

Starting online: Exploring the use of a Social Networking Site to Facilitate transition into Higher Education

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Abstract: It has been widely recognised that transition into higher education (HE) can be challenging for incoming students. Literature identifies three main areas where students may benefit from support: social, practical and academic. This paper discusses a case study that explores the potential of a social networking environment to provide support in these areas during students' transition into HE.

The Learning Development Unit (LDU) at Bucks New University has previously addressed transitional issues through pre-sessional campus-based programmes. However, to provide opportunities for a wider range of students, the LDU launched Startonline in 2010. This online pre-sessional environment used the social networking platform Ning to provide new students with access to non-subject-specific academic activities (e.g., critical thinking), social networking tools and practical information. As a pilot, the aim was to observe where students focussed their attention and explore the affordances of a social networking environment for facilitating transition.

Startonline ran for the month leading up to the beginning of the academic year, during which time around 300 students signed up and participated. Quantitative analysis of platform user data was conducted and student and staff participants were interviewed, providing useful qualitative data. Findings highlighted that students' engaged intensely in social and informational aspects of the environment, but remained resolutely uninterested in generic academic activities. There was, however, considerable self-directed interest in finding subject-specific information and learning activities. Direct, personal involvement of subject-teaching staff seemed the determining factor in take up of these aspects.

Social networking platforms are already used by students to maintain social capital and access emotional support from existing social networks when leaving secondary school. This project highlights that, equally, such environments also provide powerful opportunities for students to establish social networks as they transition into higher education. Lessons have also been learned with regard to effective pedagogical strategies for engaging students academically in social networking environments and areas identified for future research.

Keywords: Transition, social networking, social capital, affordances, engagement

1. Introduction

A review of theories related to student retention by Braxton and Hirschy (2005) suggests that while the issue of retention is complex, two models remain important in understanding: Tinto's (1975, 1993) *Academic and social integration* and Astin's (1977, 1985) *Theory of Involvement*. Both these models suggest that the more engaged a student is with the institution, the higher likelihood of student retention. By focussing on the "known" elements, such as academic, social and practical information, it is possible for universities to contribute actively and positively during the transition phase to facilitate this engagement. This case study considers the use of a social networking site (SNS) to provide support to students in their transition into higher education.

The Learning Development Unit (LDU) at Bucks New University (Bucks) has been addressing transitional issues for a number of years through face-to-face pre-sessional campus-based programmes. These programmes have been highly successful in terms of providing students with opportunities to develop academic skills and engage socially. However, these programmes are necessarily limited in the number of students that can participate. This short paper reviews *Startonline*, a bespoke SNS based on the Ning platform, launched in 2010 to provide opportunities for a wider range of students. The environment included video, podcasts, discussion forums and web pages, including:

- non-subject-specific academic activities: critical thinking; logical reasoning, writing skills
- social networking tools: profiles, 'friending', messaging and chat
- practical information ranging from student services to local entertainment

In total, just over 300 people became members (took the steps of registering to access information on all pages). Of these, 25 were staff. While not all users provided information of their geographic location, 10% of the total self identified as being from outside the United Kingdom.

Quantitative analysis of platform user data was conducted using the site itself and Google Analytics as well as qualitative review of the exchanges. This was complemented with interviews with students as well as one staff member.

2. Emphasising the social in social networking

Establishing friendships and social networks has been described as key to transition (Lowe and Cooke, 2003; Maunder *et al.*, 2010). A study of undergraduate students at Bucks noted that first-year students depend on their network of friends for everything from moral support to more general guidance, concluding that universities should do more to ensure that students have the opportunity to create these networks as soon as they start their studies (Wickens *et al.*, 2006).

SNSs are well-placed to provide students with opportunities for establishing contact with each other; they are well established as part of students' existing communication systems (Phipps, 2007) and play an acknowledged role in the ways in which they manage and maintain their 'social capital' (Ellison *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, it was clear from *Startonline* activity and from interviewees that students were keen to use the technology to lay the groundwork for future university-based relationships.

I like how it was set up so that students that were just starting could like get to know people that could be on their course or who they might be living with things like that... so that you don't feel too scared or anything when you come in to the Uni thinking "Oh no I don't know anyone." (Excerpt from student interview)

Statistical data demonstrated that the most popular areas were member profiles and discussion forums. Approximately 60% of discussions initiated by students related to finding others who were either studying on the same course or living in or near the same accommodation (see Fig.1, below). This highlights that building social capital was the primary concern of users, and that there was interest in transferring these beyond the *Startonline* environment.

Theme	Threads	Replies	Total (threads and replies)	% of total discussion activity
Social	37	173	210	63
Practical	7	24	31	9
Academic	0	0	0	0

Figure 1: Summary of student discussion forum activity (threads and replies)

Using a bespoke SNS solution rather than building on students existing online profiles (e.g., in Facebook), allowed *Startonline* to circumvent those privacy issues identified in other studies (Ribchester, 2009; Sturgeon and Walker, 2009) and located control firmly with the students in terms of the extent to which they could choose to make links between their personal online 'spaces' and their more public university 'faces'. Interestingly, there is clear evidence of students establishing initial contact in *Startonline* and then moving out into the private domain by exchanging profile information and 'friending' each other on Facebook. Similarly, there is also evidence of interest and intention of meeting within the physical University environment at an event just prior to induction

3. Managing practicalities

Managing the practicalities of living away from home in an unfamiliar environment and obtaining information related to the university was another focus for concern. The most popular thread was called "Ask any question", and enabled students to find out information accordingly. Students were also pro-active in starting their own discussion threads if they needed information. Indeed, almost 20% of all student-initiated threads were requests for information. Equally, students seemed content to answer one another, or direct others to information. In the case where specialised information was needed, the Students Union or appropriate staff member provided information. These interactions highlight that the students were both interested in practical information and pro-active in obtaining it:

I'm disabled. So I was a bit unsure about how I was, you know, how I'd go about finding the Disabled Unit and what I could do, and what sort of help they'd give[...] I did ask a few questions I wasn't sure about. So, I asked those myself. (Excerpt from student interview)

4. Learning

Student problems during first year are often related to a lack of study skills (Winterson and Russ, 2008; Cook and Leckey, 1999). However, none of the three learning generic activities were engaged with by students. Reasons for students' lack of engagement in this area remain unclear, but a possible cause is suggested in the way that SNSs can be said to afford interaction and provide opportunities for learning. Where the technology was used in a way that 'played to its strengths' (i.e., to connect with others and convey information) learning opportunities seemed to occur spontaneously. Where subject-related teaching staff members were available (and *seen* to be available), students self-directedly sought information and engaged with materials in a way that could be usefully built on within the physical teaching environment. Students also showed interest in finding subject-specific information and learning activities.

It is telling that this learning-related activity took place solely via direct messages to staff profiles, rather than in the public discussion forum, perhaps reflecting Greenhow's (2009) assessment of the usefulness of SNSs to afford useful academic behaviour. Direct, personal involvement of subject-teaching staff seemed the determining factor in encouraging this. Staff who engaged with students directly, providing subject-related content, found the experience rewarding and were able to draw on shared *Startonline* experiences during initial face-to-face contact:

...[it] was very useful in terms of that engagement: breaking it down rather than being just a cold lecture [...] it became something that was a little bit more vibrant, really. (Excerpt from staff interview)

5. Lessons learned

One of the main points of learning relates to the appropriateness of the participants' engagement with this type of environment in relation to their role as learners. 'Learning to learn' is fundamental to students' transition to HE; a key element is fostering the students' understanding of their own role within the experience (Wingate, 2007). However, in most cases, the first contact with the new environment that students experience is an instructor-led setting where they passively receive information. The provision of resources that students can access, manipulate, control and question is a positive model for their introduction to HE. Results suggest that this is the case: many students modified their profiles, while others started discussion threads or answered questions for one another. Notably, almost 80% discussions in the discussion forum were started by students. The use of an SNS allows them, in many cases, to use tools that they are already confident and competent in using in these interactions.

Staff, however, proved less comfortable with or attuned to the affordances of the SNS environment. While some expressed excitement at the opportunity to develop their own presence and resources within *Startonline*, and some evidentially did so, many did not participate, or participated only partially, registering but failing properly to engage with the SNS 'spirit', including no personal photograph, giving no indication of subject expertise and teaching interests and making little effort to attempt to connect with their future students. Based on this experience, it is suggested that a university-wide strategy and set of explicit guidelines on how staff might best engage with SNSs are needed in order to promote an equal opportunity for all students to engage with their tutors and to provide tutors with the benefits of engaging with their students prior to arrival.

One section of staff that provided essential support to the environment was administrative personnel. The "Ask any question" thread that proved so popular with students was initially maintained by academic staff responsible for the project. However, it was quickly apparent that the most effective host for this area would be an administrative assistant. The active involvement of administrative staff

provided necessary practical information, and in doing so contributed to the success of one of the most popular areas of the site.

6. Ways forward

Following initial success with Startonline in 2010, a further iteration of the environment was made available in 2011 and another planned for 2012. While it is beyond the scope of this brief paper to discuss in detail the results of Startonline 2011, two aspects of the experience were notable and cast an interesting light upon this discussion. First, the adoption of SNS-appropriate approaches to using the environment by staff was clearly seen to be instrumental in creating opportunities for student engagement. In particular, personal and personable approaches accompanied by staff photographs were seen to be effective in creating space for staff-student interaction. Second, and to our surprise, student numbers and the amount of social interaction in the SNS were much reduced in comparison to 2010. This may have been due in part to changes in which the university marketed its pre-sessional activities in 2011, but it may also result from students finding or creating opportunities for social interaction elsewhere via existing tools such as Facebook. This would cast an interesting light on those concerns relating to students' management of their personal and public identities in SNS (Ribchester, 2009; Sturgeon and Walker, 2009) and how we might usefully provide opportunities for such interactions in the future. Clearly, further research into student use of SNS and other tools in self-directedly and proactively attending to their transitional needs will be required in order better to identify appropriate strategies for supporting them in the future.

At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to assume that all new students conform entirely to Prensky's stereotype of the 'digital native' (Prensky, 2001) with their innate understanding of the affordances of the online environment and its tools and willingness to engage with them. Transition is an area of challenge, too, for mature students, indeed, in many ways, it is an issue of even greater importance for them than it is for those students fresh from the pre-university educational system (McGivney, 1996; Reay et al, 2002). The same also applies for the increasing numbers of international students entering the UK university system, for whom environments such as *Startonline* represent a useful opportunity to begin the process of engaging with a new educational culture, establishing networks of future friends and finding useful information about their soon-to-be new homes before they leave their existing ones. Further research is required into the uses such 'non-traditional' students make of SNS and related tools and how best these learners may also be supported in their transitional journeys.

7. Conclusion

Using SNSs has the potential to widen access to useful pre-entry information and allow students to engage easily and at a distance with other students and members of staff. Issues of privacy do not preclude the use of this type of environment, as these may be avoided by adopting a bespoke solution, allowing students to manage the degree of overlap between academic and private social networks.

It is apparent that the usefulness of the SNS is at its most beneficial when it is employed for its intended purpose. Using SNSs empowers students to engage in the useful activity of developing friendships, something that they are demonstrably interested in doing. Attempting to manipulate the affordances of the platform to provide generic pre-entry learning activities was not successful. However, the social engagement of staff members encouraged engagement with subject specific resources. Moreover, the development of students as self directed learners, who take responsibility for their own engagement, is a key benefit of using SNSs that could be effectively exploited.

Future research into students' use of the full range of SNS possibilities available to them and ways of supporting non-traditional students in their use of such tools will be useful in developing the range of resources available to new students in their transition into higher education.

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