



Embedded and scaffolded course design enhances students' online learning experiences

The challenge

Established in 1967, the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) operates over three Queensland campuses at Toowoomba, and in the outer Brisbane corridors of Springfield and Ipswich. Between 1967 and 2013 more than 88,428 students graduated from USQ and there are currently more than 28,000 enrolled students. The student cohort is very diverse, for example 34% come from low socio-economic status backgrounds. USQ is one of Australia's largest providers of online (distance) education programs, with more than 75% of its students studying via distance or online. Since 2014, all programs and courses are offered online, with Moodle (or Study Desk) being the primary mode of delivery.

USQ studies have revealed that the cultural and structural challenges faced by commencing students are exacerbated in an online delivery context. Students, including those enrolled in on-campus mode, report high levels of apprehension about navigating the digital environment, which appeared to aggravate their discomfort and anxiety, and contribute to students expressing their intention to leave.

This case study investigated the experiences of undergraduate nursing students studying two compulsory first year core courses, Building Professional Nursing Attributes A and B (CMS/MAT).

'Wow, there are a lot of people in the same boat as me, and all different walks of life.' And that was very reaffirming, 'Yeah no, you're not alone in this.'... You weren't alone at all in the study, and it sort of made you feel like, 'You're okay, keep going.' Because everyone else is feeling a little bit like you're feeling.

The rationale for these courses is to empower students by intentionally embedding and scaffolding core online and university literacies. CMS/MAT's interdisciplinary whole-of-program approach replaced the previously used de-contextualised, 'bolt-on' skills course.

The case study investigated whether the courses assisted students to become more familiar with the largely online USQ environment and, in turn, enhanced students' experiences in transition, and influenced retention.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 6 students and 6 staff between January and March 2016.

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Key findings

The case study found that the two embedded and scaffolded courses assisted first year nursing students to master the literacies required to study in a largely online regional university environment and to feel more confident about their studies.

Skills Building

MAT and CMS were a good way to ease me into assessment expectations, how to upload assignments, things like that... If it wasn't for those aspects, I probably would not still be at university. I would have dropped out. (Student)

I couldn't have actually progressed without having done those courses. (Student)

A sense of belonging

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Importantly, staff saw the benefits of this approach, empathised with the students and understood their responsibilities in developing students' self-efficacy.

It's an ironic situation where all the information and the help to navigate those digital systems are actually also online, so that's a problem in itself. (Staff)

Not knowing what they don't know, students don't know how to navigate around the culture of a university and it takes six months to be able to do that, we need to teach some of that. (Staff)

Embedding tertiary literacies in first year subjects shapes the student experience

The data collected for this case study showed that embedding tertiary literacies and skills building into two core first year courses works because it increases students' motivation, skills, identity and self-efficacy. These factors, in turn, have a positive influence on student engagement, and increase students' sense of belonging, interaction and participation.

Implications for practice

This case study confirms more than a decade of earlier work on the deficit discourse shift¹ and Transition Pedagogy². This earlier work has highlighted the importance of embedding the literacies needed by students to successfully undertake tertiary study within the curriculum as an intentional part of the first year experience.

What this current study has revealed is the mechanisms by which 'embedding' works. Embedding skills development works because it highlights the skills needed by the students in their discipline, which in turn builds their confidence, self-efficacy and motivation to complete their program. A sense of belonging is created because students feel as if they are part of a group, encountering the same challenges and having shared goals.

Conclusion

Case study data revealed that the two embedded and scaffolded core courses assisted first year nursing students to become more familiar with the often unfamiliar and largely online regional university environment, and to feel more confident as they attempted to engage and master the literacies they needed to be successful with their studies.

1 Lawrence, J. (2003) The 'deficit-discourse' shift: university teachers and their role in helping first year students persevere and succeed in the new university culture. UltiBASE. <https://eprints.usq.edu.au/5469/>

2 Kift, S. (2009) Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education <http://transitionpedagogy.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Kift-Sally-ALTC-Senior-Fellowship-Report-Sep-09.pdf>