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What do Distance Students Learn in Social Media Study Groups?

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MON: What do Distance Students Learn in Social Media Study Groups? (P.Seaward)

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Extra content

Many university students engage in social media, and some create prolific learning dialogue (Junco 2011). This paper reports on observation of distance learning MA Education students' use of their preferred open online, social network study group, over a one year period of one module. The lens of innovation is used as a way of understanding engagement with social media, as web native students are inhabiting new territory to satisfy unmet needs.

The study aims to understand how social media supports or disrupts studies by analysing frequencies of academic related content, and to evaluate the purpose and value of other topics discussed. Some analysis of vernacular literary practice is conducted. While academics write public blogs, students exchange more in these microblogging communities which charts a collective stream of consciousness. There are further unexplored questions about how this dialogue and learning differs to that in the institution's virtual learning environment.

Qualitative data is gathered from open, computer mediated textual dialogue in a naturalistic, ethnographic methodology. This new scholarly communication text of up to 200 students is used to examine patterns of activity, and analyse the textual encounters of critical incidents in more depth. The research population are OU students who engaged in one informal public social media group, formed and led by peer students. They are aged 18 and over, mostly based in the UK. Pseudonyms are used in line with BERA (2011) guidance.

The findings reported in the paper and conference reveal that students use their social network study group to discuss academic related topics, and to share their experiences about study. Some frustration was experienced with the pedagogy of this module, and sharing of additional resources to aid understanding was common. Like participants in a study by Vivian et al (2014), learners were especially active online at key times in the module calendar. This was for a few weeks in advance of each assessment hand-in date, and for up to a month afterwards as participants shared their reaction to their feedback and results. Occasions which earned more volume and frequency of dialogue include the beginning and end of the module, and a critical

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incident when the university changed their rules relating to qualification achievement. Overall findings show these learners are accomplished at inhabiting and facilitating innovative, focussed crowd learning in this virtual study space (Sharples et al 2013); and the informal learning dialogue can influence student cohorts constructively.

In summary the results suggest this open, online learning environment may play an important role in the distance learning experience, module attainment and likelihood of overall qualification completion. Academic staff are encouraged to discover more evidence about the value this open platform can offer.



[P Seaward](#)

17:13 on 28 January 2015 (Edited 15:36 on 19 August 2018)

References

BERA (2011) 'Ethical guidelines for Educational research', online [http://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf] accessed 18.08.14 09.30

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[P Seaward](#)

17:18 on 28 January 2015

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[Samantha Marks](#)

8:16am 27 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Phillippa. I look forward to seeing more of your discussion, not least because in my last

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module, people didn't really use the module forum, yet there was a 'study group' (I use the term very loosely) on Facebook. This acted as the reinforcement and community that in this Master course (Online and distance education) we probably get through the forums. I am intrigued as to how different the results and improvements in assignments might be from those who were part of the Facebook group and those who weren't. Mentally it was a real source of support and encouragement, although we probably didn't really do much formal study. Does your discussion focus on a more formal approach, i.e. people working towards a specific task or goal; or informal, as I have suggested? I believe there is room for both.



[Sheila Greenwood](#)

4:08pm 2 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Phillipa . I find this topic fascinating not least because in my own study practice I find it useful to discuss topics in a formal sense as with the directed activities in spaces such as TGF and also in a more relaxed manner - such as the student cafe on this course. Often I like to ask questions and seek advice outside my direct learning community with friends/ fellow students on informal spaces such as Facebook. Your study suggested that traffic to and from such study areas intensified at key stages in the module, suggesting that in times of heightened tension, stress or uncertainty moral support is sought. This I can relate to.

I will be watching your slot at conference



[Dave Martin](#)

6:24pm 2 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Having tutored on the MA ODE and studied Creative Writing at undergraduate level with the OU in the past few years I've been interested in the impact Facebook groups can have. So I'm looking forward to hearing something about the evidence behind your summary claim that *'results suggest this open, online learning environment may play an important role in the distance learning experience, module attainment and likelihood of overall qualification completion.'*, especially what you did to *'analyse the textual encounters'*.

I've been interested in this since working with Caroline Coffin of the OU on the linguistic analysis of argument in history. <http://arguinginhistory.open.ac.uk/index.cfm>



[Lisa Kidger](#)

1:59pm 4 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Phillipa

This is interesting, as some of my students have recently set up a facebook group for study support, rather than using our chat room. I like the idea that it could contribute to their success, which, interestingly, makes me feel more supportive of it (not that I wasn't before, but it adds a little extra happiness) .

Lisa

[M.M](#)



7:12pm 9 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Phillipa

Just listening back to your presentation-lovely work. Very interesting and a lovely style!



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

2:03pm 10 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Your comments and questions from your live presentation:

- ▶ really interesting - lower drop-outs
- ▶ I asked my class re facebook use and all but one students used. Can this also lead to exclusion?
- ▶ Did the tutors show any concerns about the study group (assuming they knew about it)?
- ▶ students recently introduced me to the parallel social universe that exists for chinese students studying on popular MOOCs. fascinating spaces.
- ▶ Were there any negative interactions between students? Obviously on the OU forums this can be moderated and action taken to ensure it does not continue
- ▶ Were these facebook pages open , open groups or closed groups please?
- ▶ 17% is low - I wonder whether this is because it is easy to sign up for an OU course and maybe the committment wasn't there in the first place or indeed the motivation?
- ▶ Disruptive behaviour on facebook pages is interesting as well.
- ▶ I don't use Facebook and have found it difficult in some MOOCs where people tend to group there.
- ▶ we must remember that some students are not on FB for good reason



[P Seaward](#)

5:20pm 17 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thank you for all these supportive comments and questions. I will try to address the questions in turn.

The Junco research suggests the effect is positive for new students, as they maintain continuity of old friendships while acquiring new friends and social support in their new course or institution. We have no firm evidence to confirm this from my study, other than anecdotal observation.

We did not assume that every student in a distance learner group would participate, and it was not used as a communication channel by the university. I participate in one such group at a campus university, and we have been accused of this too. Moreover, as the use of social media in education is relatively new, the university is still developing ideas about

how and whether it should be used by the institution at all. It was not a channel adopted by the OU in this study.

This study group was occasionally mentioned in tutor group and whole module forums in the VLE, so all were made aware of its existence. Tutors expressed no concerns, as it did not replace the 'walled garden' of the OU VLE, and it did not require their participation. It was more a place to solve, than create problems for them. There was one tutor from the module present, not in 'helicopter' style, and her presence was very valuable with ambiguous questions in the brief etc

I too have been introduced to the curious parallel universe inhabited by Chinese students in a campus uni! They like Wechat and other new social platforms. I wonder if these have proliferated due to restrictions on the platforms used in the UK and US, by the Chinese government? The software can change name and form, but won't disappear now.

There was one potentially disruptive interaction, early on in the module. However this was spotted by participants early on, and the possible negative undertones were minimised with some constructive group dialogue. Web communication relies on a new skillful set of interpersonal skills; we are all learning these fast.

Facebook study groups are Open for anyone to apply to join, just like the OU. Mostly they become 'closed' status so they don't clutter up everyone's news feed thereafter. People are inhibited to contribute fully in an open status group.

Of course the 17% is low, and has many reasons behind this. Nevertheless, in the post-2012 funding environment it is a priority for improvement in order for the university to remain financially viable. Our government needs students to complete their qualification so that they can start to earn more and pay back their tuition fee loans!

We witness disruptive behaviour in many online study groups, although this was not a feature of this one. A further study may be able to compare and contrast some reasons why. I have some ideas about reasons for this, discussed at the conference.

Facebook study groups should not be seen as replacing a university VLE. The content and tone of the dialogue is very different. Consider the conversations that take place in a lecture theatre and a coffee bar at a university. They can address similar topics, but do so in a different manner. They also address different issues altogether, that matter to the students. It is just a new phenomenon for us to trace evidence of this in electronic spaces.

Yes many people are not on Facebook for good reason. Many teachers in this study group said they were prohibited from having an account as they work at a school. They are still not excluded, and it was common for many teachers in this group to adopt a pseudonym. Hence verifying their requests to join was fun!

I hope this addresses many of the unanswered questions from the day. If anyone has further questions, please get in touch through the module channels, here, or find me on Twitter. Many thanks all x

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