

Interactions, Student Enthusiasm And Perceived Learning In An Online Teacher Education Degree.

Bill Ussher

The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

ABSTRACT

Students in an online teaching degree explore their learning experiences and how those were presented and sustained. Results indicate that learner satisfaction depended on several factors including tutors' interactions and feedback. Students' perceptions of 'good' interactions and how this impacts on enthusiasm and learning are considered for course designers.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1997 the University of Waikato has delivered a version of its three-year Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) degree to distance students. This programme, known as the Mixed Media Programme (MMP), developed to meet a need in rural and remote areas of the North Island for primary school teachers, is a full-time programme that includes one day per week at a local base-school, compulsory on-campus block courses (residential school) and online coursework.

This paper reports on the results of a study that investigated ways students' perceived their online learning experiences and the way that those experiences are presented, organised and sustained in such a learning environment (Donaghy, McGee, Ussher & Yates, 2003). The MMP has steadily grown over the past seven years and with it the need for understanding online students' study habits and learning experiences. While the retention rate of students is considered good, generally above 80% (Donaghy & McGee, 2003), Swan (2001) considers there is an ongoing need to improve practice in order to maintain these retention rates and effective online interaction is a key component to the success of such programmes. With asynchronous *ClassForum* (software platform) discussions being the site of a large proportion of students' online coursework, this paper focuses on what these MMP students deemed good interaction and feedback.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first premise of this study is that learning is a “self-regulated process that builds on learners’ existing knowledge and in which learners are active participants” (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2003, p.157), a constructivist perspective. Teacher education students are required to work with a wide range of people associated directly and indirectly with their study programme in developing knowledge and community. This Mixed Media Programme offers opportunities for such ‘construction’ in both synchronous and asynchronous interactions (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). The synchronous interaction opportunities occur in the on-campus blocks and within some courses while most, if not all, of the courses also include asynchronous discussions. If we believe that knowledge is not transferred but is indeed constructed then it follows that “the greater the interactivity in an online course and the more attention paid to developing a sense of community, the more likely students will stick with the course” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.117). For learning to occur, students in this MMP must have purposeful, significant and successful opportunities to construct and co-construct their knowledge.

Secondly, for satisfaction in the online learning environment it requires a “sense of community [that] keeps students engaged with the course and one another” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.118). Researchers (for example, Campbell, 2001; Haythornthwaite, 2000; Stacey, 1999; Swan, 2001) express the importance of acknowledging and utilising the various online presences in developing an effective learning community. Providing experiences that emphasise a collaborative community requires attention to social, cognitive and pedagogical presences (Hughes & Hewson, 2001; Swan, 2001). Within such communities there will be social networks involving strong and weak ties (Haythornthwaite, 2000). Haythornthwaite suggests that the weaker ties provide greater cognitive-informational support while the strong, internal ties provide the social-emotional support. Such ties are necessary to develop and sustain a learning community. The courses and staff within a university study programme such as this must empower students to “take on and maintain the community-building process” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.118).

METHODOLOGY

Data for this qualitative interpretive study were gathered from 29 current students who volunteered after being informed about the research through *ClassForum*. The sample included twelve Year 1, nine Year 2 and eight Year 3 students. The sample was representative of the age and backgrounds of the

general population, but not of gender. All student identities were protected for confidentiality by replacing names with numbers, such as Year 2 student 4. There were three stages of data collection for this research. The first stage involved an online survey completed by all students independently and from this students were individually interviewed about their study. Based on this interview information, online discussions probed students' ideas and perceptions further, exploring issues such as online interactions and whether the level of tutors' feedback affected students' level of participation in *ClassForum* discussions and assignment work. Students gave detailed descriptions of what they liked and what they thought could be improved. The discussions were facilitated and the data were analysed by a research assistant with no input or intervention from any staff teaching these MMP students. The results that follow are interpreted from the qualitative results of the survey, as presented by the research assistant, and analysis of the transcripts from the interview and forum discussions.

RESULTS

The first feature to be considered by this report is that of student interaction with their tutors. Students in this programme interact with tutors both online and face-to-face but this information is focused on the interactions via computer-mediated communications such as asynchronous discussions within courses. Given that there is considerable variation in courses and purposes over the entire programme, students in this study rated interactions with tutors from poor to excellent. The results are shown in Table 1. The following quote typifies comments by these students.

I believe there is just simply a difference in 'nature' between tutors, some are so very suitable to this type of teaching, where some just shouldn't be doing this at all. (*Year 3, student 4*)

The level of interaction with tutors varies with each paper. (*Year 2, student 1*)
In completing these ratings students would have been considering different tutors and different courses but overall it can be seen that the general rating of 'good' was given by 50% or better in each year group of the sample and 66% over the total sample.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total (n=29)
Good	8	7	4	19 (66%)
Interaction varied between tutors &	6	2	2	10 (34%)
Poor	5	2	0	7 (24%)
Excellent	3	1	1	5 (17%)

Table 1: Students' ratings of the level of interaction with their tutors in the online environment

Establishing a community of learning is important for these students and interactions are viewed as integral to this. It is interesting to note that no Year 3 students rated their tutors as 'poor', and some of these students did not give the tutors a rating at all. So what are these interactions that this group of students considered produced 'good' interactions? Students indicated they preferred a personal presence in the interactions.

Those tutors who were able to relate to us well online tended to get the most from us. Good tutor interaction developed discussions and exposed new ideas. Those that were unable to relate got the bare minimum. (*Year 2, student 4*)

If the discussions are lively and fast you visit them more often, contribute more and get far more from them. It makes a huge difference if you feel that the tutor enjoys being online and wants to spend time interacting. (*Year 2, student 9*)

As indicated by the information in Table 2, students in this study considered that the interactions were performed in a range of course components.

	Year 1 (n=12)	Year 2 (n=9)	Year 3 (n=8)	Total (n=29)
Interaction in portfolios was good	0	0	5	5 (17%)
Interaction in online discussions was	0	0	4	4 (14%)
Regular interaction online needed	0	2	1	3 (10%)
Feedback linked to tutor interaction	0	2	1	3 (10%)
Interaction via email was good	0	0	3	3 (10%)
Regular interaction online needed	2	0	0	2 (7%)
Likes tutors who state online teaching	1	0	0	1 (3%)
Interaction in chit chat folder	0	0	1	1 (3%)

Table 2: Issues associated with the level of interaction with their tutors

The overall response to this aspect of the study was low as it was not a formal section within the survey or discussions. In the portfolios, a private forum, individual students could communicate with their tutor on a one-on-one basis. This personal interaction was important to some students:

... there are some tutors who really seem to want us to succeed and give this impression by the amount of interaction they have online, in all areas of their paper. (*Year 1, student 3*)

There seem to be some tutors who are more perceptive than others. The ones who appear to listen and understand. One of my tutors [phoned] me this year because he sensed [*through my portfolio*] I was a bit uptight. (*Year 3, student 1*)

62% of the Year 3 students felt that interactions within this particular forum were good but the other year groups did not comment on this at all in the survey or interview. Of the other sites of tutor-student interactions there was no one site that stood out as more significant than any other. It might be concluded that these students were not so concerned about where the interactions took place, but rather the quantity and quality of such interactions. The value of these interactions is exemplified here:

I also couldn't do without the discussions [...]. It is often through the discussions that clarity comes on a subject. And as for tutors coming into discussions, well it isn't a must but ... (*Year 2, student 1*)

The discussions clearly indicated that students considered that tutors who regularly participated online produced a better learning environment through discussions and interactions. Students signalled a strong link between each tutor's frequency and quality of interaction and their own enthusiasm. Unfortunately there were those tutors who did not interact well with these students ...

The class discussions varied between papers depending on the tutors' level of participation. Some were challenging, motivating and taught with a sense of humour. Then there were those tutors who did not show up for class discussions. (*Year 1, student 10*)

Some of our tutors will only post the discussion topic and that is it. For those papers you tend to be less enthusiastic and will simply do what is required. (*Year 3, student 5*)

Last year in [*subject*] we hardly had our tutor. (*Year 3, student 1*)

However, generally the students' perceptions of the tutors' contribution to and involvement in these courses were positive.

As a further part of the survey, interviews and discussion, students were asked about the effectiveness of feedback in their online learning environment. The

ratings these students considered in terms of the feedback that they received from their tutors are indicated in Table 3 below.

	Year 1 (n=12)	Year 2 (n=9)	Year 3 (n=8)	Total
Generally poor	11	3	5	19 (66%)
Generally good	5	6	6	17 (59%)
Excellent	7	6	0	13 (45%)
Average feedback	2	0	0	2 (7%)

Table 3: Student rating of the feedback they received

When commenting on feedback from their tutors the students also expressed their needs clearly. Table 4 shows the range of issues that students commented on in regard to the feedback of tutors.

	Year 1 (n=12)	Year 2 (n=9)	Year 3 (n=8)	Total (n=29)
Inconsistent (-)	4	3	2	9 (31%)
Prompt feedback (+)	4	2	0	6 (21%)
Clear and concise (+)	0	0	3	3 (10%)
Regular contact (+)	3	0	0	3 (10%)
Illegible writing (-)	1	1	0	2 (7%)
Through portfolios (+)	0	0	2	2 (7%)

Table 4: Students' positive (+) and negative (-) comments relating to feedback they received

It is clear that these students considered the provision of feedback to be critical to their learning as exemplified by these students.

Feedback is, I believe, one of the most important areas in an online programme!
(Year 1, student 3)

We are all obviously capable but I wonder if some of us would perform 100% better if we had the feedback. (Year 2, student 1)

To be quite blunt [...] the papers I've had the least feedback on are the ones that I reflect on as being the ones I lost interest in the quickest. (Year 3, student 5)

Students in this online learning environment emphasised the need for regular feedback. They wanted tutors to provide prompt, regular feedback ...

The feedback from [subjects] is the most positive and constant. They are in there regularly and giving us feedback on what we have done. I would like to hear from my tutors every second day. (Year 1, student 6)

It is no good getting feedback 6 weeks down the track when all is in the past and you are now on a new topic. (Year 1, student 10)

Hearing from tutors on a regular basis helps to keep motivation high and keeps us as students on the right track mostly. (Year 3, student 4)

I enjoy it [*the feedback*] and as long as my questions get answered in a reasonable timeframe I'm happy. But waiting for a response can be a problem ... (Year 3, student 4)

However, while it was important and needed to be provided promptly, these students felt that feedback on their assignments and questions must be constructive and focussed.

Feedback for [*subject*] has so far been excellent, with the lecturer giving precise points of where I need to improve or where I may have been right on the button. Feedback needs to be like that, right down to the last point. We as MMP students, need specific, detailed feedback ... (Year 2, student 1)

Feedback I have found to be the best is clear, accurate and precise ... (Year 3, student 1)

They also wanted the feedback to be personalised and specific to their work, rather than it becoming "chit-chat", addressed to individual students on their contributions to discussions and assessed work.

I struggled with my first [*subject*] assignment and the tutor was great because he would tell me what I needed to work on. I would like feedback on where I've gone wrong with assignments. (Year 1, student 6)

The feedback I like is specific, and focused on what I did wrong and how I can do better in the future. (Year 2, student 4)

25% or more considered the feedback they received was inconsistent across the three year groups. This inconsistency was discussed from a programme perspective (across several papers) as well as within individual papers.

Feedback is a very touchy subject at the moment. The problem is that even within a paper it is dependent on which tutor you have. (Year 1, student 7)

I do agree that in general things aren't too bad. It is just that the ones that are bad sure make up for it! (Year 2, student 4)

I have had the misfortune of receiving a lecturer, out of three in a paper, that gives no feedback. (*Year 1, student 10*)

WHAT FEEDBACK!!! (*Year 1, student 3*)

DISCUSSION

Although care must be taken in generalising these data due to sample size and selection, these results indicate that being a satisfied learner is dependent on several factors, which contributed to successful knowledge construction and engagement in their online learning community. These are now detailed and discussed.

KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

These students reported that in this programme the interactions were performed over a wide range of course component, such as in portfolios, discussions and 'chit chat' folders. This ensured that they had generous opportunities to be active within courses. As Phillips states, in order to "support metacognition we need to engage the student in active learning" (2003, p.177). These students were quite clear that those tutors that interacted frequently and regularly produced a more effective and active learning environment.

The students' comments indicate that those tutors who interacted regularly with the class also provided regular feedback to their students. Providing opportunities to build on and develop their previously constructed knowledge is important for these students who are generally second-chance learners. Campbell (2001) found that many new online students thought that all they had to do was answer a question and that was it, "until they realised that this was not about 'finding the right answer' but an ongoing activity" (p.3). Because of this prevailing perception about learning, it is imperative in this online learning community that such students receive feedback that is personalised and focused on their work and learning. Many students commented about this as a strength of some tutors.

All interactions and feedback must be purposeful. In order to achieve this these interactions must be personalised. The general and social comments are of little or no value to students' learning, they must be focused and constructive. While students need opportunities to "share and compare [their] observations and

understandings with others" (Kanuka & Anderson, 1998, p.72) in order to develop understanding, the role of the tutor in making such interactions purposeful cannot be underestimated. Feedback on contributions to discussions, written assignment tasks and relating to lesson plans must provide students with information about their learning to date and provide them with a future map.

To make the learning significant these students required personal interactions such as those performed through the portfolio forums and on written assignments, whether electronic or hard-copy. They emphasised the value of all interactions, where quality and quantity are critical to learning matters. Similarly Swan found in her research with students learning online, "that all interactions with instructors mattered" (2001, p.309), not just feedback. These students found that they "couldn't do without the discussions" and such statements were reflective of the success that students felt in such learning environments. This again reinforces Swan's findings that "students who had higher perceived levels of interaction with teachers had higher perceived levels of satisfaction with the course and reported higher levels of learning" (2001, p.316), all prerequisites to feelings of success.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Tutor interactions and feedback are important behaviours when encouraging students to establish and engage in a community of learners. With the students considering that tutors' behaviour in this programme range from poor to excellent this impacts on the students' desire to engage and consequently their enthusiasm and learning.

Thorpe (2003) asserts that, "interpersonal interaction is key to all main theories of learner support" (p.201) hence in an effort to create a successful learning environment tutors must interact with students on a personal level. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that "social presence is a strong predictor of satisfaction" (p.23). Such social presence is illustrated by these students as a tutor's ability to "relate well" to individual and groups of students, to create a feeling that the tutor "enjoys being online" and wants to "spend time interacting" with students. These students commented positively about their reaction to tutors who show a "sense of humour" and are prepared to have a bit of "fun" in the learning community. But most of all these students felt they needed to know that a tutor wanted "you to succeed", to show he/she cares about your progress. In caring, tutors are not required to build strong social ties and networks with their students but rather to demonstrate respect, honesty and integrity through which cognitive aspects can be channelled.

Inconsistent interactions by tutors produced a negative feeling towards them and their course. Attending to and interacting with course work and discussions frequently, helps the learner engage and make more meaning. Tutors must develop a cognitive presence through their interactions and feedback. "Just checking in on a regular basis but not contributing something substantive to the discussion does little to support the development of the learning community" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.24).

Swan suggests that it may be the "quality of interaction with instructors [that] is more important than the quantity of interactions" (2001, pp.324-5). While each tutor's presence over the range of course components is vital to learning and the establishment of the learning community, their behaviour must be such that they are seen to be "posting regularly, responding in a timely manner and modelling good online communication and interaction" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.118). In this online community tutors have many opportunities to be ever present! Tutors have an important role to ensure the course functions as intended. It is not appropriate to set a course up and then leave the students to their own devices. In such courses students tend to be "less enthusiastic", doing only "what is required" therefore tutors need to attend to methods, strategies and structures within their course to ensure a pedagogical presence.

The participants considered the interactions among all programme personnel critical to effective learning; this included the academic as well as non-academic staff. However the depth and purpose of such networks and ties varies. While it is true that the "maintenance and life of an active learning community online is the responsibility of all members, the students and the teachers" (Campbell, 2001, p.5), the role that each plays in such communities, is different. For the tutors in these online learning communities their presence is vital but not as part of the students' strong, social network but rather as a weaker tie that promotes the cognitive and functional aspects of the programme. It is the presence and availability of each tutor that is considered most important by these students.

CONCLUSION

The object of every online teacher education programme is learning, but "group dynamics and being able to communicate are prerequisites to being able to collaborate and enter into joint construction of knowledge" (Hughes & Hewson, 2001, p.8). The comments of these students support such findings and reinforce that the factors that contribute significantly to the success of online courses include "an instructor who interacts frequently and constructively with

students, and a valued and dynamic discussion" (Swan, 2001, p.327). In considering implications for tutors it is obvious that course and program designers must include opportunities for interactions. In her research Swan found that "84% indicated they interacted with their teachers a great deal or sufficiently" (2001, p.316) and analysis of this indicated that this was strongly related to student satisfaction and perceived learning.

REFERENCES

Campbell, N. (2001). *The life and times of an online discussion*. Paper presented at the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia 15th Biennial Forum, Sydney Australia, September 24-27.

Donaghy, A. & McGee, C. (2003, April). *E-education: Case studies of university teachers' experiences*. Hamilton, NZ: Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research.

Donaghy, A., McGee, C., Ussher, B. & Yates, R. (2003, April). *Online teaching and learning: A study of teacher education students' experiences*. Hamilton, NZ: Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research.

Gunawardena, C. & Zittle, F. (1997). Social presence as a predictor of satisfaction within a computer-mediated conferencing environment. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 11(3), 8-26.

Haythornthwaite, C. (2000). Online personal networks. *New Media and Society*, 2(2), 195-226.

Hughes, C. & Hewson, L. (2001). *Group dynamics and pedagogy in online groups*. Paper presented at the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia 15th Biennial Forum, Sydney Australia, September 24-27.

Kanuka, H. & Anderson, T. (1998). Online social interchange, discord, and knowledge construction. *Journal of Distance Education*, 13(1), 57-74.

Krause, K., Bochner, S. & Duchesne, S. (2003). *Educational psychology for learning and teaching*. Southbank, Australia: Thomson.

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. (2003). *The virtual student: A profile and guide to working with online learners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Phillips, M. (2003). Delivering learner support on-line: Does the medium affect the message? In A. Tait & R. Mills (eds). *Rethinking learner support in distance education: Change and continuity in an international context* (pp.164-181). London: Routledge Falmer.

Stacey, E. (1999). Collaborative learning in an online environment. *Journal of Distance Education*, 14(2), 14-33.

Swan, K. (2001). Virtual interaction: Design factors affecting student satisfaction and perceived learning in asynchronous online courses. *Distance Education*, 22(2), 306-31.

Thorpe, M. (2003). Collaborative on-line learning: Transforming learner support and course design. In A. Tait & R. Mills (eds). *Rethinking learner support in distance education: Change and continuity in an international context* (pp.182-211). London: Routledge Falmer.