

Combining international student social and academic transition online

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ABSTRACT

The social and academic acculturation of a large number of newly arrived international students challenges even the most prepared of UK higher education institutions. How best to facilitate students' social need to form new friendships with that of formally preparing them for the often unfamiliar academic demands of a different educational system? This paper will present a pre-arrival online course delivered to over 2,000 international students each summer, which combines student-centred socialisation with institution-driven academic preparation. From the initial data, it will draw some tentative conclusions about how far this approach could help facilitate students' transition in advance of their arrival.

Introduction

Most UK universities have now established a presence on social networking services such as *YouTube* or *Facebook*, including Chinese social networks such as *Weibo*, with the aim of promoting their institution, offering a taste of academic life there and providing answers to prospective international students' concerns. But how many international students are successful in hunting down those precious digital signposts created by their destination institutions? And how many receive a response to a posted message on a social networking site seeking to 'befriend' another student already studying at or destined for the same UK institution? The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) website reports that in 2011-12 the number of international students studying in the UK was climbing steadily towards half a million - a 2% increase on the previous year (UKCISA, 2013). Many UK HEIs (higher education institutions) prepare to receive between two to four thousand new international students each year and are faced with the challenge of how best to reach these students with preparatory information about their future academic life in an easily digestible format, and/or facilitate meaningful contact for them with other students. This project set out to develop one combined solution to these challenges in the form of a pre-arrival online course for all prospective international students for one UK higher education institution, addressing student concerns for both social and academic transition at the same time.

Identifying Different Needs

The desirability of preparing international students for cultural differences encountered while living and studying in the UK has been documented for some time (Braham, 2006; Webster, 2011) and multimedia online resources, both commercial e.g. *Access UK* (Copland, 2012) and free e.g. *Prepare for Success* (eLanguages 2013a), have been designed to aid aspects of student acculturation. Such tools can help students prepare for both general day-to-day life in the UK as well as some of the challenges of adjusting to a new academic culture. In addition,

institutions are increasingly developing and hosting their own pre-arrival resources which go well beyond the international Welcome Pack of yesteryear. *YouTube*, in particular, hosts a wealth of student-centred videos offering glimpses of life at university and on campus. However, a large proportion of our incoming international students (Chinese) are excluded from western social media and even for those able to access such resources, considerable effort is often needed to hunt down resources of this kind successfully.

Watching videos and doing quizzes to check comprehension afterwards, even if skilfully designed, can be quite solitary ‘learning’ activities and in the current era of social networking there is an expectation, on the part of many students, of making direct contact with other students. The considerable success of websites such as *The Student Room* testifies to this. In response, a number of UK HEIs have developed initiatives seeking to put international students in contact with peers already studying in the UK or with home students. However, offering international students the opportunity to meet and communicate online with those at the same or similar stage of their journey towards UK study could have the added advantage of allowing pre-arrival friendships to form and help alleviate students’ sense of isolation and, in some cases, anxiety, pre-departure. This project sought to design a pre-arrival online course that offers a combined approach to responding to these different needs.

Designing a Course to Combine Socialisation and Academic Acculturation

Since 2011 the University of Southampton has offered an online acculturation course ‘Get Ready for Southampton’ (GRfS) to all international students pre-arrival, focusing on students’ pre-arrival concerns and needs, preparing them for the location in which they will live and study, introducing them to practical aspects of British life and culture, and familiarising them with effective study skills and ways of dealing with aspects of UK academic culture which may present challenges (eLanguages, 2013b). The course, which was designed by the author, Principal Teaching Fellow in eLearning (Modern Languages), shares some of the features of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) in that it is free, can be sustainably delivered to a large number of students and allows scope for student interaction and collaboration in knowledge development. Through its availability to prospective students, it also offers potential as a recruitment tool. It combines self-access, interactive English language learning resources which provide a taste of UK academic culture, of EAP, and of the city and university where the students will live and study, with tools facilitating socialisation and learning by participants both inside and outside the course. It allows for large student cohorts (over 2,000 each year) to access it at different times over a period between May and October each year. Key features of the course design include:

- automated course invitation, sign up process and account creation for students through a single entry point
- flexibility - study pace and length of use decided by the individual student
- self-access interactive course content (activity-based learning objects) in aspects of general and academic acculturation
- socialisation, information exchange and a community-building dimension through the use of a social wall alongside a student-led discussion forum.

Socialisation through Social Walls and Student-led Conversation Forums

The course platform (Moodle v2) has two integrated communication tools - a ‘social wall’ (virtual corkboard) and a student-led conversation forum allowing student contact and communication to develop. These are student-centred and untutored. Free web 2.0 applications (*Padlet*, formerly *Wallwisher*, and *Linoit*) have been adopted as social walls. These are web-hosted and do not require student registration. The walls can host short customised student posts made visually attractive through colour, images, emoticons, etc (see Fig.1) and, unlike a discussion forum, the wall allows the content of all messages to be immediately seen. GRFS students are invited to post a wall message on entering the course.



Figure 1: Section of student posts on social wall (modified for confidentiality)

In addition, a traditional discussion forum is included to offer overflow functionality, and through which students engage in extended conversation. Initial research suggests that this operates in a similar manner to popular web-based applications such as *The Student Room*. A range of discussion threads develop between students applying for the same course; from the same country/continent; in search of future housemates, etc. It is interesting to compare the effectiveness of student-initiated conversation in producing student engagement through such tools with previous research, which has tended to suggest that key factors in the successful implementation of discussion forums are the teachers’ skill in facilitating and setting up discussion tasks (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003; Northover, 2002). Both tools receive considerable usage with the benefit that a sense of a course community is quickly established

and reflected to newcomers. Contact with domestic students is also facilitated through the inclusion of links to a range of student Facebook groups, although little data is available about the effectiveness of this at the time of writing.

Preparing Students for Life and Study Changes using Interactive Learning Objects

The interactive resources in GRfS employ video and other media embedded in self-access learning resources are developed in the form of ‘learning objects’. Their design draws on an explicit pedagogical approach (Watson, 2010) in which content informing students about the destination institution and locality, aspects of UK academic culture and general student life is packaged through structured interactive learning activities, supported by answers and feedback. Such resources offer flexibility in terms of how the individual student chooses to use them but importantly, content can be scaffolded so as to provide opportunities for language improvement at the same time. Design features which facilitate this include help and feedback sections, and transcripts of audio and video clips. Structured learning activities and the extra layers of support enable the learning objects to offer more scope for interaction and reflection. Consequently, there can be greater potential for learning than that offered by less rich but pure media resources. A practical and economic benefit is that learning objects of this kind are platform-independent and can, therefore, become reusable ‘building blocks’ for online course design, creation and delivery – a potentially very useful asset in the current age of MOOCs.

Summary of Initial Findings

Since 2011, over 6,000 international students have signed up and taken the online course. The annual number has risen steadily (2011:1,623; 2012: 2,113; 2013: 2,294 to date). These students are dispersed over many countries (105 in 2011; 130 in 2012) and are applying for (or enquiring about) a wide range of courses in diverse disciplines and at different study levels e.g. Foundation Year; undergraduate and postgraduate level taught and PhD programmes; ERASMUS programmes.

With such large numbers of students on each course, sorting and analysing statistical data and qualitative feedback presents a considerable challenge and is still in progress. Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from part of the 2012 data which sought to evaluate students’ use of the social wall and the discussion forum. Approximately 8 per cent (N=178) of the total 2012 cohort returned a participant questionnaire. This represents quite a small sample, probably due to the challenge of eliciting feedback online and after students’ arrival and full immersion into university life. However, only about one third of these respondents (29 per cent) claimed not to have looked at the social wall. Of the two thirds that did, over one fifth posted a message and made contact with another student outside the course (21 and 22 per cent respectively) by sharing contact details (including those for Chinese social networks). In the forum, 55 threads containing 167 posts were created by students. The student-led forum was viewed over 4,000 times during the course.

In addition, 72 per cent of the 2012 respondents reported using between half and all of the course content (N=179), with the majority reporting use of ‘all of it’. Written feedback from students has been very positive, as this small sample of final comments from 2013 student questionnaires completed so far (N=23) shows:

It makes it easy for prospective student to get to make friends and get to know about the school before resuming studies.

Very useful because I learn things (which will) affect me very much and somehow change happens to me. So I will be ready (...). Thanks a lot.

It's amazing and fantastic. I'm now better prepared and I know what to expect in the near future. Thank you very much for this wonderful online orientation.

Views of the whole course website totalled 24,000 in 2012 and in 2013, are expected to rise with numbers of student participants already having exceeded last year's total.

Conclusion

Student comments (e.g. those above) and a cursory examination of data indicating the general pattern of content usage in 2012 suggest that both the self-access learning resources and the tools facilitating contact and communication are welcomed by students and can complement each other effectively in an untutored online course delivered over several months. In addition, this type of design may also map best with rapid turnover in international student enquiries, applications and admissions over the final quarter of the academic year. As the course grows and the data generated can be more thoroughly investigated, it is hoped that more insights into aspects of the international student experience can be provided.

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