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BELONGING IN DISTANCE LEARNING: A PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

With Industrial Revolution 4.0, distance education is becoming a standard in higher education. One of the dynamics of distance education is that it allows the pursuit of education without the need for learners to displace themselves. It offers the flexibility of time and space in which traditional education is constricted. Previous studies have discovered that learning improves when there is a sense of belonging in the distance education community. Despite this, distance education is not omnipotent. Although it is convenient, the issue of effectiveness often comes into question. Previous research has shown that the lack of belonging is one of the causes of ineffectiveness in terms of satisfaction, graduation on time, dropout rates and learning outcomes in distance education. The formula for effective learning has consequently become a battle between belonging and isolation. This is problematic because, essentially, learners are expected to self-study in distance education. As a conceptual study, this paper investigates students' experiences in distance education through a preliminary qualitative survey for descriptive purposes. The preliminary study identified three major themes relating to the sense of belonging in distant learning for the students: the distance learning approach, self-study practice; and the balance between study, work and life. In general, students do not feel predominantly isolated by distance learning but this preliminary study shows that further research needs to be conducted to ascertain the link between these themes and the sense of belonging in distance learning.

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1. Introduction

In the light of Industrial Revolution 4.0, Klaus Schwab, the Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, argued that “one of the features of this Fourth Industrial Revolution is that it doesn’t change what we are doing, but it changes us” (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 36). Maynard (2015) commented that with the convergence of technology, there are bounds to be gaps in our ability and capability to use it responsibly. The revolution is coming whether we like it or not and if we do not embrace it, we shall risk isolation in this period of unprecedented change. To avoid this, Maynard sought to persuade us to act proactively. As the director in the Risk Innovation Laboratory at Arizona State University, he believes that we are able to adapt to this change and that one of the ways to do this is to build on existing formal and informal educational platforms which work on highly innovative programmes. He believes that online educational platforms will become increasingly important. When industry revolutionises so does the delivery of education, and Klesius, Homan and Thompson (1997) noted that with the advancement of technology, the instructional delivery methods have also changed. Distance education (DE) is evidently not a new phenomenon and it goes way back to before the internet of things when it was conducted by means of postal correspondence (see Fontana & Frey, 2003; Ford, 2009; Sherry, 1995).

In *The Evolution, Principles and Practices of Distance Education*, Holmberg, Bernath, and Busch (2005) offered this description of DE:

Distance education is characterised by teaching and learning being brought about by media: in principle students and their teachers do not meet face to face. One or more media are used for their interaction and for communicating subject matter, for example the printed and written word, audio and video recordings, telephone conversations, computer communication.

The reasons to pursue education through distance learning can vary. Holmberg et al. (2005) suggested that there are public and private, social and individual reasons and stated that most often, DE is considered by adults when they need to study while working and managing their family-life commitments at the same time. Jalil (2009) stated that DE has more advantages than a conventional university beyond its ability to accommodate students who had no opportunity to pursue higher education. Now that we have entered the fourth industrial revolution, DE has become the pillar for learners who seek education by having its concentrated delivery of education in a fast-paced changing environment. If workers in the new industrial revolution do not expand their skills or re-skill themselves, they risk being made redundant and replaced by automation and technologies (Frey & Osborne, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

Rovai (2002) suggested that DE programmes need to foster a strong community by building relations between learners and offering better academic support and reducing the sense of isolation among students in the virtual classroom. It is essential that students have a continuous and effective relationship with their institution in order to feel that they ‘belong’ to DE. Failure to do this will lead to a sense of detachment for the students and a high dropout rate for the institution. One of the reasons for the occurrence of the sense of isolation can be the different setting of the virtual classroom compared with the conventional classroom. Hassenburg (2009) reviewed the differences between the traditional classroom and DE and found that the

element of community in classroom learning was ‘shattered’ as the goal of the classroom shifted from a common goal to individual achievement in DE.

Belonging is a concept frequently discussed in conventional education and DE. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that belonging has two main features:

First, people need frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person. Ideally, these interactions would be affectively positive or pleasant, but it is mainly important that the majority be free from conflict and negative affect. Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future. This aspect provides a relational context to one's interactions with the other person, and so the perception of the bond is essential for satisfying the need to belong.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) implied that people require not only continuous but also agreeable personal interactions which are conflict-free. In this context, why is the sense of belonging so important in a community? According to Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497), “a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation”. Based on their extensive review of the evidence, they found that there is a basic desire for human beings to develop social attachments. Often, people appeal to social bonds even if those bonds are undesirable and they would avoid risking breaking these bonds. Baumeister and Leary (1995) added that the sense of belonging is not only beneficial to individuals but also shapes their emotions and cognition. On the other hand, they also showed that the lack of belonging will lead to afflicted situations such as psychological and physical problems.

In a study of belongingness in the conventional school community, Osterman (2000) observed a pattern similar to what Baumeister and Leary had described. Students who experience acceptance are more motivated, engaged and committed to the school. The benefit also extended to the quality of their relationships within and outside the school. This view was supported by Richardson and Swan (2003), who showed that students experienced an overall sense of satisfaction and strengthened their learning ability when they were exposed to the ubiquitous social presence in the course and when they corresponded frequently with their instructors. Similarly, Kuo, Walker, Belland, and Schroder (2013) found that students who spent between 11-15 hours a week online to complete their online tasks gained a deeper understanding and were able to achieve better-perceived learning. It appeared that the social presence in online DE plays a crucial role in assisting learning ability and can lead to greater overall satisfaction. They believed that an online education social presence is cultured as opposed to being based on communication media alone. More importantly, this culture can lead to increased student perceptions of learning, a first step, at least, toward actual learning. This further reinforces the view that learning is a social activity. Dickey (2004) made a similar finding. He noted that creating web-based learning strategies which focus on connecting the students will help to moderate alienation and increase learning opportunities. In summary, therefore, cultivating an inclusive online interaction will boost learning outcomes and satisfaction in students.

There has to be a concerted effort to make DE more inclusive as it creates a sense of belonging and bolsters students’ retention by the institution. It is also widely assumed that students from traditional education learn more effectively than online education students, but nonetheless, LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) showed that online students can actually learn just as much. More pertinent to this current paper, LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) also showed that there are students who see the online community as

ineffective and not assisting their learning outcome. They suggested that online education institutions need to look again at the online communication processes by improving students' autonomy in achieving their courses and they concluded that online education should avoid simply duplicating the traditional education communication method online and should instead seek to optimize the strength of students' autonomy as a new convention.

It seems, therefore, that there are contradictory approaches to building conducive online education, one which advocates belongingness and the other which focuses on the autonomy of the students. Both of these approaches are worth noting as each has its merits in terms of constructing a student-centred online education. One interesting observation made by LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) is that there are online students who are impartial about actually finishing a course but more concerned about gaining the desired knowledge. In essence, online students seek knowledge for many reasons, including knowledge for its own sake, qualifications and inclusion in a community (see Holmberg et al., 2005). Although DE is convenient, the issue of its effectiveness often comes into question. As has so far been shown in this current paper, isolation or the lack of belongingness has been identified as one of the causes of ineffectiveness in DE. In a way, feeling isolated has become the common enemy of DE. This is a perplexing problem because, essentially, learners are expected to self-study and execute a decent amount of autonomy in DE. Furthermore, Mann (2005) argued that in advocating belongingness, institutions risk alienation because it would mean keeping otherness and difference detached, which is the very opposite of cultivating a sense of community.

3. Research Questions

As a conceptual study, the intention of this research is to investigate what the experiences are which influence the DE student's sense of belonging

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is two-fold. First, it seeks to discover the sense of belonging through the students' learning experiences in DE. Second, it will explore the experience of belonging from the students' perspectives. In studying student's distress in web-based learning, there were many previous studies based on online DE, it had only scarcely been conducted from the students' perspective. Hee and Suhaimi (2011) were concerned about the neglect of the students' voices in these studies as the online education institutions have often over-emphasised the production, delivery and over-validation of online education. Although there have been a few notable studies such as those of Richardson and Swan (2003), Swan (2001), Kuo et al. (2013) and Hee and Suhaimi (2011) after Hara and Kling's review, the encompassing nature and the meaning of belonging should be further considered from the students' point of view.

5. Research Methods

As a conceptual study, this research used a qualitative survey as a preliminary research method. Typically, a survey is associated with quantitative studies, but Jansen (2010) suggested that survey is also

possible with qualitative research. Unlike quantitative studies which focus on “frequencies, means or parameters”, a qualitative survey attempts to gather “the diversity of some topic of interest” in the population being studied. What matters in this research method is the establishment of meaningful variants in that population. This paper is an attempt to gain an insight into the sense of belonging and of isolation from DE students’ perspective. As it is intended to be a descriptive study, this paper has no intention to draw a conclusion or to make predictions but simply to gather the diversity of the phenomenon. The experiences drawn from the students will enable an initial understanding of their belongingness and provide a preview for an ongoing study related to the current one.

The respondents for this survey were undergraduate students of the School of Distance Education (SDE), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The students of SDE are suited to be respondents in this research as they have signed up to distance learning. There were two requirements for the respondents; first, they must be currently enrolled for the session and second, they must be located off the campus which is in Penang, Malaysia. The reason for these criteria was to ensure that the respondents were ‘isolated’ from the school by distance. They were asked to describe in responses to minimally guided questions their recent encounter with a distance learning experience, their feelings, whether they had struggled, their achievements and their thoughts on the sense of belonging through community engagement. In all of these questions, the respondents were encouraged to write freely. A few calls for respondents were put out during intensive week¹ in courses conducted by the researcher. Keen respondents were encouraged to contact the researcher. Based on a suggestion by registered respondents, the researcher also reached out to students who were not on the course. From the call for respondents, 19 students agreed to participate in the research.

The qualitative survey was carried out through SurveyMonkey and required the respondents to complete an open-ended online survey each time they had a distance learning encounter. This encounter could be in the form of a WebEx² lecture session, revision (individual or group), assignment (individual or group), experience with the school and/or university or any other experiences such as discussions with lecturers or listening to recorded WebEx lecture sessions. The respondents were asked to describe their experience and deliberate on their positive realization³ as well as any struggle in the encounter. These responses were subsequently used to weigh the DE students’ overall encounter within the learning experience. The students were also encouraged to repeat the survey five times each time after they had a distance learning encounter and when they were available to do so. The intention was not to monitor hidden changes but to allow through the repeated surveys what was hidden to be revealed. Furthermore, a single encounter with distance learning was not regarded as sufficient to provide an all-round experience of the respondents.

As the survey was minimally guided, it enabled the students to acknowledge matters most relevant to their experience in distance learning. They were asked to provide feedback on these issues in terms of their attainment and struggle. Subsequent questions were asked about their sense of belonging relating to these matters. The researcher coded their responses and classified them into themes which emerged during

¹ Intensive week is an annual, three-week, comprehensive, face-to-face programme organised for the students in the SDE.

² WebEx or Cisco WebEx is a platform used to organise virtual meetings. It offers a platform for video conferencing and cloud calling. SDE uses this platform to offer live lectures and virtual face-to-face meetings with students.

³ ‘Positive realization’ refers to the positive experience of the students in distance learning.

the analysis of the data. These themes provide an overview of how the students encountered distance learning and how this encounter related to their belongingness in distance learning. Of the 19 potential respondents, 11 responded to the survey and 21 responses were eventually extracted because three respondents managed to complete the required recurrent surveys. The response rate was low for this survey and this was expected (see Jansen, 2010). However, although the participation rate was low, it did not affect the outcome of the research as this was a preliminary survey intended for an initial review of the respondents' experiences and not to conclude it.

6. Findings

Three major themes were derived from the students' encounters in distance learning which emerged when they shared their belonging experiences: the distance learning approach; self-study practice; and the balance between study, work and life. Other themes such as the role of facilitator, lecture content, teamwork and facilities were discussed but they were intermittent. For this paper, only these three major themes will be presented and discussed.

6.1. The distance learning approach

Of the three themes, the distance learning approach provided by the institution was the most discussed encounter about their distance learning experience. This refers to the delivery of learning experiences from the school to the students. Of the eleven respondents, ten described their learning experience in this theme. Based on the students' feedback, this theme comprised reflections on their experiences on the articulation of the e-learning platform⁴, WebEx sessions, recorded sessions and the intensive course as shown in Table 01.

Table 01. Students' experience of the distance learning approach

Respondent	Positive Realization	Struggle
R1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works for working adults • Online open discussion is good 	Too rushed and too short
R2	Easy and convenient	Nil
R3	Online quiz helped to map learning outcome	Nil
R4	Assisted in self-discipline	Nil
R5	Nil	The class should be at the weekend
R6	Variety of ways of learning	Nil
R8	Interesting and precious during the intensive week	The intensive week is too long
R9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online resources are convenient • Routine for student to do revision 	Nil
R10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting classmates (Intensive) • Time for revision and assignment (intensive) 	Nil
R11	Motivated and happy	Nil

⁴ This is an open-source learning platform in which the learning environment can be tailored to the course learning outcome. On this platform, students are able to access recorded WebEx sessions, lecture notes, course materials, resources, group discussions, quizzes and information relating to the course.

6.2. Self-study practice

Self-study practice refers to the autonomy demonstrated by the students in their approach to distance learning. It relates to their attitude toward distance learning such as their learning approach in revision, assignments and following WebEx lessons. It also links to their perception of goals, motivation and overall self-reflection in their distance learning experience (refer Table 02).

Table 02. Students' self-study practice experiences

Respondent	Positive realization	Struggle
R1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal achieved • Preferred choice of course • Preparation before the lecture is important • Enjoying the studying culture 	Too rushed and too short
R3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widens knowledge • Revision • Felt positive due to planning • Pleased with revision even although exam result not ideal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personally not looking in a broader perspective • Nervous about exam • Lack of motivation • Demotivated when course-mate dropped out
R4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New experience • Decision making 	Personally struggled with detail.
R5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivated with assignment preparation • Plan is going well • Closer to completion and course purpose • Motivated to finish the proposal • Proposal submitted 	Finding resources for assignment
R7	Nil	Need to be self-conscious and responsible
R8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt like a full-time student • Managed to get into a good institution 	Nil
R9	Earlier revision is helpful	Need more time for revision
R10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to focus • Time management

This theme revealed two points. First, compared with the distance learning approach (see Table 1), the students experienced a more proportional encounter between positive realization and struggle in their self-study practice. Second, in discussing their sense of belonging in distant learning, the students reflected deeply about their self-study practice experiences. Although this point does not reveal in itself its link to their sense of belonging, it is a point which was considered by the students when reflecting on belongingness in distance learning.

6.3. Study, work and life balance

One of the major themes which influenced their experience of distance learning was their study, work and life balance experiences (refer Table 03). This theme pertains to the manner in which the students encounter the learning experience in the light of their work and life commitments.

Table 03. Students' study, work and life balance experience

Respondent	Positive realization	Struggle
R1	SDE arrangement helped	Clashed between work and class
R2	Not alone in this, a struggle experienced by everyone.	Difficult to balance
R3		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to balance • Changes at work • Ill and tired • Need to plan time • Work and study time constrained
R4	SDE arrangement helped	Difficult to balance
R5		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missed lecture due to work commitment • Time management issue • Worked on the proposal from morning till night
R6	SDE arrangement helped	
R7		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work commitment is hectic and tiring • Challenging
R8		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work commitment • Personal Challenge
R10	Meeting class-mate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and work side-lined • Time management

In this theme, the students stated that their learning encounters were either affected by or affected their need to balance their study, work and life commitments. Compared with the distance learning approach and self-study practice, it can be observed that the students faced more difficulties in finding harmony between their study, work and life commitments.

6.4. The sense of belonging

The feedback from the students showed that they had mixed experiences in their distant learning encounters (refer Table 04).

Table 04. Students' sense of belonging

	Yes	In between	No answer
Do you have a feeling of belonging after a DE encounter?	45%	18%	37%
	Yes	No	
Would feeling being a part of the online community make any difference to your sense of belonging in DE?	72%	28%	

The respondents in this study did not predominantly feel isolated from the online community nor did they exceptionally feel a sense of belonging after a distance learning experience, with 45% feeling that they did belong, 18% undecided and 37% not giving any response to this question. Even so, 72% of them considered that being a part of the learning community would make them feel that they a part of distance learning. Although this result showed a mixed sense of belonging among the students, they would generally like to feel like a part of the learning community so that they could have a feeling of belonging.

7. Conclusion

The new industrial revolution is expected to affect the way work is evolving. Workers must adapt swiftly to this change if they wish to remain sustainable in this revolution. With full-time work-life commitments, one of the best ways for workers to build their work portfolio is to pursue their education by means of distance learning. Even so, as has been demonstrated by this preliminary research, distance education is not without issues.

This research has identified three major themes which provide clues to the students' sense of belonging: the distance learning approach of the institution; self-study practice; and the study, work and life balance. In these three themes, the students responded positively to the distant learning approach of the institution. Nevertheless, they experienced most struggle in adjusting the balance between their study, work and life commitments. The self-study practice theme was a significant issue among the students when they discussed their sense of belonging in comparison with other themes such as the role of the facilitator, lecture content, teamwork and the facilities of the institution. The first theme is consistent with the findings of previous studies which have placed an emphasis on the efficiency of the distance learning institution in determining the sense of belonging. The other two themes, however, differ, with more emphasis placed on the students' learning capability and capacity when discussing their sense of belonging. It was clear that these DE students acknowledged and accepted the advantages and disadvantages of the distant learning method and, notably, they were more concerned about their approach to distance learning.

Galusha (1998) studied the barriers in distance education and advised that researchers in this area must be aware of the characteristics and demographics of distance learners so that they can develop a thorough understanding of the potential barriers to learning. DE students often comprise students who have other commitments such as family or full-time work even though they may not necessarily be adult learners (see Latanich, Nonis, & Hudson, 2001). In this current exploratory research, study, work and life commitments were an important aspect highlighted by the students and this suggests that they are possibly a barrier to providing students with an effective learning experience and sense of belonging.

The self-study practice theme is another theme to be studied when exploring the links to the sense of belonging. Latanich et al. (2001) offered an insightful observation in the study of self-learning. They discovered that the more the learners were given autonomy in their learning experience, the more they retained the information and were motivated by their need to perform better. Although that study was not linked to sense of belonging in distant learning, it did show that self-autonomy plays a crucial role in learning (see also Diaz & Cartnal, 1999).

The purpose of this paper was to explore how SDE students' encounters determine their sense of belonging. Based on the students' experiences, the findings revealed themes which relate to the sense of

belonging in distant learning. Although the data do not display direct links to the sense of belonging of the students, the themes discussed were aspects which were habitually and earnestly considered by the students when reflecting on belongingness in distance learning. As this was a qualitative survey conducted online, the respondents' feelings of belonging were not adequately expressed and extracted. Nonetheless, the identified themes explored have provided the direction for the forthcoming full research study.

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