

Staff Accessibility and Online Engagement With First-Year Students: An Autoethnographic Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Studying online is becoming an increasingly attractive option to prospective students worldwide, yet external completion rates tend to be considerably lower than those enrolled on campus. Through an autoethnographic critical reflection process of teaching 27 first-year online students at a regional Australian university, this article considers methods for increasing accessibility and student engagement as well as managing personal challenges supporting online students from non-traditional backgrounds. Among seven key implications for practice, this article argues the need for genuine and open-ended interaction with online students at the early stages of a semester. It also recommends that teaching staff consciously recognize the limitations of providing academic support to non-traditional students. Based on these practices, this article confirms the benefits of critical reflection in higher education settings and the broader impact it can have on pedagogic approaches to tertiary teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, Autoethnography, First-Year Experience, Non-Traditional Students, Online Teaching and Learning, Reflective Practice, Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Online students are making up an increasing portion of total higher education enrolments worldwide, due at least in part to this study mode offering greater flexibility around family, employment and living commitments. However, online completion rates tend to be considerably lower than those enrolled on-campus or in a blended delivery mode. For online students, many recent studies cite student difficulties with finding an appropriate work-life-study balance, feelings of isolation, and understanding academic culture in an online environment as key reasons for withdrawal (Cochran et al., 2014; Davidson, 2017; Merrill, 2015; Sutton, 2014). These developments have been especially concerning in the Australian higher education sector, with a recent 2018 federal report urging universities to give greater support to online students because the respective attrition rate is approximately double that of the rate for internal and multimodal students (Department of Education and Training, 2018). This report followed on from a previous government study that emphasised the role university educators must play in supporting low socioeconomic status students; a cohort that is highly represented in online enrolments due to the flexibility it offers around work and family situations. The report stressed the need for university teaching staff to engage regularly and ensure that students can access support

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easily. It also highlighted the importance of becoming a reflective practitioner (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012).

University educators cannot control the individual circumstances in students' lives that impact their respective ability to study successfully online, yet support can be offered if staff are accessible and engage regularly with online students. Teacher presence plays a key role in keeping students motivated and building a sense of belonging in an online tertiary environment. One method for continually developing these capabilities is for teaching staff to reflect critically on experiences and perceptions of online study and adjust practices accordingly (O'Shea, Stone and Delahunty, 2015; Stone, 2017). To this end, critical reflection must become a greater focal point for the development of university teaching staff, especially when teaching diverse learners that are studying at university for the first time. Assessments with a focus on critical reflection are used widely across experience based learning units¹, yet there is still contestation over what reflective practice actually constitutes, how critical reflection skills can be developed, and the overarching importance of reflecting critically in a tertiary teaching environment (Harvey, Coulson & McMaugh, 2016; Merierdirk, 2016).

Framed in this light, this article details a qualitative reflective practice study that analysed methods for increasing accessibility and student engagement in an online teaching environment. The study also contained elements of an autoethnography, in which these self-reflections were considered in relation to the broader socio-cultural and educative context in which these students were studying (Chang, 2008; Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015). Looking introspectively over one semester teaching first-year undergraduate students online at Charles Darwin University (CDU), critical reflections were recorded based on how the researcher increased accessibility and engaged with students about academic content. Contrary to most studies that focused on "accessibility" in relation to greater student access to higher education or supporting students with learning disabilities, this study defined the term as the extent to which students could easily contact teaching staff during a teaching period (Lee, 2017). It also adopted a limited definition of the term "student engagement", focusing specifically on the multimodal ways in which students learn through interaction with teaching staff regarding academic content (Kahu, 2013). Reflections were also recorded on personal views about interacting with students facing difficult study challenges, in the hope that it would challenge underlying assumptions about student learning in this context. Finally, this article outlines seven key implications for practice based on these reflections and offers broader conclusions about the need for reflective practice in supporting online university students, particularly those in the first year of study.

TEACHING CONTEXT: SUPPORTING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ONLINE

Online study options offer flexible opportunities for students who have previously been unable to attend university due to family or work commitments. This delivery mode is especially appealing to "non-traditional" students, a cohort that has been characterised elsewhere as "low-socioeconomic status, mature-age with family commitments, the first-in-family to study at university, or studying part-time externally while working full-time" (Kelly, 2018, p. 73; Trowler, 2015). It can also include indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. However, due to these varied backgrounds and commitments, non-traditional students tend to face additional challenges when studying at the tertiary level (Devlin et al., 2012; Probert, 2013; Rolls, Northedge & Chambers, 2017). Some common examples include conflicting priorities related to raising children, as well as little to no background in using computers or reading complex literature. While recent studies demonstrate that non-traditional students often have high resilience in relation to academic studies and general well-being, current university teaching practices are not necessarily inclusive of non-traditional student experiences (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2017; Meuleman, Carrett, Wrench & King, 2015).

This project was conducted at CDU, a regional Australian university based in the Northern Territory which enrolls a high number of non-traditional students in its online programs. In this context the researcher taught CUC100 (Academic Literacies through Exploring Sustainability), a first-year

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