



## **DOUBLY INVOLVED OR DOUBLY ISOLATED?: LEARNING THROUGH FULL TIME DISTANCE STUDY. WHAT THE STUDENTS SAY.**

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### **Summary**

*This paper reports on one aspect of a small study which is part of a larger project concerning the ways distance students make supportive connections with other people and build them into support networks. The paper notes how full time distance students perceive themselves as different and reports on experiences at either end of a continuum of engagement involving two communities that provide the primary contexts for full time distance students – the close community of family and friends and the more distant community of fellow students. The paper maps the breadth of contexts in which full time distance students are undertaking study as the starting point for ongoing investigations. The evidence for the extremes of involvement was taken from interviews with a small number of full time distance students who were studying for Bachelors or Masters degrees. The data made clear that students experienced considerable variation in levels of engagement with each other and with family and friends and this translated into markedly different levels of support. Possible reasons for and the implications of this variation are examined in the presentation.*

### **Introduction**

Distance students' lives see them potentially engage in educational transactions in two lived communities – the distance community of fellow learners and the community of family and friends. There is potential for students to be engaged with both communities by sharing study experiences with family and friends, and life beyond study with other distance learners. An alternative scenario sees these students isolated from both communities if the demands and consequences of study make engagement with family and friends difficult and institutional arrangements make communication with fellow students hard to realise. While the first scenario sees students likely to be supported cognitively and affectively in many ways, the second suggests that support of both types would not be readily forthcoming. The study that is the basis of this brief paper used the voices of participants to explore whether fulltime distance students can be doubly involved or doubly isolated and to map the ground between these two extremes. In particular it explored the participants' perspectives of their life in and the inter-relationship between those two communities as a means to understand the factors that supported the students' ongoing study.

Distance education is mostly considered to be a means to obtain an additional qualification while still working, or to study a topic of interest in leisure time. In both cases the study

involved is usually part-time. The student remains in the workforce and maintains their engagement with their full range of social contacts except for the occasional weekend or late night when work on the next assignment just can't be delayed.

Students undertaking full time distance study are somewhat different from that usual picture. The full time nature of their study load typically precludes the possibility of work. Their study commitment means that they are generally committed to be studying physically alone and withdrawn from the community that surrounds them for long periods of time every day, to re-engage subsequently with that community as if they had been engaged in work.

In the New Zealand university system where this study was undertaken, distance students made up 16% of the total number of students in 2008. Approximately ten percent of those distance students were undertaking fulltime study. That percentage is likely to increase as a result of the current global recession as more people find retraining necessary and wish to complete that retraining as speedily as possible. Full time distance study is a relatively understudied phenomenon, but the percentage of such students is increasing. It is necessary to understand the study contexts of such full time distance students in order to adequately and satisfactorily support them as learners.

### **Brief review**

Distance student success is profoundly affected by the social context in which the teaching learning transactions occur (Gibson, 1998). For this reason, Gibson concludes that

*Perhaps the greatest service is to begin to understand the existence and impact of multiple forces, so as to create awareness and provide a source of emotional support to learners as they begin to act upon their multiple contexts toward the end of achieving their learning goals (p.124)*

These contexts are united within the concept of learner control, a central concept in distance education theory. Baynton's (1992) articulation of the concept of control includes both a sense of what the learner can do within the learning transaction through the dimensions of competence, support and independence as well as the importance of control of a number of direct and indirect factors related to the institutional and wider social contexts facing students. The concept of control thus acknowledges and takes account of the range of contexts that impact on a student's ability to attain (learning) goals. Exploring student engagement with those contexts provides a means to develop understandings of the ways in which they may or may not support learning and potentially to illuminate the concept of control.

Work, family and social demands are the major contextual factors affecting distance students. In the case of full time distance students workplace demands, if existing at all, are considerably reduced. The major contextual factors for full time students are family and social demands. In terms of supporting students toward successful completion, Asbee and Simpson (1998) reported that support from students' families, partners and friends was the most important source of support, ahead of support from tutors and then other students. Institutional support was ranked last of the four. Asbee and Simpson's study did not differentiate full time and part time students.

Work by Anderson and Simpson (2004) was undertaken with a group of full time students who were engaged in study using an online learning environment. Their research showed that students engaged in full time study found communication within small groups of fellow students to be the most important factor in both learning and affective support. Outside the

groups formed for study, support from the lecturer or tutor was next most important for learning. This study did not ask about support from families.

The nature of the distance study in which students are involved may have considerable impact on the contexts of study and sources of support. Distance study designed to be collaborative, such as much study undertaken in virtual learning environments, will provide more opportunities for interaction between students than, say, print-based material designed and distributed for individual study. But opportunities for online interaction and support do not imply students necessarily engage with each other. Haythornthwaite, Kazmer and Robins (2000) show that when students fail to make connections online they may feel under more stress and somewhat isolated in comparison to others in the online course.

In sum, the contexts of family/friends and, potentially, of fellow students are the two principal contexts within which full time distance students engage in their study. Understanding these contexts is an important aspect of the understanding the demands on full time distance learners. At one end of a continuum of support for distance students are those students who are doubly involved, gaining strength from engagement with family and fellow students. At the other end are those students who are doubly isolated, receiving little or no support from either.

This paper reports on one aspect of a small study which is part of a larger project concerning the ways distance students make supportive connections with other people and build them into support networks. It notes how full time distance students perceive themselves as different and reports on experiences at either end of the continuum mentioned above to illustrate the breadth of contexts in which full time distance students are undertaking study.

## **Design of the Study**

The data gathered in this study were qualitative in nature, comprising the text of hour-long interviews with 15 (13 female, 2 male) students studying full-time at a distance. The sampling was purposive, designed to provide a spread of geographic (primarily rural/urban) and subject matter contexts. The gender imbalance reflected the proportion of responses to an invitation to participate in the study; with one exception participants were over the age of 25 years. They were all university students studying for either Bachelors or Masters degrees, who were interviewed in their site of study. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to interviews. In the overall study data were analysed using coding techniques to develop themes and associated analytical dimensions. In the section that follows, quotes from students are *italicized*.

## **Findings and discussion**

Is it different being a full time distance student? Clearly the participants felt it was, and most had had previous experience of part time distance study, and of on-campus study. One difference is that study becomes 'work' yet the usual signs of work - employment and income - are missing. Another is that the student is not often at a recognised place where people go to be full time students. One participant studying full time at a distance after a year of full time on campus study said "I don't really feel that I am a university student if that makes sense."

Additionally, a part timer can hide the study, but a full time student can't.

*When you're doing your degree in little bites you can structure those bites to fit with whatever's happening ...but (full time) you're signed up lock, stock, and barrel and you have to do it but these things keep coming at you and you can't deflect them*

Solving the problem of "being at study" was central to being able to study effectively. Students did this in different ways, although some felt that they never fully succeeded.

*I've found it really hard being a full time student to get my family to accept that this is my full time job for this year, in fact impossible. They just simply don't and won't accept it. It's been my biggest challenge.*

For most, a variety of strategies, negotiation or luck gave them the space that was needed. Workspaces were carved out, people managed, time allocated and study continued.

One student reported:

*I work at my children's school. I have an office there, it's a quiet part of the school, it's got broadband computer in there, plenty of room. That has made life a lot easier*

Another felt lucky to have a husband who understood distance learning "*he had a very similar [distance learning] experience to myself ... in that he was very isolated so he understood exactly what I was going through.*"

If the difficulty of being at study was solved, the fact that study wasn't a 'third shift' (Kramarae, 2001), coming after work and family, meant that that full time distance study could be easier than part time study. "*I found it much more challenging being a part-time student because my job was so challenging. Some weeks I was doing 70 hours a week of work and then having to come home and read.*"

Being a full time distance student, then, presents a small complex of issues which is relatively unique to this group of students. Unable to hide their study, their distinctiveness as full time students away from an accepted place of full time study marks them as different within their lived community of family and friends. Their geographic isolation from fellow students makes it difficult to build relationships with that group. Student experiences of engagement with and isolation from these two groups is reported next.

Family, as one student put it, are necessarily included and excluded,

*you're including them and excluding them at the same time. You're including them because what you're doing impacts on what you would normally be doing with them and for them but you're excluding them because it's something that you're doing on your own and you often have to do it in isolation from them.*

Excluding one's family can work well as a student strategy, when isolating oneself to avoid interruption, but students run the risk of finding their study and thus part of themselves denied. One student's comments illustrated this dilemma.

*...if people aren't, particularly your husband, on part of your journey with you then, what happens? And that's concerned me a little bit. I have at times thought I just won't talk about some of that stuff and then I think well if I don't talk about it because it's actually something I'm really interested in then does that mean that I only get to be partly myself. I don't know, time will tell.*

Family refusal to treat study as a commitment led to a sense of lack of support and isolation, exemplified in the comment, "*no one ever accepts while you're at home that you're actually*

*doing anything valid*", but strong family support was also evident in some cases, with students saying of their family, *"they've decided to support me to get through this"* and *"my partner's ... really good, especially when I'm stressed or when I've got a lot on, he's understanding"*

Family members should be a strong source of support for full time distance students. Those family members are situated awkwardly because at times study undertaken excludes them. Yet effective family support for the student implies a reciprocal inclusive relationship. For some students such relationships seem never to develop. For others, gaining this support requires careful management of relationships while for a few it seems almost unconditional and readily forthcoming.

Fellow students are a potential source of support. One student illustrated how this was likely. Fellow students, she thought, would have an understanding of the demands she faced, *"nobody else understands what you've got to do. Your family or your friends, if they're not doing it they don't know the work that's involved and what you've got to deal with"*. A meeting with a fellow student left one participant *"feeling really motivated and stimulated by it because he knew some of the stuff that I was talking about. We could actually talk on the same sort of level and it's a feeling, it's a situation I never dreamt I would be in really"*.

Others talked about online discussions - some positively as in *"[it's] a really active environment because everyone's putting their ideas in no matter what they are"*, and some more ambivalently, *"it did have a little bit of a nuisance factor for me but on the whole I thought it was a really good component"*. Online environments have been found to be a source of support for students as noted in the review, but they need careful design and thoughtful moderation to become locations for support. Being an outsider in the online environment, consistent with Wegerif's (1998) notion of insiders and outsiders, was described by one student, *"A lot of the people on there, they sound really intelligent and so often I'll be like "oh gosh I didn't get that out of the book" and things like that ... I don't know if they just write it in such a way, it's quite intimidating sometimes, and I'm just like "gosh!"*

Isolation from fellow students was almost always expressed as a negative factor with students feeling that the contribution of others contributed to the maintenance of effective learning. One participant felt he regressed without that contact *"I'm alone in probably a number of areas. I'm alone firstly in contact with students [and] it's very easy to get into a very undisciplined approach"*, while another felt it was more difficult to advance, *"I've felt a little bit isolated particularly this year with that because I've got a whole lot of thinking that I really want to do some talking about because obviously that helps your learning"*.

## **Conclusion**

Full time distance students face several issues relatively unique to their particular circumstances. Prominent is their potential isolation from or engagement with two communities central to their life as students. At opposite ends of a continuum they can be 'doubly involved' – engaged with both communities – or 'doubly isolated' – relatively devoid of contact with or support from either. This paper provides a sense of the joys and frustrations found at either end of the continuum, illustrating the diversity faced by distance educators who wish to support full time distance students.

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