

Centralising first year students' voices: Analysing Facebook status updates

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Abstract

Understanding how students experience their first year of higher education (FYHE) is an essential component of sophisticated transition curriculum design. Contemporary student voice is largely absent from the research which informs third generation FYHE research. Social network sites (SNSs) are a tool for adding student voice to the development of transition pedagogy. This paper reports on how one study gathered student experiences using the social network site, Facebook. By using research that archived the status updates of 26 first year students, this paper explains and justifies the use of phenomenography as a conceptual framework and research approach for dealing with social network site data. This paper also reports, in part, on the findings of a longitudinal study sought to understand the transition experiences of the participants throughout 2011. The potential of research using social network site data for transition curriculum design and future research is discussed.

Introduction

Creating an effective first year curriculum is a multifaceted process. Innovative and flexible curriculum and environmental design, good classroom practice, and an understanding of the students all play symbiotic roles in enhancing transition experiences. There is a rich tradition of research within the field of the first year in higher education (FYHE) that seeks to develop curriculum and improve pedagogy. While contextualising students is usually alluded to, the emphasis on the role of the instructor or institution continues to dominate FYHE research (Mills & Gale, 2011). There is an absence of contemporary student voice in academic discussions about transition pedagogy and curriculum.

Curriculum both shapes and is shaped by the societal needs; however, there are times when the cultural, economic and technological advancements in society outstrip educational institutions' ability to respond to the new context (Lattuca & Stark, 2011; Rudolph & Thelin, 2011). While past research is highly valuable for shaping a transition curriculum, building on ideas that were developed in a different communicative, technological and social context will only provide a partial understanding of the needs of contemporary first year students. It is this situation that universities are finding themselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is undeniable that there has been a major shift in the way first year student communicates in the last decade. Social media, specifically social network sites (SNSs), and the invention of the mobile telephone and wireless technology have revolutionised communication. Many researchers and curriculum writers have studiously looked for ways to harness the technology to enhance pedagogical, collegial and social experiences in the education system (Hew, 2011); In fact, research shows that many students are resistant to education professionals using SNSs to enhance their coursework (Greenhouse & Robelia, 2009). Very few studies have used the technology simply as it was intended and designed – an online place to socialise and record experience (Selwyn, 2012). Baker (2013) discovered the usefulness of SNSs for conducting a longitudinal study. She used content analysis of Facebook as a

component of a study into the reading and writing practices of 11 students moving from secondary school study to undergraduate study. Baker used Facebook initially to communicate with her participants as they moved from their common secondary school to multiple geospatial and temporal boundaries as they attended different universities. As her study progressed, Baker began used a content analysis of status updates made by her participants to enhance her inquiry. While Cheung, Chiu, and Lee (2011) did not analyse status update content on Facebook, they utilised the SNS for access and for the recruitment of participants to their study exploring what drives university students to use SNSs. Selwyn (2009), Jenkins et al. (2012) and Bosch (2009) all found that undergraduates are describing their university experience on Facebook, but only Selwyn (2012), in a later paper, extrapolated on the data to the question of how Facebook data can be used to describe participants' perceptions of university. Through reviewing the literature about the theoretical direction of research into SNSs, Selwyn suggests that there is a gap in the research where SNSs are allowed to be simply SNSs. In other words, higher education research has usually looked for a way to use SNSs to enhance university experiences rather than exploring what is being shared about the experience on SNSs.

This paper will focus on and justify the choice to use Facebook as a data collection tool for understanding the experiences of first year university students. It will also elaborate the use of phenomenography as a research design that centralises student voice. It will also report, in part, on the results of the longitudinal study that collected the transition experiences of 26 first year students from Facebook throughout 2011. The participants were school-leavers with active Facebook accounts and enrolled in one of a variety courses at one of three multi-campus metropolitan universities in Southeast Queensland. This paper presents four phenomenographic outcomes to describe (in part) what aspects of the university experience the participants were focussing their attention on at four critical times in the university year in order to add to the conversation about FYHE curriculum design.

Conceptualising the study

Issues of retention have been central to FYHE research since the 1950s (McInnis, 2001). Within the Australian context the experiences of the first year student have been the focus of a large scale, government funded, longitudinal studies begun in the early 1990s and still active with the next instalment due in 2014 (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). This longitudinal study was integral to higher education government policy shifts during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Bradley, 2008). The *Review of Australian Higher Education Report* (Bradley Report) firmly placed the funding of undergraduate education in the hands of the student with the recommendation that federal monies be attached to the student. It became in the best interest of universities to retain their students with the cost of attrition for each of the 38 public universities in Australia amounting to around \$20-\$36 million per annum (Adams, Banks, Davis, & Dickson, 2010). Economically, the first year experience is already focused on the students.

Learner centredness is a well-supported notion within individual classrooms and pedagogies; however, knowing the needs of individual students is a difficult task when considering the transition curriculum for a first year program aimed at thousands. The current FYHE curricula do allude to the idea of learner centred curriculum through acknowledging the importance of peer support, the ongoing nature of orientation (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010), the 'first person' cataloguing of transition indicators (Lizzio, 2006; Wilson, 2009), and flexible learning opportunities. These curricula are not truly learner centred because they do not centralise the individual, tumultuous, and cyclical nature of transition that has been

established in studies that use student voice (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011) nor do they aim to find out what the student already knows. Students come from a diversity of pathways into university; they live in a society where flux, chaos and choice are the norm; their university experiences, if they are going to prepare students for a future in contemporary connected society, the higher education curriculum needs to acknowledge this reality. Higher education pedagogy also needs to value the tools students use to navigate their reality.

Contextualising the student is essential to understanding the student. The first year student of 2014 lives in a very different globalised world to that of early researchers into the FYHE (James et al., 2010; McInnis). In fact, the globalised world is markedly different from that conceptualised by the Bradley Report that is shaping current higher education practice. In 2000, Bauman predicted that the mobile telephone would completely change the way the world was conceived. In 2014, smart phones are an essential piece of personal equipment made possible through wireless connectivity technology. In 2010, when this study was conceived, social network sites (SNS), particularly Facebook, had become essential communication applications especially for the youngest first year students (Alexa, 2011). The combination of wireless technology and SNS created a communication revolution where young people are leading the rest of the world. With this contextual understanding and the desire to centralise student voice, I chose to use Facebook to collect data.

SNSs are the quintessential embodiment of the fast pace of contemporary society. The chaos of experience is no more prevalent than when described instantaneously. The role of SNSs for enhancing social integration and learning experiences is extensive (Hew, 2011), though as Selwyn (2012) notes, one dimensional and determinist. He notes that the research is primarily concerned with what should or could happen. This concentration has led to a uniform view on how SNSs are used in education, usually centring on the digital technologies can enhance learning. There is little regard for the historical and sociological contexts that education and technology exist within. However, in recent years the increased use and accessibility of SNSs, has opened doors to a multitude of experiential descriptions. Research using SNS data has been growing since the turn of the twenty-first century with more and more social researchers seeing the value of online data (Lazer et al., 2009). Selwyn (2012) used status data to discover that undergraduate students were using Facebook to record their experiences of university and found they were using it for both academic, environmental and social ad-hoc learning experiences. The study referred to in this paper, sought to target those descriptions to better understand what students were focusing on at critical points during their first year of university. "We act and react to a situation as we see it and the way we see it decides how we act" (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 7). By discovering how first year students react to their experiences, a curriculum can be designed that helps students see their situation in a different way.

Research approach

Phenomenography is a useful tool for understanding the experiences students in contemporary connected society and useful for analysing data collected from Facebook. Phenomenography rigorously grounds its interpretations in the data, bracketing previous understandings and centralising the experiences of the participants. Phenomenography is also useful for applying an understanding of the learner to the creation of curricula (Åkerlind et al., 2010). While contemporary society is increasingly individualised due to the plethora of pathways available (Bauman, 2000), it is impractical to create a different curriculum for every individual that enrolls in higher education. The purpose of phenomenography is to map

a structure of the finite number of ways these individuals experience a phenomenon (Bowden, 2005). It was developed by researchers that realised that a phenomenon is learned in a variety of ways but that some approaches have greater similarities than differences (Marton, 1986). Therefore, if a scaffolding technique or teaching strategy were to be created around phenomenographic results, some aspects of the pedagogy would be recognisable to all the individuals. Therefore, phenomenography is a useful tool for understanding how first year students 'learn' to be university students because the outcome provides a finite number of ways a phenomenon is experienced, but provides enough variety to have a sense of individualism.

Phenomenography is a valuable tool for understanding how learning is experienced, especially when recorded on SNSs, because it takes what participants say about their experiences at face-value. Information recorded on SNSs has been regularly dismissed by popular media as lacking authenticity. While some academic research gives this popular view credence (Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012), there is an emerging understanding that online and offline life is blurred and that status updates are relatively representative of offline life (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). Regardless, phenomenography is not interested in whether the information provided on SNSs is authentic. Marton and Booth (1997) explain that "what [phenomenography] boils down to...is taking the experiences of people seriously" (p. 13). This means that whether truthful or not, SNSs publish the described experiences of people and that is what is interesting to phenomenographic study.

Phenomenography seeks to understand the different ways a group of people experience a phenomenon (Marton, 1981) and to reach this understanding, data is qualitatively collected from individuals. While interview is traditionally used to gather data for phenomenographic analysis, diary entries and historical artefacts are also appropriate (Marton, 1994; Prinsloo, Slade, & Galpin, 2011). The principal purpose of Facebook is to record personal activities using the status update function. A status update is a short, written online 'diary entry'. The status updates are organised on Facebook as part of a personal timeline. Facebook is essentially public and interactive personal diary.

There are four advantages to using observed and archived SNS artefacts for a study of first year university students compared to a formal interview, the most common method for collecting phenomenographic data. First, the interview has been criticised for not truly entering the learner's reality because the interview is an academic construction, familiar to the researcher but not necessarily to the participant (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). The interview is also political. A person's power is written on their body through the embodiment of gender, sexuality, race, class, and age (Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005; Probyn, 1991). No matter how many pilot studies an interviewer conducts to limit influence, the interviewer will always remain in a position of power, and the setting will never be completely comfortable for the participant. The interviewer and the participant are from different cultural contexts and past research suggests that interviews are affected by cultural norms (Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2008). SNSs, on the other hand, are an essential part of many first year students' lived experiences and they are places where many students feel comfortable and (usually) safe. During an interview, the participants will (usually) only describe the aspects of their reality with which the interviewer is concerned. On the other hand, status updates are unprompted representations of the participants' reality and, according to recent research, fairly representative of offline user identity (Back et al., 2010; Waggoner, Smith, & Collins, 2009; Weisbuch, Ivcevic, & Ambady, 2009).

Second, phenomenographers also seek to represent a snap shot in time. Status updates are an instantaneous captured representation of the users' experience (such as updates which are transmitted live from a lecture or tutorial). Interviews are usually reflective by nature. The interviewee needs to remember how they understand a phenomenon, whereas on SNSs, the participants' status updates are raw and immediate providing unique insight into a phenomenon. Questioning participants about their experiences would be intrusive, possibly adulterating the nature of the data gleaned from Facebook.

Third, a phenomenographic researcher would usually conduct several pilot studies. This would be to practice their interview technique in order to capture a snap shot of what the learner sees at the moment the interview is conducted, without changing the conception through subjective questioning or body language. When experiences are archived via SNSs, the researcher is bodily separate from the participant.

Fourth, SNSs solve longitudinal and multi-location study retention problems, especially for studies which recommend a sample of between 20 and 30 subjects. By connecting with the participants via their Facebook accounts, 25 of the 26 participants, of the study referred to here, remained to the conclusion of the data collection period. Facebook gave access to the participants around the clock, for as long as they remained connected to the study account and continued to use their own accounts. One student opted out during the data collection phase but only through the cancellation of her Facebook account.

Method and results

Twenty-five first year students from a variety of faculties across three multi-campus metropolitan universities in Southeast Queensland in 2011 first year students made their Facebook profiles available for phenomenographic analysis. The study used phenomenographic parameters (a detailed discussion about sole phenomenographic analysis is available in Åkerlind, 2005) to analyse Facebook status updates collected during four of the critical times for transition noted by Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011): orientation (CT1), the first assignment (CT2), end of semester one (CT3) and end of the year (CT4). Below, a basic overview of the results of the study referred to in this paper is outlined. It is not the intention of this paper to detail the results of the larger study (Barnes, 2014), but simply show how Facebook status updates can be used to show what first year students are focused on at critical points in the year.

CT1: Orientation

During orientation, the participants were understandably focussing on their new experiences. The status updates continuously recorded 'firsts' such as first arrival on campus, first lecture, first days and new tensions between university and finances. The participants were also focussing on old social connections and plans for making new friends. Status updates listed parties and organised events the participants. However, the majority of the social interaction was with the participants' outside-university network. Facebook interactions showed the participants were connecting with old friends and family to share their experiences and elicit advice. For example, F12 is given advice about buying her textbooks and gives advice as to how to receive a book voucher:

Debating with myself the importance of attending a half hour campus tour. I think I might sort out my books and use my \$120 book voucher :) thanks [University]. [F12 is cautioned to not be so quick to buy her textbooks] Yeah I got the same talk from the lady at creative industries. \$120

voucher is pretty kick ass [University A] just give them to you. Ask [University A]. I got a phone call but some people have to go and talk to their faculty coordinators.

In the far peripheral were the participants' conceptions of the supposed core business of orientation. Infrequently, they referred to their lectures commenting simply on the titles of courses and attributes of their instructors.

CT2: First Assignment

During the preparation, submission and feedback process of the first assessment pieces, the students were understandably focused on their assessment. The experiences of assessment were highly emotive with many status updates using explicit language and concepts, capitalisation and punctuation to express intensity of experience. For example, M02 describes his experiences with a piece of assessment:

Dear [Subject]; the diaries we are made to write for you every selected week, are all loads of shit. The questions they contain are absolutely the most insignificant pieces of shit i have ever read. You are currently, the biggest waste of time in my life and I am appalled at how much of a load of shit you are. Go die in a hole. Regards [M02] :) [sic]

The minor focus was on experiences of the classroom. Status updates include descriptions of 'live' experiences from lectures such as perceived relationships with instructors, pedagogy and comments on climate control. For example, several students commented on the temperature of the air conditioning. Conceptions of attendance are in the periphery, moving in and out of focus as participants are running late, questioning the necessity of lectures or expressing anxiety about absenteeism. How the participants describe their sense of university as a place is also a peripheral category but only focused on momentarily as they are confronted with further new experiences. For example, M07 comments on an act of theft: "Who the fuck steals a water bottle with [M07's NAME] printed on it. I'm pritty sure I'm probs the only [M07's Name] who goes to [University B]. WTF??? it doesn't make sense." [sic]

CT3: The end of first semester

The end of first semester fell, for the majority of participants in the final examination period of the first semester. The focus of this CT was again on assessment. However, within this focus, aspects of assessment changed between writing, completing and submitting assignments, studying for examinations, waiting for results and receiving feedback. Though assessment takes up the majority of the participants focus for CT3, conceptions of the university schedule move in and out of focus regularly. The participants wrote of their experiences enrolling for second semester, report on their exam schedule and anticipate and plan their holidays. For example, M06 describes his experiences of missing out on enrolling in a class: "all 20 marketing tutorials full within 16 minutes of registration being available... was not worth getting up for".

During CT3, a sense of place is also in the peripheral, moving into focus sporadically throughout the time. CT3 is also the first time a participant openly reflects on her transition to university. F07 wrote a status update that reflects a sense of place through describing her experiences of belonging.

"I was always told that I would miss school once I left. Well, I don't. I can see that others do. I guess I might be strange or something, because I doubt that I will ever miss school. I never really

belonged there and I never fit in. I will miss uni when I finish because I do belong there and I do fit in.” [sic]

CT4: The end of the year

The end of the year period of time, like CT3, fell during the finalisation of assessment and examination block and study was the focus of the participants. However, the focus on assessment lacked intensity of previous periods of time. The levels of anxiety were lower (though still apparent) but more often the participants used Facebook to organise study groups, discuss content, tick off lists and ask for help. For example, M05 uses Facebook to organise a Maths study group and describes his study plans: “[Friend A,B,C,D,E and F]. Math all day study and whatnot at mine tomorrow? I don't plan to sleep until after the exam, haha” [sic].

The participants’ experiences of the expectations and content of assessment tasks were in the peripheral during CT4. The participants wish members of their network ‘luck’, describe their travel to and from examinations, celebrate completion and reflect on results. In fact, reflection is another aspect of CT4 which largely remains in the peripheral but is often attached to status updates which focus on other experiences. For example, F19 reflects on her choice of career whilst commenting on the content and expected difficulty level of an examination. F05 writes of “thinking about dropping out of uni”. She explains that she has a learning difficulty which prevents her from transferring her engagement in class into her written assignments and exams. She describes her depression about a sporting injury, the need to work, how much she needs to work to keep up with her studies and her lack of social life. She states that her “stress levels have never been higher” and that she is “hopeless”. Experiences of looking forward to holidays or finishing university for the year are also peripheral and move in and out of focus attached to other experiences. For example, M07 references both assessment and holidays and “I'm so close to finishing exams I can taste the beach; In my mouth. Mmmm crunchy salt sand...”, F02 is both reflective and finishing for the year “finished uni for the year. Feeling abit happy and sad [uni] is the best place ever!” [sic]

Discussion, limitations and further research

First and foremost it is important to note that the participants of this study were in fact recording experiences of their first year at university. As also noted by Selwyn (2009), the status updates include post-hoc descriptions of learning experiences, the exchange of information, moral support, and descriptions of academic engagement. The status updates also showed that first year students reflect on their university experiences. Furthermore, the data shows that experiences of first year are diverse and complex.

The results also support research that acknowledges that induction does not occur at a single point in time but rather throughout the year if at all (Kift et al., 2010; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011; Wilson, 2009). It is not until the end of first semester that the participants are expressing feelings of belonging. Enrolment into second semester courses becomes a milestone whereby the first year students demonstrate their intention to continue their studies.

The phenomenographic outcomes reveal what participants from several disciplines across three universities are focussing on during the critical points of time during their first year. This is valuable knowledge for transition curriculum development because it gives an idea of what strategies for success could be taught at what critical time. For example, the idea of conducting a transition skills workshop during orientation may not be useful because this is

not what the students are focussed on. Though students report that their core business during orientation is academic (White), their actual focuses (according to the data presented in the larger study) are new and social experiences. The students are focused on the 'new', 'fun' and 'exciting' aspects of university such as parties.

This research argues that it is worth exploring FYHE curriculum using modern technologies. The use of SNSs to track the experiences of first year students has great potential for future research, especially for longitudinal studies that follow large students for an entire degree. However, the size of the data-set would pose problems for small-sample qualitative approach like phenomenography. The use of software could overcome this limitation as it could handle a much larger amount of data (Penn-Edwards, 2010).

A further limitation is in the changeable nature of social media. Mini-blog and video-log social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube are gaining popularity and also contain descriptions of experiences of first year. These applications, unlike Facebook profiles, are publically available.

This study supports the emerging bank of literature that suggests first year transition is not a smooth process. The pathways into first year university are diverse, calling for a diversity of approaches to assist transition. The major contribution to knowledge of this study is that there is potential in using social media as a data collection tool for adding student voice to curriculum design and thereby enhance the experiences of the first year in higher education.

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