

RETENTION IN ONLINE COURSES: USING A MOTIVATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND ONLINE PEERS TO ENLIGHTEN POTENTIAL LEARNERS ABOUT LEARNING ONLINE

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Abstract

Despite the exponential growth in online learning, student retention rates in the online environment remain a concern to educators. Online learning @ UniSA is a learning object aimed at laying foundations for online learning for prospective students. It uses the voices of student peers to explore the qualities needed to succeed. Through the insights of four students and their facilitator, prospective online learners can make an informed choice about whether online study is likely to suit their own situation. Preliminary data supports the authors' hypothesis that the web site has allowed prospective students to select online study with their eyes wide open to what this choice really means.

Keywords

Retention; online learning; learning object; online peers; motivation

Introduction

There's much more of a commitment than just a standard uni course. Because you are online, you are doing things constantly. You can't just sit back and wait for each assignment to come — each week there's discussion to participate in and a new media quiz.

(Nick in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Online learning has, in part, been promoted as a way to cope with the massification of education where more courses are offered to more students in a variety of modes. It is seen as a way to open classrooms to more learners, allowing students to 'learn and earn' (Nunan, 2005) and fit their study into the jigsaw of work/family/life (Khoo, 2003; Clarke, 2000). Students increasingly expect the online environment to play a role in their learning (Murray et al., 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) as technology helps meet their lifestyle needs.

Student retention rates in all courses — including those using online learning environments — are a growing concern to Australian educators and retention rates now feature as an aspect of new government funding arrangements.

Educators are therefore entreated to provide well-designed online environments that integrate student support (Thorpe, 2002; Tait, 2000) to minimise student attrition.

Students who are using the online learning environment for the first time can be equated with students making the transition to university from school. They must come to terms with different teaching styles, study skills, time management, group work and information technology competence (Lowe & Cook, 2003). The opening comment from student 'Nick' reinforces this.

The online learning environment has its own particular set of hurdles for new students. For example, new online learners may experience 'isolation, disconnectness and technological problems' (Willing & Johnston, 2004). They also grapple with emotions such as fear (of the technology and new forms of assessment), anxiety and apprehension (about technological hiccups) and shame and embarrassment (about not being able to use the technology) (O'Regan, 2003). Lowe and Cook (2003) emphasise that successful transition to new study environments relies heavily on realistic expectations on the part of the students. They stress students who come with unrealistic expectations are less likely to succeed educationally and socially, so preparation and induction is vital to retention (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Primarily, this paper reflects on our development of the learning object *Online learning @ UniSA* (Duff & Quinn, 2004; see Figure 1). The main driver for this development was concern from teaching staff about student readiness to study online and its potential impact on retention in online courses.

Figure 1: Front page of *Online learning @ UniSA* showing the online learning community within the learning object and the structure of the web site.

Aim

This paper has two aims.

The first aim is to argue for better preparation of learners so that they make an informed choice about studying online. This preparation will enhance the enjoyment of their learning journeys so that, when faced with difficulties, they are more likely to persist.

The paper is a reflection on the development of a resource that gives students an awareness of the implications of studying online before they made a commitment to it. This would mean they could embark on their studies with their eyes wide open to the benefits, potential pitfalls and personal qualities required for success in online learning.

The second aim is to demonstrate how a theoretical framework for adult learning can be used to inform the design of an effective learning object that would be used independently by students. An accessible online learning object was conceived as the most appropriate approach to reach the growing numbers of online students requiring this type of induction.

To meet both aims, the design of *Online learning @ UniSA* was guided by Raymond Wlodowski's (1999) motivational framework for inclusive adult education.

The impact of the resource on learners was evaluated by determining how many users engaged with it; examining student and staff experiences and (indirectly) quantifying the retention rates in a target program (Bachelor of Arts).

Applying Wlodkowski's Motivational Framework to an Online Environment through the Voices of Online Peers

Wlodkowski argues that the role of the teacher is to nurture the intrinsic motivation of the learner. For adults to stay motivated within learning environments, they need to feel included, see the learning as personally relevant and engage in challenging and thoughtful learning experiences (Wlodkowski, 1999). However, how can you do this when the learning environment is online rather than in a traditional classroom setting?

To incorporate Wlodkowski's framework into *Online learning @ UniSA*, the core element of the design was the inclusion of student voices to engender these feelings of inclusivity and relevance. Students tell their 'transition stories' from face-to-face to the online learning environment. The use of student voice is linked to notions around peer assisted learning which is 'a form of study support whereby experienced students ... support the learning experience of other, less experienced students' (Chapstick & Fleming, 2004). By providing student accounts of their experiences — rather than lecturer-generated didactic lists of 'what to do in the online environment' — *Online learning @ UniSA* provides authentic peer-to-peer accounts of online learning experiences, which equates to online peer mentoring or coaching (Griffiths, 2005).

Through recorded interview, four experienced online students (Nick, Melissa, Adam and a fourth anonymous student) and a facilitator (Andrea) 'meaningfully interact with other students' (Ramsden, in Peat et al., 2001) providing unvarnished accounts of the challenges and potential pitfalls of online learning. Their experiences are a cross-institutional slice of their studies, which take place jointly through UniSA and Open Universities Australia.

Students were enthusiastic participants and signed a talent-release form consenting to the use of their images and voices online to assist other learners. The learning object used short edited sound bytes of these student interviews to expand on their experience in the online environment. The sound bytes are accompanied by text for accessibility reasons.

Wlodkowski's Four Cornerstones

The four cornerstones of Wlodkowski's framework for enhancing adult motivation to learn are to establish feelings of inclusion, develop appropriate attitudes, enhance meaning and engender feelings of competence. In this section we describe each of these in more detail and show how they were used to shape the design of *Online learning @ UniSA*, as well as the selection of the words of the online peers for use within the learning object.

Creating Inclusion

The first element of an environment that motivates adult learners is creating an atmosphere that engenders respect and fosters feelings of safety, capability and an ability to influence the learning situation (Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 89). The students participating would, in effect, act as online peers for those considering online learning. When designing *Online learning @ UniSA*, we ensured the peers and facilitator introduced themselves and invited others into their 'online learning community'. They were depicted in various settings (for example, at a computer, in a café and at a whiteboard) and they provided a down-to-earth account of their daily experiences of online learning (Figure 2).



Melissa

'I'm doing computing and multimedia as my Bachelor of IT (Information Technology). I've been studying four years part time and full time on and off. I've studied one subject online. The course I studied online was Electronic Publishing on the Internet. In this course, we wrote online web page documents, rather than essays.'



Adam

'I'm a Computer Information Science student and I've taken two courses online including Exploring Technoculture and Electronic Publishing on the Internet. I came straight from high school to do my studies.'



Andrea

'My name is Andrea Duff and I've been involved in teaching online for about three or four years and the course I've taught in is Communication and the Media, which is a course run off-line at the University of South Australia but also online through Open Learning Australia.'



Nick

'Currently I'm studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Communications. I've been doing that for a year-and-a-half now through Open Learning Australia so it's all external. The more recent parts I've been doing have been online, including the current unit, Communication and the Media, where I'm studying the media, how it works and the involvement in everyday life.'

Figure 2: Introducing the online peers from various settings using images, audio files and transcripts

We illustrated the respectful nature of the environment through the inclusion and exclusion of graphics. We enlisted a graphic designer to depict the community as ‘connected’ with the teacher in a circle of learners. This equalised the relationship between learner and teacher, diminishing the traditional relationship hierarchy. One of our online peers was depicted without a photograph, reflecting the sometimes relative anonymity of the online environment (Figure 1).

We also selected excerpts from the recorded student interviews for inclusion in *Online learning @ UniSA* to discuss these aspects of online study. For example Melissa, one of the online peers, discussed how the anonymity of online learning can work in your favour:

One of the advantages is that it's sort of like being anonymous. I guess shy people might be more open than they normally would be because no one actually knows who they are in real life. So that would be one advantage.

(Melissa in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Developing Attitudes: Personal Relevance and Choice

The second of the four cornerstones in Wlodkowski's framework for motivating adult learners is to include opportunities for novices to develop appropriate attitudes that have personal relevance and allow for personal choice within the learning environment (Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 133). This fosters the goal of University teaching which is to engender deep — rather than surface — approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999).

The online peers included in *Online learning @ UniSA* spoke about how they required a ‘different level of motivation’ to get work done:

You definitely need motivation. You need to be able to...I suppose...create some sort of program yourself to be able to get the assignments done on time because there's no one there actually monitoring your progress [on a day-to-day basis]. You don't have tutors to actually speak to at a designated time...so if you've got a query you have to ask that before [the] assignment deadline because you might not get an instant reply...if someone doesn't check their emails straight away...It definitely takes a different degree of motivation to keep ahead.

(Melissa in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Adam spoke of having to ‘take that extra step’ to connect with people in the online learning environment, while Nick talked about the personal relevance of online study for him as it developed his skills using the Internet:

... one thing I definitely felt it [online study] develop was my becoming accustomed to [the online environment]. Previously I hadn't done a great deal [of] emailing anyone. I'd been stuck back in the telephone and letter age. But I was getting more used to using the net and getting that huge advantage and now I use the net quite a lot...except when my younger brother's on. Oh well...that's life!

(Nick in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Enhancing Meaning

The third cornerstone to a motivational learning environment is to enhance meaning for adult learners through creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include learners' perspectives and values (Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 179).

The learning activities within *Online learning @ UniSA* are listening to/looking at/ and reading text from student peers; an 18 item online quiz and an online survey to ascertain feedback.

The quiz allows novice learners to examine various elements known to impact on success in online learning, in light of their current attitudes and life situation. The quiz items were based on the authors' experiences, as well as several similar tools available online (Cowley et al., 2002). Embedded in the quiz is supportive feedback for each answer option as a technique to support learning (Quinn & Reid, 2003). At the end of the quiz, a score is generated and an interpretation guide provided (Table 1).

Table 1: Interpreting quiz scores

Number of Yes responses	Your predicted success as an online learner
15–18	You have what it takes to go well online — it is highly likely that, if you have the time to devote to study, that you will be fabulous!
10–14	You may go well in online learning but there are a few adjustments you will need to make to get you to be successful as an online learner.
<10	Perhaps you should consider a face to face course

To enhance meaning in our online learning environment our student peers were invited to describe online learning from the learner's perspective. In the section 'Benefits of online learning', Melissa talks about being able to study at 'her own pace' around family and practical issues. Adam talked about his perspectives of online study:

Then there's also benefits of staying at home and if it's an online subject, I've got all the information there and it doesn't matter where I am, I can always get to that information. Say you're stuck at your Grandma's house or babysitting your friends' kids or something – you can [use their computer] – it's all there.

(Adam in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Assessment is also a major issue from the learners' perspective. In the section 'Qualities for online learning' assessment in the online environment is explained, as well as the skills required to be successful in assessment derived from UniSA's Graduate Qualities (2006).

Engendering Competence

The final element of Wlodkowski's framework is to create a learning environment that engenders competence, or being effective at what we personally value. Wlodkowski (1999, p. 239) underlines that not only is it important for learners to feel a sense of competency, but it is also important that the learning is relevant to an individual's situation.

Online learning @ UniSA provides opportunities for students to use the very software that is specific to their study at UniSA. Its navigation structure is the same as other websites using the UniSA online teaching and learning platform. It also integrates the same quiz and survey tools. The learning object includes a page of technical support and a glossary of terms related to online learning.

The peers also spoke about making use of the support structures available for online learning:

If you want to make sure you do well, make sure you're up-to-date with internet technologies and the help available there because I know there's always people out there to help. You just need to get in contact with them.

(Adam in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

And about how it felt to become competent and effective in a new environment:

When I first began [to study online], I was anxious and resentful The anxiety and resentment have been replaced by a sense of confidence. I DID it! ... I learned to work with the technology. There were times I nearly threw the footwear at the computer... but no system is perfect. I will even go as far as to say I enjoyed working online!

(Anonymous online peer in *Online learning @ UniSA*)

Implicit in the design was that students would be given the opportunity to use the tools to become confident online learners, once they made the choice to undertake this mode of study.

Measuring the Impact

Our hypothesis was that the learning object, *Online learning @ UniSA*, has allowed prospective students to make an informed choice about undertaking courses that utilise online teaching and learning, via engagement with the practical experiences of their online peers. To test this hypothesis we have looked at quantitative and qualitative data in relation to website accession data, student and staff experiences and student retention.

Website Accession Data

Despite its area of specialisation (that is, online learning), *Online Learning @ UniSA* was produced as a generic learning support resource and therefore it needed to be given prominence in order for thousands of prospective students to find and use it. The resource was built in a non-password protected area of the teaching and learning server at UniSA (UniSANet). This would mean anyone could access it — inside or outside of the University. Links to the resource were created on every course home page under the heading 'Support resources for this course'. A link was also created in the student support unit (Learning Connection) website.

The site was launched and marketed during student orientation sessions, which took place just prior to the first semester in 2004. Hit rates for the front page of the learning object were almost 13,000 over an 18-month period. Hit rates, which are the number of times a web page has been viewed, can be only used to give an approximation of the use of websites. They do not provide information about where the learners are coming from, how long they stayed on a page or what they read. Counter programs cannot determine if the 'hit' was from a small number of users visiting many times, or many users visiting a few times (Stout, 1997). It is plausible however, to compare this hit rate to other resources that are similarly placed and marketed. In comparison, UniSA's Report Writing Style Guide had approximately 12,000 hits over a similar time period.

This comparison supports the hypothesis that *Online learning @ UniSA* was marketed successfully and accessed frequently, however more advanced tracking services and web file analysis would be required to fully understand how learners are interacting with the learning object.

Staff and Student Experience

Anonymous surveys were embedded into the learning object to collect user feedback about student learning experiences and suggestions for how the learning object might be improved (Figure 3). This type of optional feedback mechanism often captures small amounts of feedback and often at the ‘extremes’ (Kelly & Marsh, 1999). That is, people who take the time to respond are usually those who have a strong position about their experience. To date, responses to the embedded surveys have been small and mostly positive. The low response rate is a concern as it may indicate that users did not fully engage with the resource to the point that they felt obliged to contribute to its development. However, if the users are primarily novices, they may not feel that they are in a powerful enough position to make judgements and comments on the learning environment.

Respondents indicated that the learning object was ‘engaging’, ‘exposed issues’ and ‘built confidence’. These responses aligned well with Wlodkowski’s framework that described what adults require to be motivated to engage with learning, namely to feel included, to see the learning as personally relevant and meaningful and engender competence. Interestingly, approximately 10% of respondents wrote that, after engaging with the learning object quiz, they were not suited for online learning. In their responses they indicated that they would not enrol, or would need to consider their decision to enrol in an online course more carefully. This indicates that there has been a filtering of students prior to enrolment as their eyes have been opened to the expectations that will be made of them as online learners.

Your feedback on Online Learning @ UniSA

Thank you for taking a minute to share your experience with us.

Our response to your feedback so far
Your feedback so far has been very positive - thank you! There was a technical issue (an expired password) which meant that for a short period people were not able to access the quiz. Thanks for bringing this to our attention. This now has been fixed.

Please use this space to provide feedback about the web site to the authors.

1. Was this resource helpful and how can it be improved?

- (Enter text into this box, maximum 2000 characters)

◀
▶

Thank you, we do value your input! The information provided will be used to guide web site revision and development. A summary of your feedback and our response to it will be posted regularly.

Figure 3: Simple feedback survey

Student Retention

A coincidental source of data that provides insight into the effectiveness of the use of student voices and experiences in *Online learning @ UniSA* is retention rate. Australian universities provide the Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) with annual data on the retention of students in university courses. Retention rates are calculated as the number of continuing students enrolled in Study Period 1 of a given year divided by the number of total students enrolled at the census date of the previous year, less the students who completed in the previous year. This data can be cut in various ways including by internal and external enrolments, and by program. Table 2 shows the change in retention rate in external courses across the University and in the Bachelor of Arts program from 2002 to 2005.

The student peers used in the learning object were mostly drawn from the Bachelor of Arts program, so they would be most meaningful to those students contemplating online courses in this program. The *Online learning @ UniSA* workshop was introduced at the beginning of 2004. An increase in retention of externally enrolled Bachelor of Arts students was detected in 2004 (44%) and 2005 (22%), when compared to 2003. A smaller increase in retention of all externally enrolled students at UniSA was detected in 2004 (10%) and 2005 (12%) compared to 2003. The external student cohort in this data would include online students and other students studying by more traditional distance modes. As such it is possible that this increase in student retention could be attributed to changes in retention of non-online student cohorts. For this reason, we have referred to this observation as ‘coincidental’ data. Retention of external students, including online students, can be influenced by many factors, however student support and preparedness for learning in this mode are known to be significant factors (Thorpe, 2002; Tait, 2000). In further studies we plan to study the retention rate of selected online courses that explicitly use *Online learning @ UniSA* as a pre-enrolment resource.

Table 2: DEST-reported retention rates of UniSA students studying externally over the period 2002–2005 for the University as a whole and in a targeted Bachelor of Arts program

Retention rates (%) of external students		
Year	University wide	Bachelor of Arts
2002	61.09	50.00
2003	61.13	54.55
2004	67.17	78.57
2005	68.61	66.67

Discussion and Conclusion

Retention rates in courses have been a problem for many universities. There are two aspects to retention. The first is ensuring adequate support for the students who have enrolled in a course. The second is ensuring that only those students who are capable of completing the course enrol (Lowe & Cook, 2003). As the online peers point out, students need to be disciplined, motivated and self-directed for online learning (Cowley et al., 2002).

To prepare students for transitioning into online learning environments they need to have a realistic view of the study and technological requirements to enable them to succeed (Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002; Cowley et al., 2002). Their attitudes and perceptions will influence their decision to enrol; their motivation to complete and their engagement with either a deep or surface learning approach (Biggs, 1999).

Preparing students to be successful in online courses can be tackled in many ways (Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002; Cowley et al., 2002) but approaches such as *Online Learning @ UniSA* are an economically feasible means for universities to reach and prepare large numbers of distant students. *Online learning @ UniSA* was created over a six month time period by the authors to meet a local need in our Bachelor of Arts program. After this initial investment, the cost of this resource is low. *Online learning @ UniSA* requires little ongoing maintenance other than monitoring of, and responding to, user feedback. The resource has been reused by other online courses within the University, and is linked onto every course home page at UniSA (for example, see <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/courses/index.asp>).

A common problem with online learning objects that have been designed for students to use independently is motivating students to engage with them. The design of this resource applied an adult learning theory that had been originally designed for the classroom, to the design of an online learning object, in an attempt to stimulate independent student engagement. To our knowledge, this is the first time Wlodkowski's framework has been explicitly applied to the design of an online learning environment. Other frameworks for designing online learning environments to influence engagement and effectiveness of learning online are available (Laurillard, 2002; Herrington et al., 2003; Ferry et al., 2006), however, these are primarily for interactive and collaborative environments, not self-directed resources such as *Online learning @ UniSA*.

The choice to use the voices of student peers within this learning object, rather than didactic lists of preparatory information, was a philosophical one, which drew on Wlodowski's framework (Wlodkowski, 1999). Through the words of online peers we attempted to create an environment that was meaningful to new students, fostered inclusion, developed competence and appropriate attitudes to learning. Placing the resource in an online mode (rather than in printed mode) offered potential students an opportunity to become competent with unique aspects of online study, such as navigating through websites, listening to sound bytes and participating in quizzes and surveys. Over an 18-month period *Online learning @ UniSA* received an accession rate equivalent to that of the most popular online resource available from our teaching and learning support unit. In addition, the qualitative evaluation data from users of *Online learning @ UniSA* indicated that the incorporation of student peers helped connect novice learners to the expectations and attitudes they needed to be successful, coaching them to commit to action (Griffiths, 2005). To further explore the success of the framework within online environments, focus groups of student users of *Online learning @ UniSA* could be used. Based on the data available thus far, further application of Wlodkowski's framework for adult learning to different online environments appears warranted.

Online Learning @ UniSA aimed to open the eyes of potential students to the realities of online learning. Evidence suggests it has allowed students to judge for themselves whether they were in a position to study online, thus sparing them the pain, embarrassment, feelings of inadequacy and financial loss of withdrawing at a later date. This was perhaps the most positive outcome of *Online Learning @ UniSA*, allowing students to make the choice about whether to enrol in an online course or not, depending on their feelings of competence or confidence. By using devices such as *Online Learning @ UniSA*, universities may be able to have a significant impact on student retention rates in online courses.

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