and unrelated to academic work. Explanation was lacking regarding My Uni Course's purpose. Compared to Facebook and Basecamp, participants found this website complicated. Participants also felt overwhelmed on top of other responsibilities, assignments and engagements.

Development opportunities...

Despite these issues, most participants acknowledged that My Uni Course was potentially a useful way of setting goals and looking back on stages of achievement. Participants generally felt that articulating *milestones*, and keeping a record of achievements, would help them to feel in control and clarify the steps taken on their academic journey. Within this context participants described varied beneficial types of targets and related information:

- Deadlines and how to meet them
- How to achieve good grades
- A time management timetable
- How to attain a work placement related to their chosen career

The motivational value of using My Uni Course as a peer discussion forum, and a means to broaden perspectives, was also often mentioned. In this context, some participants wanted a more open forum for debate across Business disciplines, providing a competitive element. Developing debating skills online was also felt to support academic writing development, where shared writing is engaging.

In order to better motivate students participants agreed that My Uni Course should incorporate:

- A first milestone related to academic work or the first six weeks transition at university including academic experiences
- Publicity for social events

- Links to the external business world e.g. industry experts
- Improved accessibility
- Incentives for each milestone reached
- A clearer explanation of its purpose

Case Study 2 Applied Social Science

Background

In Applied Social Science at the UOB at Hastings, a course intervention was introduced in the form of an extended induction that continued throughout the academic year. This comprised three main elements including pre-university entry activities, student mentors and a course linked website, Kura, that aimed to encourage communication between academic staff, students and mentors and provide course related resources and materials in order to engage students and foster a sense of belonging.

Benefits...

Kura

Most participants described positive experiences of Kura, which they found relevant and engaging. Beneficial aspects included course-related audio-visual resources, reading materials and interactive quizzes. Participants also found that Kura was a useful online platform to communicate with peers, contribute online and access resources when unable to attend lectures.

Pre-entry activities

Key motivational and confidence boosting benefits of the pre-entry and transition events described included:

- A sample lecture during Transition Day
- The first week induction, which helped prepare students for the course
- Email support and meeting opportunities with approachable mentors

Engaging teaching

Varied aspects of engaging practice in teaching, assessment and feedback were often mentioned. Examples of good practice included lecturers' approachability, helpfulness and encouragement; learning and teaching that was relevant to real life; and detailed constructive feedback on written assignments that helped students to progress in academic writing. This helped to increase participants' confidence and for some students was the reason why they continued on their course.

Issues...

Regarding the intervention, issues that most participants frequently described related to transition and pre-entry events, which some participants were not aware of or did not engage in. Other than a sample lecture, most aspects of Transition Day were considered non-relevant to most participants. The most challenging issues for many participants related to their overall early student experiences concerning: finances, accessible resources and academic writing. Financially, participants were unhappy about the impact of printing costs on top of increased student fees. Participants also felt that a post-code related student bursary was unfair. There was a lack of consistency described in resources provision, since pre-printed lecture hand-outs and reading materials were only provided for some modules. Most participants found the first

essay assignment challenging, and felt they had not received sufficient early writing support sessions to help prepare them for this assignment.

Development opportunities....

Finances

Participants suggested that pre-printed hand-outs and reading materials could be provided for all modules, which might affect some students' decisions to stay on the course. Participants also felt that the student bursary scheme allocated according to postcode needed adjusting in order to make it fairer.

Resources

In addition to staff providing pre-printed lecture hand outs and reading materials, participants wanted more library books on reading lists to be available.

Academic writing support

There was general agreement that an academic writing session on how to write and structure an essay early in the first semester would be helpful in increasing students' confidence about writing their first essay.

Case Study 3 – Digital Media

Background

The Digital Media and Digital Media Development intervention aimed to support students' success and retention through an extended induction from pre-entry to the middle of the first semester. The purpose was to enhance students' perceptions of belonging on their course and to a peer community of practice. The intervention was designed to be relevant to the Digital Media curriculum. Activities included: a pre-entry 'challenge' circulated via email and through a course area of the UOB's Blackboard virtual learning environment, Studentcentral; course preparation during Welcome Week; and a group assignment to design a mobile app.

Benefits....

Extended induction

All participants took part in the extended induction activities. Participants suggested that the extended induction helped to strengthen their peer community, communication and relationships with staff and provide work related course activities.

Pre-entry activities

Some focus group participants found that the pre-entry on-line challenge, 'Count Down to Uni Challenge' useful. This involved each student on the course creating an online superhero identity accompanied by text about them-selves. Participants who engaged in and completed this challenge found it an effective means to connect with lecturers and students on the course. Hence for some students, this helped to achieve the intervention's aim of enhancing the students' sense of starting to belong to a course community of practice.

Group assignment - designing an app

Most participants agreed that designing a mobile app as a group assignment was an effective way to engage as a member of a course community of practice, encouraging students to learn

to work as a team, share ideas and overcome the challenges of teamwork, thus gaining a sense of achievement and greater confidence.

Practical nature of the course

In addition to beneficial aspects of the intervention, participants were enthusiastic about the course itself whose practical, technical and creative aspects were found to be engaging rather than an overly theoretical focus. Participants agreed that the broad technical nature of the course provided a sound basis for future employment.

Work experience and networking opportunities

Students were excited by visiting a local employment agency, which gave them opportunities to find out more about future potential employers and their possible future careers.

Designing a website

Designing a website from scratch provided most participants with greater confidence and a strong sense of achievement. There was general agreement that achieving this important step would enhance students' chances of future employment within their industry.

Developing an on-line community of practice

Over time most students had developed an online community of practice, partly through Facebook and partly through the online aspects of the course. Online communication with peers and lecturers was described as fast and convenient. Through Facebook participants were able to share ideas and resources, which provided mutual support for learning.

Issues...

In terms of the intervention, some students did not engage in the pre-entry activity and did not find it useful. In addition, participants described other aspects of their first year experience in Digital Media courses that were challenging. One facet that participants found most difficult was group work. A few participants complained that some group members did not contribute equally to the group assignment, which put more pressure on hardworking students and endangered their chances of achieving a higher grade. Group grading was described as unfair in this context. Other challenges that participants often mentioned included finding an appropriate work-life balance and time management. Practical difficulties that students often described related to travel and inconvenient timing of lectures, seminars or meetings.

Development opportunities...

In relation to induction activities participants agreed that icebreaking and group activities, such as designing an app, would be better placed in the first semester rather than the second as this helps to foster a sense of community of practice and bonding amongst students. Since participants benefited from visiting an employment agency in Brighton, they suggested that more similar trips, and work placements in the local media industry would help to motivate them. One participant had set up a Facebook group involving other participants to share tips and information and organise meetings, and there was agreement that such a Facebook group for all students on the course would be beneficial. Participants also suggested that students on the digital media course could help design Studentcentral to enhance its' accessibility and engagement.

Discussion

Linking back to the Communities of Practice conceptual framework and additional literature supporting this qualitative evaluation as a part of ‘What Works’ (Tinto, 2003; Wenger, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2013), key overarching themes that recurred across focus groups are categorised here as: belonging to the university and course, engagement, confidence and challenges.

a. Belonging to the University – feeling welcome and developing a student identity

Across focus groups participants described varied ways in which they felt that they belonged to the University. Supported by Thomas’ earlier work (2012), factors that students described which enhanced their feelings of belonging and student identity in this study related mainly to people, friendship and communication including:

- the welcoming University environment (e.g. taking part in University extra-curricular activities)
- making new friends, being among people of a similar age and maturity and being in the same boat as other students
- having parents who value education and sharing their values
- receiving regular emails and practical help from University support and academic staff
- support from mentors, personal tutors or international tutors

Facilitated by such provision, activities, values and interactions, developing a sense of belonging was identified by our research as an important step in cultivating HE learner identities. It served as a basis from which participants developed ‘their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories’ (Wenger, 2009:213) linked to the university. Hence, participants cemented their identities as learners and members of a community of practice through social participation. This is reiterated by Thomas (2012) who argues that finding friends and feeling part of an institution and course are argued to be a necessary starting point for academic success.

b. Belonging to the course: communities of practice

Supported by Wenger (2009) and Tinto (2003), belonging to a course peer learning community, both face to face and online, was a strong overarching theme that emerged across focus groups in this research. Participants described different aspects of belonging to a community of practice they found beneficial:

- working as a team, collaborating, shared goals and mutual respect
- contributing individual strengths, sharing ideas, discussion and debate
- online communication through Facebook, Kura, Basecamp and My Uni Course
- employability through learning to work as a team

For research participants, learning thus involved engaging with and contributing to learning communities. As Wenger (2009) suggests, communities of practice create practices of what needs to be done; and in HE, learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be learning that involves membership of communities of practice. In this context, principles of shared knowledge, knowing and responsibility (Tinto, 2003) are important facets of belonging and engagement.

c. Engagement

In their recommendations for student retention and success, Yorke and Longden (2008) emphasised institutional commitments to learning and engagement and treating curriculum issues as an academic and social milieu. Enjoyable and exciting aspects of starting degrees that engaged students were often described by participants in this study as:

- the intellectual challenge of working at a higher level and developing critical thinking skills
- being thrown in at the deep end, independent learning and freedom to work creatively
- love of their subject
- being in a new place and meeting new people
- working collaboratively and in groups, both face to face and online
- inspirational teaching, lecturers' enthusiasm, warmth and encouragement
- connecting online resources and activities (Kura, Basecamp and My Uni Course) to learning

Students' involvement in educationally purposive activities has been associated with student success (Trowler, 2010), and it is notable from the focus group discussions that developing learner identities and belonging to communities of practices are recurring themes, and also key aspects of university life that engage students with their learning.

d. Confidence

As Yorke (2013) and Thomas (2012) establish, confidence is a central block for student engagement and retention. Confidence building aspects of students' early experiences of starting their degrees that were often mentioned across focus groups in our research included:

- achieving academic success and building on previous learning
- positive constructive feedback from academic staff
- approachability of academic and support staff, and mentors
- leadership opportunities e.g. being a student rep
- work related experiences
- working successfully as part of a team
- developing effective time management: e.g. work life balance
- experiences of living independently e.g. learning to cook
- the safety net of course related online environments e.g. Kura and My Uni Course

Confidence building experiences have been associated with increased intention to persist with university education; and Thomas (2012) found that academic, social and professional

services make an important contribution to the development of some students' confidence. In the case of our focus group discussants, sense-making and meaning-making associated with developing HE learner identities through academic and non-academic activities bolstered their confidence, a building block for further engagement with learning.

e. Challenges

Aspects of early first year experiences that many participants found demotivating included some course related transition events or activities at the beginning of the first semester that were meant to help students settle in, but which most participants did not find engaging. Such activities were not related to academic course content, but more to social integration or settling in, an issue that is flagged up as strategically important by Thomas' (2012) for institutions to foster engagement and belonging. Other problems that participants mentioned across focus groups related to technical difficulties when working online, related to receiving emails, logging into Studentcentral or accessing information or websites. Another challenge, which many participants across focus groups described was the sense of being overwhelmed by information, and the pace of teaching and learning and activities in the early stages of the first semester.

Practical implications

In highlighting both the positive and challenging early experiences of first year students within and across disciplines, this study identifies three key areas of importance to educational developers. First, it is important to consider how curricula and teaching might be developed and reorganised to provide for sustained engagement between teachers and students, and peer-to-peer interactions, to enhance student learning communities. Our study suggests that students differ in their articulations of what engages them in different disciplines, but most acknowledge the benefits of learning communities both online and in person across disciplines. Building student engagement means enhancing processes and structures that foster learning communities, virtual or face-to-face, in ways that are responsive to the needs of increasingly diverse students. Attention to minimising technical hitches and designing manageable chunks of learning are important.

Second, it is equally important to seek ways in which retention interventions, curricula, teaching and wider organisational support might help to convey the message to increasingly diverse students that they belong. A sense of belonging can be cultivated by a range of university provisions, both academic and extracurricular. Some attention is also needed to individualise meaning-making processes associated with learners' identity development that transcend current university provisions. Provisions should cater for a broader range of students' individual needs related to housing, transport, finance and work-life balance (related to their multiple identities and social worlds).

Third, as Wenger (2009) establishes, the development of learning practices, from an organisational viewpoint, involves sustaining interconnected communities of practice. Educational developers might pay greater attention to varied communities of practice of first year students (such as social media, or in different disciplines) and integrate these in retention activities aimed at fostering engagement and belonging. For instance, our study reveals that Facebook was more effective in engaging many students, than some university designed online communication systems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that learning communities play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging and engaging students in learning. Generally participants across focus groups were engaged in learning and being at university with the data suggesting that the key dimensions of Wenger's (2009) social learning theory (meaning, identity, community and practice) are in place for some learners. Students felt a sense of belonging to the University and their course, and were developing a strong identity as students in their disciplines, an area also identified by Thomas (2012) as important for retention. A strong emergent theme relating to students' sense of belonging on their course, was their membership of a peer community of practice where face to face and online collaboration, communication and discussion increased student engagement, confidence and belonging, also emphasised as important by Wenger (2009) and Tinto (2003).

Research participants appeared to have mainly positive experiences of learning, teaching, assessment and pastoral support when starting their degrees and settling in to university that impacted positively on motivation, sense of belonging, confidence and engagement, Yorke's (2013) conceptual thematic categories. Participants' sense of belonging, when considered as meaning academic and social engagement was high. Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) (Thomas, 2012) was evidenced by the focus group discussions.

However, participants expressed mixed feelings regarding interventions designed to help support their transition into starting their course, where positive experiences generally related to activities which were directly relevant to their course content, such as sample lectures, and where less positive experiences related to activities which students found irrelevant, such as writing about social integration during Fresher's week. Many participants across groups talked about being overwhelmed by information and the pace of work and life when starting university and courses. In addition, some participants across groups talked about frustrating online difficulties at the beginning of the first semester.

While the first stage of our ongoing qualitative study provides useful insights into what works for students in terms of fostering their sense of belonging, engagement and confidence for learning, further research is required into the nuanced factors that inhibit and enable student success in varied contexts. We acknowledge that the size of our samples are small and that students were self-selecting, and that more studies are required to provide deeper insights into context-specific factors that foster a sense of belonging and build engagement in different universities.

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