Engaging students online: an analysis of students' motivations for seeking individual learning development support

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Presentation abstract

This presentation outlines the key findings of a small-scale research project aimed to explore the motivations for student engagement in self-selecting learning development (LD) online tutorials. The study used a mixed methods approach, including an online survey (n=43) and online interview (n=5). The recruitment invitation was emailed to all users booking a tutorial (n=390) within the project timeframe (October 2020-April 2021). The generalisability of findings is limited by the low response rate (16.8%) as well as age bias of the sample (the over-24 age group was overrepresented at 75% of the sample despite being only 30% of the LD user population).

Findings show that the main driver for engagement reported was participants' limited confidence in their own academic writing abilities, which was consistently linked to attainment. Engagement was further motivated through a range of perceived impacts, including improved confidence and awareness of academic conventions. Participants reported a generally positive attitude towards online delivery, with key benefits including removing access barriers for students with complex commitments, travel and health issues. Conversely, the main downside of online tutorials was seen as diminished interpersonal contact. Qualitative data from both survey and interviews were further investigated using a discourse analysis framework. One key finding was that the path to LD engagement is often mediated by academic authority figures, who may exert a significant impact on learner self-views.

The presentation was designed to initiate discussion on the implications of these findings for learning developers. One area of reflection I planned to submit for the participants' consideration is how lessons learned from the enforced pivoting to online delivery can

underpin the developmental dimension of LD, with the ultimate goal of promoting learner confidence and growth.

Community response

A range of themes emerged from this fascinating presentation – from looking at online provision in the context of social justice, to treating it as a source of student empowerment, to making links with other online provisions, such as the Writing Café. What it made clear is that, despite the difficulties brought about by the Covid-19 crisis, some of the changes it inspired need to be maintained, particularly when it comes to enhancing students' sense of independence and ownership over their university studies. The affordances and obstacles of the online space require much reflection and analysis in order to humanise this new learning space and move forward in the most productive and meaningful way, especially when it comes to inclusivity and fair access (Loon, 2021).

Figure 1. A visual reflection on the session by Jacqui Bartram.
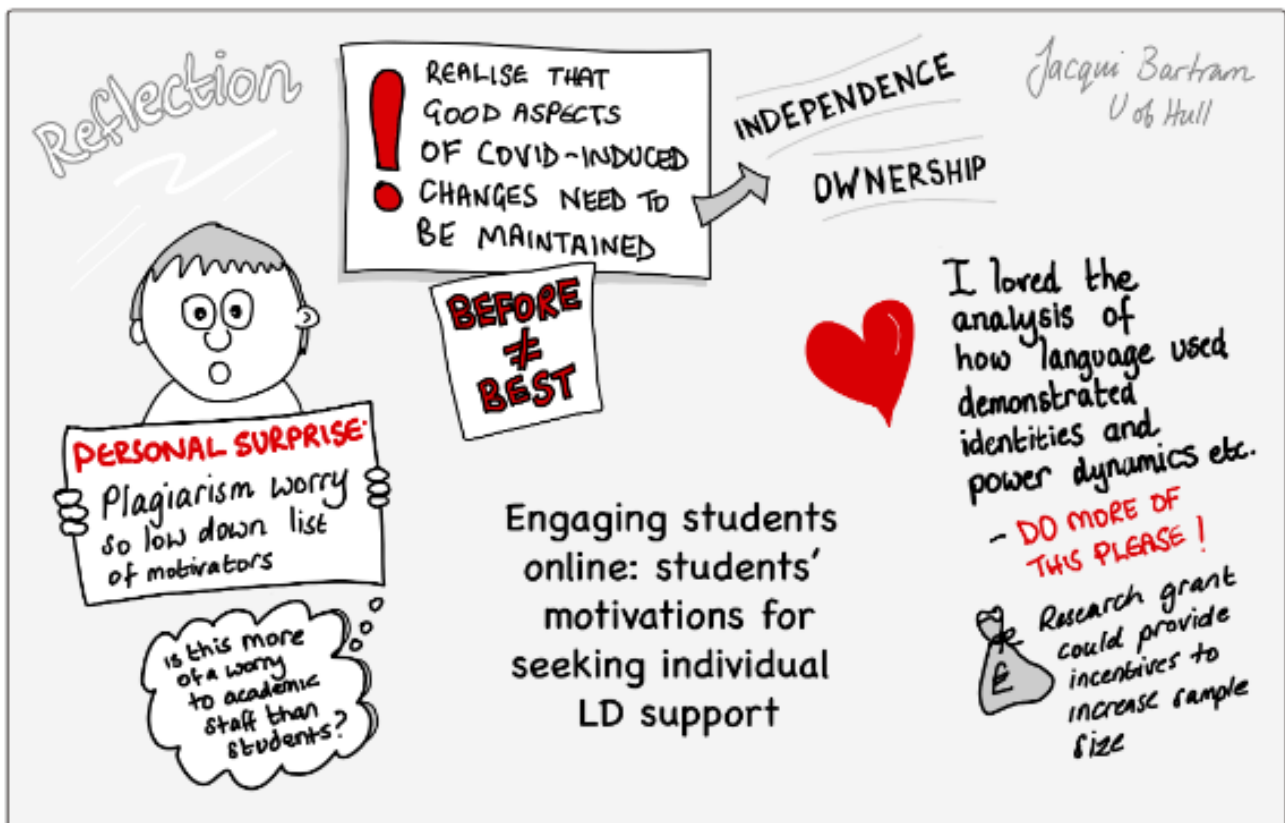
The point the presenter made about power relationships was particularly compelling and gives a clear indication of why learning development is so important. The fact that some

respondents deferred to academic authority figures (lecturers and supervisors) shows a tendency to adopt a passive attitude to academic writing. On the other hand, the comments on the rapport with LD tutors demonstrated more balanced power dynamics through 'mutual understanding' and 'conversation'. It would be interesting to do the same survey in a year or two to see whether anything has changed post-pandemic (if there is such a thing). The presentation was also a nice reminder for us as learning developers to focus on empowering students and to try and help them develop their confidence for learning. Indeed, I would hazard saying that this underpins everything!

Introducing Goodfellow's (2005) analytical framework, inspired by Gee's (1999) discourse analysis book, was very illuminating. The presenter used three discourse models: identities, social goods, and sign systems and knowledge to analyse students' responses to their engagement with an online module and to tease out the relationships between students' communication of their own identities as learners; their positioning within a set of academic power relationships; and their perspectives on types of academic writing and knowledge systems. I find the tool very powerful for learning developers to interpret student feedback from surveys or interviews, and to better understand the strengths of our provision in a holistic and systematic manner. I have also observed some of the benefits of online learning reported by the presenter in my own practice. I find an online one-to-one especially effective when it focuses on an assignment draft. There is enhanced accessibility to me as I can read the student's work easily on my device rather than looking at or using the student's screen. This can be particularly consequential for those who prefer working with PCs (Windows), like myself, and who struggle with MAC computers, which many of our students use. In the online setting, I also find it easier to provide written feedback simultaneously, which seems especially useful to students whose first language is not English.

What I was heartened to find in the presentation was the overall positive feedback the online tutorials received, as well as the fact that the majority of the students were seeking to improve their writing (n=38) over their grades (n=26). The findings are also transferable to similar contexts and schemes. For example, in the Writing Cafe where I work as a student mentor, we encounter similar behaviours, both positive and negative. When it comes to positives, the clear benefits of online spaces include accessibility for those with transportation issues, schedule conflicts, or health issues, the latter being a particular

concern in a post-pandemic Britain. But we have also observed challenges and limitations similar to the ones mentioned by the presenter. Quality of delivery for the live sessions, for example, is greatly dependent on the absence of technical issues. The alternative presented in the talk – the email-based tutorials – sounds attractive and the Writing Café could benefit from something similar: an asynchronous method for students to receive feedback on specific issues. Nonetheless, as a student myself, seeing students from another university struggling with similar aspects of academic writing was also interesting and could be taken as indication of a much more systemic problem, with students having key gaps in their knowledge and understanding before coming to university. This had been observed in students before the pandemic and has likely only been furthered by the effect the pandemic had on learning. Overall, the presentation raised a number of critical points about online tutorials and provoked me to consider the email-based alternatives as potentially useful to the future development of the Writing Café. To further this study, a larger sample size would be excellent, as the study mentions it was held back by the low response rate. Additional investigation into the skewed response demographics could improve this too, although it could just be an anomaly caused by the small sample size.

Next steps and additional questions

This is worthwhile research in the context of social justice as raised in the conference keynote: who reaches out for support, why, and what barriers do they face? I wonder if you have any plans to look at why people might not access LD support, or to build on any of your findings to try to better reach those who do not use the service?

One idea which came to mind in terms of increasing response rates was to perhaps add one question for students to answer whenever they sign up for a session asking why they are signing up, then one question after the session to explore what they got out of it.

Author's reflection

Sharing details of this research project with the LD community has been exciting, and also an opportunity to reflect on this work with fresh eyes, almost a year after completion. It was also incredibly powerful to witness the community response building up through such

thoughtful and creative reflections, insights from contributors' own practice as well as practical suggestions. One of the recurrent themes that stood out for me focused on the project's impact – how have the findings influenced practice?

While impact on practice – at individual, team and broader levels – has in fact been the main trigger for the research idea, once the project was completed, I could see there was a high risk of moving on to other commitments and not making the most of the evidence already gathered. In the early days of the project, I was sharing data with my colleagues on the go – as soon as completed questionnaires were returned, or after I was conducting one more interview. We eagerly discussed the implications; moreover, as soon as I had put together a draft of findings, I shared a report which we debated wholeheartedly, considering implications on the restructuring of our online resources, our delivery modes and our provision. And yet, a few months on, it felt like we were once again looking for new sources of evidence.

Therefore, I feel that this conference presentation, as well as the publication of my research in *JLDHE* (Cirstea, 2022), followed by the lovely surprise to see the article selected as a topic of discussion by the *JLDHE* Reading Club, all gave the data a new life and another chance at making an impact, and becoming part of conversations that matter. In terms of future plans, this heartening community response as well as a very productive discussion of the project's findings with members of the ALDinHE Research Community have rekindled my determination to pursue further research into motivations for LD tutorial engagement (or lack thereof).

On a more personal level, revisiting the project has reminded me of the context in which I conducted the research, between January and May 2021, at a time when the UK was experiencing recurrent waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, and most teaching and learning activities were conducted online or anxiously in person, within rigid restrictions. As I was awarded a 2-week sabbatical fellowship in the final stages of the project, I decided to start a research diary, to keep track of my progress with such a tight deadline. Re-reading this diary, I was surprised how detached my entries were from the turmoil of the outside world, reminding me of this little gem from the Thesis Whisperer (Mewburn, 2020):

Figure 2. Screenshot from the Thesis Whisperer (Mewburn, 2020).

But while vividly 'screaming inside my heart', I also found that focusing on my research, and my teaching, were effective distractions and positively impacted on my ability to continue supporting students with their own struggles.

A final thought I would like to share refers to the impact of this research project as 'headspace', as 'thinking time' on my own professional practice. In my diary, I had noted:

> It has been a long time since I had a whole day to focus on a single project; this is exciting and daunting at the same time. It reminded me that I have been missing research and at the same time the feeling of anxiety and excitement around starting out a new text or writing up something new. The best way to appease that, I find, is by looking back at things I have already done – the research data, past conference presentations that have tackled the topic, the literature I have already read and saved.

I feel that research has intrinsic benefits for teaching-focused professionals, by simply offering an opportunity to 'stop and think', to enter into a dialogue with our teaching and learning partners – students, colleagues and voices from the wider academic community. All these have a major impact on one's thinking, which will therefore influence subsequent practice though in not so easily traceable or quantifiable ways.

For all these reasons, I feel my small project has had some impact, and more than that, it has found its place as a small piece of the puzzle among all the exciting projects, reflections and ideas shared and debated at this conference.

Acknowledgments

References

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Further reading

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Author details

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