Exploring the role of digital diversity in learning and belonging

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‘Access without support is not opportunity’ (Tinto 2008)

University is both a social and academic experience
Can be more challenging for diverse or under-represented groups entering university
‘A culture of belonging’ is critical (Thomas, 2012)

WP literature – little or no attention to the role of informal, peer to peer support or technologies
Digital technologies research – little attention to diversity and mainly formal uses of social technologies

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Digital diversity, learning and belonging (DD-lab)

• Funded by University of Bristol WP research programme – 2.5 years
• To investigate widening participation once students have begun their university education and how digital technologies are impacting on the successful engagement of diverse and under-represented students
• 2\textsuperscript{nd} year undergraduates – 23 programmes – 6 faculties -2013/14

To what extent is ‘a culture of belonging’ and engagement experienced by WP students?

What are the impacts of informal support and peer relationships on WP students in their learning lives?

How are digital technologies being mobilised by WP students for educational, cultural and social purposes?

What new forms of learning interactions are created?
### DD-Lab context and sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Under-represented category</th>
<th>University of Bristol</th>
<th>DD-Lab sample</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State school attendance</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>31 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1\textsuperscript{st} generation at university</td>
<td>Not collected</td>
<td>31 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students from black and minority ethnic groups</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>12 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature students</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>11 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local students</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>7 (22.6%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Participation of under-represented groups - year of entry 2012/13 (UoB Widening Participation statistical summary 3\textsuperscript{rd}. Dec 2012)
Methodology

- Co-researcher methodology
- iPad and Evernote to collect data
- Briefed to capture their ‘learning lives’
- 6 to 8 notes or documents per month long period
- Collected 637 documentaries, including text accounts, audio, video, photos, snapshots from screen or documents, annotated notes.
- 54 Interviews and 5 focus groups

Longitudinal qualitative study:
Three data collection periods
- November
- February/March
- April/May
Challenges of diversity

- Divide between home and university
- Mixed feelings about home
- Moving into university after 1st year – diff exp with peers
- The haves and the have nots
- Where you live/can afford to live
- Commuting in – who is local?
- Age divides – mature means many things

- Not being able to replace technology
- Financial pressures
- Lack of studying strategies (for some)
- Teaching styles – big difference to school
- Assumptions of academic staff
- Lack of prior knowledge of areas such as Latin, Further Maths
Mobilising digital technologies – for learning and belonging

Integrating different elements of your life

- Mobilising student voice for action and dissent
- Independently setting up groups themselves - peer working, projects, whole programme

Alternative sources (to tutors and formal teaching) of advice and guidance

- Producing digital arts for relaxation
- Mentoring with outsiders

Maintaining connections with home, family and friends

- Talking online about work across different times and spaces
- Photographing and scanning resources to take with them

Organising events and knowing what is going on

- Validating understanding and oneself

Maintaining links with the university from work

- Engaging in and creating alternative learning spaces, mixing the physical and the digital
- Meeting up and hanging out!
Students’ online social networking practices

the social and the academic are intertwined

Sustaining connections to home, other friends, mentoring

Away from uni but still ‘present’

Group spaces

discussions at scale, asking ‘dumb’ questions, checking, reassurance, collaborative work, problem solving

Social networking, especially Facebook is pervasive but can become exclusive and excluding
More emphasis in WP needed on supporting participation IN university

Importance of getting to know and work with peers

Digital technologies
- Helping to develop new forms of social and cultural capital
- Integrate social and academic endeavours, new academic spaces
- Support collaboration, connections to home and peers
- Opportunities for empowerment – but also disempowerment

More critical for students whose academic identities may be more fragile, sense of belonging more complex

Students should be encouraged to develop their own academic and social networks and capacities

Students’ researching their own learning helps their learning!
Next steps.....

• **Policy Bristol briefing paper** - over 100 distributed

• Influencing the Bristol Futures and BILT initiatives, work with SU and Student Services

• Working with the **Brightside Trust** and colleagues from Newcastle University on developing mechanisms for sharing stories of successful transitions

• ESRC/Newton funded project in South Africa
Thank you!

**Full paper**

**Project Website**
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Discussant

Professor Alvin Birdi,
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University of Bristol
Closing remarks

Professor Judith Squires

Pro Vice-Chancellor

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