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Of horses, possums and hogs: SPOCs and engagement in doctoral training in research methods

Introduction

The provision of advanced methods training to doctoral researchers in business and management has traditionally revolved around short, intensive, face-to-face courses. This approach to the development of research capacity and capability building has been subject to growing criticism from multiple angles. The funders, for example, are concerned about the comprehensiveness, depth and effectiveness of such training as well as its ability to address long term development or up-skilling needs (Moley et al. 2013). From the learner perspective, there have been complaints about difficulties with access, lack of flexibility and timing (Kilburn et al., 2015). Criticisms also concern the apparent lack of pedagogic culture around research training highlighting the ad hoc nature of provision as well as dearth of debate, investigation and evaluation (Nind et al., 2014). Recent developments in e-learning, specifically the emergence of SPOCs, may offer a potential solution to these problems affecting the current mode of advanced training provision. Contrasted with large and open online courses (MOOCs), the SPOC or small private online course restricts the access to learning to a particular cohort of learners. By leveraging the affordances of online learning platforms, SPOCs offer flexible, accessible and engaging learning environment. Despite these advantages, little is known about the actual pedagogical benefits and challenges that these developments bring. Among the challenges – student engagement – apparent consensus in the literature around the desirability to high engagement and the problematic nature of peripheral participation. However, ....

Drawing on the research of one such SPOC on advanced doctoral research methods training in a research-intensive university, this article aims to add nuance to the concept of peripheral participation in online learning. Using an adapted expert panel method and
building on interviews with method specialists, doctoral researchers and method teachers as well as detailed observation and evidence drawn from the online course, we explore what insights we may glean into the pedagogy of advanced methods training from this new mode of training delivery. In particular, we ask the following questions:

1. What distinctive pedagogical challenges and benefits arise in this mode of training delivery of advanced methods training to doctoral researchers in business and management?
2. How do instructors and doctoral researchers respond to those challenges?

The findings explore the distinctive benefits and pedagogical challenges of this delivery method and the discussion aims to stimulate dialogue and provide practical guidance. The pros and cons of the delivery method are highlighted together with potential solutions.

**On teaching and training for advanced doctoral students**

- teaching vs training

- advanced doctoral training

- advanced doctoral training online

**On student engagement**

Student engagement has long been recognised as a strong predictor of learner achievement and development (Astin, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement has been the focus of a substantial amount of research, covering themes such as benefits of engagement (e.g. Kuh et al., 2008), new conceptualisations or understandings of the term (e.g. Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013) and engagement in relation to institution characteristics (e.g. Finn and Voelkl, 1993). Fewer studies, however, have examined
student engagement in the context of online learning environments.

Engagement can be viewed from both a broader institutional perspective and narrower individual level. Kuh and colleagues develop the broader perspective. In line with earlier efforts to understand engagement (e.g. Steinberg et al. 1996, Marks 2000, Newmann et al. 1992, HEFCE 2008), the authors (Kuh et al. 2007) identify two distinctive characteristics of student engagement. The first is, intuitively, about the amount of time and effort students devote to their studies. The second characteristic, however, refers to “how the institution deploys its resources and organises the curriculum” so as to encourage students to participate in activities that lead to persistence, satisfaction and learning (p.44). Learning can thus be seen as a joint effort which does depend on institutions for providing students with the necessary conditions and opportunities to become engaged (Coates, 2005). However, it is still the individual learners who are ultimately responsible for their involvement with the course material. Thus, even though the idea of student engagement draws together considerations about institutional environments, learning resources and instructors, it maintains a focus on students and on the time and effort they devote to university study (idem).

Considering the individual-level engagement The literature distinguishes different overlapping dimensions of engagement, the most common three being behaviour, cognition and emotion. While earlier work often defines engagement according to just one dimension (e.g. Newmann et al. 1992 describing the construct only from a cognitive perspective), later theorists adopt a more holistic approach, taking all three perspectives into account. Let’s examine each of them in turn. Behavioural engagement (see Fredricks et al. 2004) entails positive conduct and compliance with rules and classroom norms, as well as the absence of disruptive behaviors such as poor attendance (Finn, 1993); it also involves participation in learning, including behaviors such as asking questions and contributing to class discussions (Birch and Ladd, 1997; Finn et al., 1995; Skinner and Belmont, 1993); finally, it implies wider participation in extracurricular activities, which is assumed to lead to greater commitment (Fredricks et al., 2004) by developing a sense of belonging (Finn 1993). The second dimension of engagement, cognition, most commonly refers to students’ self-regulation strategies, including the idea of planning,
monitoring, and evaluating their progress when accomplishing tasks (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). At the same time, cognitive engagement involves the use of deep learning strategies such as seeking to understand the material and creating connections between ideas (Fredricks et al., 2004), and relies on individual characteristics such as self-efficacy and a positive attitude in the face of failure (Jimerson et al., 2003). The main distinction between behavioural and cognitive engagement is that with the former, the effort is simply a matter of doing the work, whereas with the latter, the effort is focused on learning and mastering the material (Fredricks et al., 2004). The third dimension of engagement, emotional engagement, refers to students’ affective reactions to learning, including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety (Connell and Wellbom, 1991; Skinner and Belmont, 1993). These may have to do with immediate emotions, such as enjoyment and interest in the task (e.g. Furlong et al., 2003) but also with higher order affect such as attachment and identification (Finn, 1989; Libbey, 2004). Positive emotions foster a type of learning motivation (intrinsic motivation, see Kahu 2013) which is about taking pleasure and interest in learning and which is perceived to lead to better outcomes compared to more instrumental motivations (Bryson and Hand, 2008).

While the literature on student engagement appears to be dynamic and comprehensive, the shift to an online learning environment may throw a further challenge to educators and instructors, one to which student engagement continues to be interesting and to provide possible and interesting resolutions.

**On online student engagement**

Keeping in mind the three prevalent dimensions of student engagement, research suggests that behavioural engagement is important for successful online learning (Morris et al., 2005). In the online environment, this type of engagement can be measured in terms of the frequency and duration of participation, including the number of content pages viewed and discussion posts read or the seconds spent viewing content pages and reading
discussions. Morris et al. (2005) examined the correlations between such usage behavior measures in the online environment and student achievement, and found that achievement was positively correlated with the number of discussion posts read and the time spent reading them. With these findings in mind, instructors could facilitate student success by tracing where students are going in the course, how often, and when. They can also direct students to important content pages, give feedback on participation, and help students to understand the layout of a course, all of which could lead to higher success rates and higher levels of retention (Morris et al., 2005).

In relation to cognitive engagement in online learning, studies have revealed interesting insights, however most of them are not methodologically rigorous. Zhu (2006) started from the premise that cognitive engagement is not directly observable online, and thus she resolved to examine cognitive engagement by analyzing students’ behaviours of seeking, interpreting, analyzing and summarizing information and making decisions in online discussions. Nevertheless, the coding scheme she developed for understanding different levels of cognitive engagement was not investigated for validity and reliability (Shukor et al., 2014). Similarly, Shukor et al. (2014) discovered that sharing information and posting ‘high level’ messages such as explaining facts or asking questions also facilitates online cognitive engagement. However, their sample of only 20 undergraduate students is rather small, and future research should aim to replicate these findings at a larger scale (Shukor et al., 2014).

Considering emotional engagement, Cho and Cho (2014) discovered that different types of class goals can have a different impact on students’ affective engagement. They distinguish between mastery goals, which focus on improving students’ understanding of the material, performance-approach goals, which focus on demonstrating students’ competence relative to others, and performance-avoidance goals, which focus on hiding students’ incompetence relative to others. Out of these three, it was only the mastery goals which had a positive impact on affective engagement. By contrast, performance-approach goals were not significantly associated with emotional engagement, but to behavioural engagement, whereas performance-avoidance goals were not significantly associated with either behavioral or emotional engagement (Cho and Cho, 2014). What
this essentially means is that students who perceive their online class as being mastery-oriented tend to work hard and experience enjoyment, and those who perceive their online class as being performance-approach oriented tend to work hard, but not necessarily enjoy their work.

There is an emerging construct in the student engagement literature that has been considered in depth in the online learning literature. This is known as social engagement and refers to the willingness to socialize with others (Rennie and Morrison, 2013). This is promoted by interaction either between students or between students and staff, and online discussion forums, for instance, allow participants not only to exchange knowledge and ideas, but also to create a sense of community that bond them to the course (Hollands and Tirthali, 2014). This can be argued to be contributing to affective, emotional engagement with an online course.

In terms of engagement styles which students may adopt for various courses or for various aspects of their courses, there are two models which are relevant to this discussion. One is devised by Coates (2007) and is argued to be valid for both online and offline learners and it consists of 4 engagement styles: intensive, passive, independent and collaborative along two axes of engagement: academic and social. Students with a high level of both social and academic engagement experience what is known as an ‘intense’ form of engagement. Those who are academically, but not socially engaged experience an ‘independent’ form of engagement. At the other end are students who are socially but not academically engaged, exhibiting what is known as ‘collaborative’ engagement. Finally, there are ‘passive’ styles of engagement, where students are not engaged either academic or socially. Coates’s (2007) model comes close one emerging from a MOOC study by Miligan and colleagues (Miligan et al. 2013). This model differentiates between active participation, passive participation and lurking. Active participants represent the key group who contribute the most to the course content development and are the most successful learners. Lurking participants, on the other hand, are actively following the course but do not actively engage with other learners within it. They are not disengaged or unhappy with the course, but rather choose not to participate, either because of lack of confidence, or because they see silent participation
as a step to more full participation in future courses. Finally, passive participants are those who do not participate in discussions and also share frustration or dissatisfaction towards the course, either perceiving the connectivist nature of the course as inappropriate or failing to see the inherent value of learning through networks (Milligan et al., 2013). A succinct representation of the two models is illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Active engagement</th>
<th>Limited engagement</th>
<th>The grey zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coates 2007</td>
<td>Intensive engagement</td>
<td>Passive engagement</td>
<td>Independent engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milligan et al. 2013</td>
<td>Active participation</td>
<td>Passive participation</td>
<td>Lurking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These authors agree that students can shift attitudes between these styles. There also seems to be a consensus about difference between active and limited engagement, as well as about the features of participation within these two categories. The models however differ in terms of gradients of engagement (or indeed of disengagement). However, they do not invalidate each other; rather, one could interpret independent and collaborative engagement as gradients of ‘lurking’ behavior. However, there seems to be a grey zone there which is worth further consideration. This is also because the literature leaves this middle category out when discussing learning effectiveness in relation to engagement. For example, Astin (1993) and Fredricks (Fredricks et al. 2004) argue that student engagement is strong predictor of learner achievement and development, and Milligan (Milligan et al. 2013) claims that active participants contribute the most to the course content development and are the most successful learners. The implication is that passive participants are not as successful. In addition, there also seems to be a consensus in the literature that passive participants also show frustration or dissatisfaction towards the
course (Milligan et al., 2013). Active participants however are likely to find staff more approachable (e.g. Coates 2007), hence could be argued to be potentially more satisfied with their courses. Therefore student satisfaction as well as performance depend on whether or not students are engaging well with the course or indeed if they stay passive. Little is known however of their predicted performance or satisfaction with a course on which they behave like ‘lurkers’ -i.e. more or less engaged, either socially or academically.

It is these lurkers that form the focus of this article. We argue that they are reasonably successful learners and that they can be as satisfied with the course as their more actively engaged colleagues. These arguments come from the evidence gathered from participants to an advanced doctoral training course on research methods in which ‘lurking’ appeared to be the rule rather than the exception and which received full marks for student satisfaction.

The study (+ add almost 1 page = 200 words)

The context of the study was provided by the delivery of a SPOC course on advanced doctoral research methods training in a research-intensive university.

The course achieved an excellent satisfaction score, one hundred percent of the student having ticked ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ in the appropriate box for ‘overall satisfaction with the course’ in the generic end of course survey.

Some of the evidence on their actual engagement with the course came from the analytics embedded in the virtual learning environment (Moodle). Most of the evidence, however, came from a number of 10 in-depth interviews with the participants, in which they reported various degrees of participation and the stories surrounding and justifying their engagement with the course materials, its instructor and with their peers.
Findings- of possums, hogs and horses (3 pages = 1,000 words)

... (description of findings, with quotes, then clustering into the three types)

Discussion (1 ½ pages = 500 words)

Our findings need to be placed against the work done by Coates (2007), Miligan et al (2013) and Sun (2014).

...

Conclusion (1 page = 300 words)

...

References


Furlong


