

Authentic Two-Way Engagement in the Delivery of Online Learning – is it time for educators to step into the new 21st century communications paradigm?

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ABSTRACT

Online higher education courses are delivered online – or are they? Students are able to download and listen to lectures in their own time, and participate in online forums with lecturers and classmates. Assessments are handed in online and thesis presentation is facilitated online. Although that is the theory, in reality is this really happening? Are the perceived benefits of close face-to-face interaction in tutorials being replicated in the online environment? Or are students missing out on a key facet of the learning process when engaging online?

This case study examines the intersection of expectations between students seeking to access online learning in the 21st century, and those responsible for delivering it - who may be unconsciously biased towards continuing to use a 20th century communications methodology in an online and social environment. This paper explores issues arising from this perceived clash of communication paradigms, and offers ideas for future research into assisting educators to truly engage in two-way and interactive communications with their students in the delivery of online learning.

Key words: Online education; communication; social media; student learning; student assessment; innovation

Introduction

The traditional model of delivering learning programs has been face-to-face, with lecturers presenting to classrooms of visible students using a one-way transmission delivery method of communication (Carey, 2009; Craig & Muller, 2007; Hallahan et al, 2007) - i.e. ‘I talk, you listen.’ In this traditional model, tutorial classes have complemented formal lectures to provide student cohorts with informal access to additional information that is essential for them to successfully navigate their way through course subjects and assessment tasks. These tutorials facilitate the opportunity for students to receive guidance from a tutor, as well as discuss issues with their peers, to obtain insights into the explicit assessment requirements of the subject and to gain a real understanding of the implicit assessment expectations of their lecturer.

Stepping into the 21st century, the concept of online learning appears to have been embraced by many institutes of higher learning, but have the educators responsible for delivering learning through this new methodology embraced the new paradigm of two-way communications equally as enthusiastically? We argue that perhaps a large majority have not. Morrison (2016) has said “Universities have long been wrestling with the internet. On the one hand it represents a huge opportunity, in the shape of an enormous resource and new methods of delivery; on the other it represents a huge threat, in the shape of an enormous resource and new methods of delivery.”

Morrison (2016) additionally observes that while the recent MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) movement is becoming an increasingly attractive methodology of learning for students to learn “in their own time and at their own pace” and has given “some credibility to online learning”, it is “not always popular with academics.” Issues arising for educators in an online environment include managing a cohort of students that one has never met. Administration of online classes can be onerous, requiring additional technology training to be able to set up access to videos and podcasts of lectures, enable downloads of lecture slides and notes on online education platforms, such as Moodle and Blackboard. Facilitation of online forums held between the lecturer and their student cohort can be difficult to manage across disparate locations, different time zones and differing expectations. Online education also offers students a variety of channels through which to contact their lecturer and ask questions by email, online noticeboard, private messaging or online forums – and they expect answers in real-time, adding to an already heavy workload.

This paper identifies some of the key issues arising for students undertaking online courses in the environment of the traditional higher education organisational structure. These include: being engaged using an outdated model of one-way authoritative communication in a two-way authentic engagement environment; being subjected to a technology-based learning environment that the facilitator is not adept at facilitating; and missing the opportunity for vital implicitly-delivered information in a more overtly explicit environment that can impact their learning outcomes. This paper explores these issues, and provides recommendations for potential future research.

Literature Review

We are now in the second half of the second decade of a new communications paradigm, which has been heavily influenced by the advent of online and social media communications that encourages two-way, authentic and engaged communication with audiences (Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006; Macnamara, 2010; Laloux, 2014). These days, “communication is understood not just as merely passing information but as an active way of creating, shaping, and maintaining relationships and enacting shared values, common cultures, and agreed goals, and the means for their achievement.” (Clegg, Kornberger & Pitsis, 2008, p.303). Walker (2009) refers to this process as ‘sense-making’, referring to it as “the gap between where a person is and where they wish to be”.

Tench & Yeomans claim that technology has become one of the most significant shapers of organisations and further state that the online communications environment has redefined audience expectations for engagement (2009, p.522). Feedback acts as a vital and overarching mechanism in the process of 21st century communications for constant organisational and individual adaptation and evolution (Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006; Macnamara, 2010; Laloux, 2014), and as audiences start to interact with organisations “they generate feedback and data” with an expectation of listening and response from that organisation (Ries, 2011, p.75). Macnamara agrees that “on the positive side, emergent media and communication practices offer opportunities to enhance communication” and improve collaboration efficiencies. However, he also notes that while businesses and organisations are currently using what he terms ‘Web 2.0’ online tools and practices for automation and efficiencies, most are still to fully recognise the enormous innovation benefits that interactive communication tools could have on their organisational structures, or the positive impacts implied for their internal and external stakeholders (2010, pp.327-329).

A strong case is made for organisations to commence progression away from the dominant Transmission Model of linear communications towards a non-linear Systems Theory approach (Carey, 2009; Craig & Muller, 2007; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006; Hallahan, et al, 2007; Harrison, 2011; Laloux, 2014; Walker, 2009), which “recognises the importance of the environment” and the interdependence of multiple stakeholders within those environments for an organisation to be effective (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2006, p.33). Alberts, Nakayama & Martin (2007) and Mohan et al (2008) put forward the Transactional Model of communication where meaning is negotiated through social interaction, discourse and heightened awareness of individual communicators’ environments (including cultural backgrounds and personal experiences). Laloux extends these new communication theories and models towards the concept of the interdependence of non-linear networks within systems. These systems, he argues, are optimum frameworks for the 21st century as they are self-regulating and adaptive to dynamic environments. He strongly advocates a move from the “machine paradigm” to the emerging 21st century

paradigm of organisations expressing themselves as adaptive living systems (2014, pp.215-216), which provide essential feedback loop opportunities for a system to evolve as it develops. Morgan (1997) supports this and believes viewing enterprises through the metaphor of ‘organisations as organisms’ – that is, reflexive and adaptive to constant change – would be beneficial, stating “If innovation is a priority, then a flexible, dynamic, project-oriented matrix or organic forms of organisation will be superior to the mechanistic-bureaucratic.” (p.68).

Methodology

This paper is a case study of a group of mature-age students who have completed postgraduate degrees in both the traditional face-to-face and emerging online contexts, and who provided a comparison between the two experiences through an ethnographic study. The study involved both participant observation and face-to-face interviews as the students were completing their online course.

From the data, the question has arisen whether the new paradigm of communications is being truly understood and considered by educators in the online learning context, and most importantly whether it is being harnessed for potential benefits to not only student cohorts, but also to the organisation the educators themselves represent.

Results & Discussion

Traditionally, face-to-face tutorial classes have fulfilled the primary function of filling an informal communications channel gap between the student cohort and the lecturer, with the tutor acting as a ‘mediator’. We would argue that the tutorial format represents better access to information that the student cohort consider essential to being able to complete the subject, and their degree, successfully. This includes being engaged in two-way semi-formal interaction with their tutor, with questions being asked and answered by both the tutor and student cohort, to find common meaning of both course material and assessment requirements. Tutorials also include informal peer-to-peer communication within the student cohort to ascertain whether they have correctly understood the assessment requirements and expectations of both the lecturer and tutor. In the online learning environment, this peer-to-peer opportunity to informally obtain vital information pertaining to assessment requirements and expectations appears to be largely missing.

Formal communication in an informal environment

The mature-age student cohort that took part in this case study had previously completed a postgraduate diploma attending face-to-face, prior to commencing an additional postgraduate degree online in the discipline of communications. In the face-to-face course, the one hour lectures were primarily considered a waste of time - as digital adepts, they felt this time could have been better spent reading the texts in personal time as self-directed learning. Being able to access pre-uploaded lecture slides and lists of referenced texts for self-directed learning was one of the main attractors for the case study participants deciding to continue postgraduate education online, rather than through the traditional full-time face-to-face methodology. Furthermore, these students generally considered it a more desirable and respectful approach to learning for a mature-age student with decades of relevant work experience.

However, the next step in the learning process – the tutorial – was either completely missing or mishandled by various lecturers, and had a noticeable impact on the online student cohort’s ability to successfully meet the tacit expectations of the course and its facilitators. The view was that the functional aspects of the face-to-face course had been addressed more effectively in the two hour tutorials under the guidance of an interactive and engaging tutor. Topics and subjects that were integral to successfully completing the course and matching the lecturer’s assessment expectations were implicitly presented to students both verbally and visually (with supporting physical clues to essential concepts given by underlining items or pointing to phrases). The tutorial environment also provided students with a vital opportunity to informally check in with each other on progress within the subject for sense-making and affirmation that instructions had been correctly understood. From the case study experience, this information was relayed through casual conversations while sitting in the class or in coffee breaks. In the online learning environment, the absence of this tutorial space of semi-formal and informal communication was noted as a major drawback to the way learning was conducted online.

An example of the absence of an informal communications environment being provided to assist with peer-to-peer sense-making (Walker, 2009) was highlighted in the case study. In one instance, the entire student cohort was admonished on an online public forum board by the lecturer, who vented frustration at the delivered results of an introductory assessment by stating “none of you are getting this concept at all!” We would respectfully put forward the idea, given Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) foundational Transmissions Model communications theory which defines communication as a process of ‘sending and receiving’, that if an intended audience is not receiving a message then it implies there is actually an issue with the sender in the first instance, and with the choice of channel being used effectively in the second instance. This example highlights the impact of the absence of the informal tutorial environment on online learning. In a face-to-face environment, the student cohort would have been guided by a tutor to engage in two-way discussions on the set topic to understand the lecturer’s expectations. The online learning environment is missing the ‘water cooler’ and ‘coffee break’ sessions of the face-to-face environment, where students obtain vital information through their peer-to-peer networks. In this example within the case study, as a coping mechanism the cohort of online students attempted to replicate the informal communications channel usually provided through face-to-face interaction in tutorials. They sent private Direct Messages (DM) to each other through the online learning platform, or sent offline mobile texts to each other with questions such as “do you understand what we’re supposed to be answering?” or “which text should we be referring to?” instead of addressing their concerns on the public online forum board where the lecturer could view the conversations. Informal peer-to-peer channels of communication became the preferred and most trusted method of information transfer between students, and they ended up bypassing the lecturer almost completely to be able to successfully complete the course.

Two-way communication – there is a clue in the title

According to the two-way symmetrical model of communications (Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al, 2006), the interests of both the organisation (in this case, the higher education institution and the lecturer) and its publics (in this case, the student cohort) are balanced. Information is provided with the understanding that feedback will be coming back, and that revisions to how the information is being relayed may be necessary. From the case study, most online communications issues between the educator and the student cohort occurred in the context of one-way transmission communication climates, where information was managed top-down and without effective use of online education platforms to engage in or facilitate two-way dialogue either between students and the educator, or peer-to-peer discussions.

The first experience online students have of their online higher education course is usually through the online noticeboard for the class. This is where the lecturer sets up access to the subject outline and course notes at the commencement of the semester. It is also where the lecturer ideally posts an introduction to themselves, an overview of their background and an outline of their assessment expectations for the subject. This is what would normally happen in the first face-to-face lecture of the semester with a new cohort of students, however it doesn’t seem to be replicated as well in the online environment.

From the case study, an incident was relayed of an online lecturer posting a terse introductory online note, “Hello, my name is X and I will be your lecturer for this subject. Please read X reading and purchase X text. Classes commence on X date”, which provided no facilitation for the online student cohort to respond or interact with each other prior to the study period formally commencing. Normally in the online environment, posts are interactive with the ability for the audience to post their own comments and replies to conversations in a thread format (for example, as is very common when posting to Facebook and engaging with friends and family). In this example, the online educator had not enabled the comments functionality to their own introductory post for students to reply and engage with either the lecturer, or each other. This was possibly due to the lecturer’s lack of experience with online learning platforms or inadequate technology training, however it was also construed by the student cohort to be an alarming omen of things to come. They feared their learning process would be impacted under the tutelage of a professor operating within a 20th century framework of communications.

An additional example from the case study was provided, where another lecturer made good initial use of establishing a tutorial online forum in which students were encouraged to discuss questions and topics arising from analysis of a major assessment item. Unfortunately, this public discussion forum for the student cohort became unwieldy and unmanageable. An entire class of 32 students was asked to contribute to a

single topic post, creating conversation threads within conversation threads to the point where most students could no longer follow the discussion.

Is the course 100% online or not?

A final example of the clash between face-to-face and online learning paradigms is provided by the case study, where the online student cohort was given the option of presenting their final thesis either online as a live-streaming video conference, or in person at the campus. Which begs the question, why was a face-to-face option given for an online course? Those students who were unable to present in person immediately felt they were at a disadvantage. Although this perception may have been entirely unfounded, it would have been perhaps preferable to not foster an environment of anxiety in the lead up to the culmination of four years' study. For the final thesis presentation, half of the student cohort gathered in a lecture room with the lecturer on campus, while the other half dialled into the video conference from various locations across Australia. Due to technology issues and a lack of technological support for the lecturer, the students presenting online could view each other's presentations, but not the presentations of those presenting in person. What was meant to be an opportunity for the entire student cohort to present their thesis findings to each other, after spending many hours online together discussing topics, descended into a disappointing 'us' and 'them' environment between the online cohort and the face-to-face cohort. This neatly sums up the challenge of educators in the online environment not entirely embracing the 21st century ethos, and the impact it has not only on the learning processes of online student cohorts, but also on their well-being.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

This paper is limited to the analysis of one group of mature-age postgraduate students in the broad discipline of communications, and for future research there is scope to increase the study of the experience of online students from a variety of disciplines to encompass more respondents from a wide variety of backgrounds, subject degrees and demographics. However, the conclusions we have drawn from this case study underline that in the self-directed online learning environment, the need for moderated, informal communications spaces in which to share experiences, ideas and questions is vital. Embracing the online learning communications environment more effectively would benefit higher education organisations through "increased innovation, idea exchange and... collaboration" (Harrison, 2011, p.522) between the institution, its lecturers and its student cohorts. The online learning environment represents a significant opportunity to dramatically reshape the higher education experience, and future research could potentially focus on replicating and adapting the focus and terminology that online retail brands have on 'User Experiences' (UX) to the online learning context. Educators adopting the two-way engagement model of communications would become more 'online forum moderators' than 'lecturer', and there could be opportunities to create new internal support roles in education enterprises to assist in facilitating online discussion groups within student cohorts – where those formerly known as 'tutors' could become SOXO (Student Online Experience Officers) or perhaps LOXA (Learner Online Experience Advisors).

Furthermore, the online learning environment lends itself to a progression from the previously dominant Transmission Model paradigm of hierarchical and linear methods of communication, towards a non-linear Systems Theory approach using the Transactional Model of communication. Future research could investigate basing the delivery of online learning on the Transactional Model of negotiating meaning through social interaction and discourse, while being aware of the impact on understanding of the surrounding environments, including the cultural backgrounds and personal experiences of the communicators (Alberts, Nakayama & Martin, 2007; Mohan et al, 2008). There is additional opportunity for further research into the role of organisational structures of higher education institutions to be developed from 20th century models into the new knowledge economy models of the 21st century online environment. Future research would benefit from more in-depth analysis of online education organisational structures, from the perspective of "interdependence, open system, moving equilibrium, equity, autonomy, (and) innovation" espoused by Grunig (cited Walker, 2009) in his Excellence Theory on two-way symmetrical communications. We believe there is a significant opportunity for new education enterprises to contribute to the reshaping of the education environment in the 21st century, and that online learning heralds the start of an evolution in the holistic approach to education based on increased two-way symmetrical communication engagement between educators and learners.

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