Measuring the Online Student Experience: A Sensemaking Exercise

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Abstract: Postgraduate students often return to the classroom, physical or online, with little or no training for what is expected from them in terms of reflective practice or critical thinking. While many universities are benchmarking student experience in face-to-face or more traditional programs, surveys do not offer customizable solutions to measure the online student experience, especially at the postgraduate level. We begin with the assumption that there is a need to measure the online student experience that has not been met by current tools or processes specifically within Library and Information Science (LIS). We employ social sensemaking to examine the student experience discussed in the LIS literature and map our understanding of the student journey to focus on a student-centered journey more deeply. Focusing on the why and how of the learning experience, this article discusses our mapping and the stakeholders and partners involved in learning and teaching throughout a program of study. We identify action research as a framework to explore both the student experience and its improvement over time.

Introduction

As programs change to provide an online experience, organizational and cultural structures within the university are stretched to provide services online. While many universities are benchmarking student experience in face-to-face or more traditional programs, surveys do not offer customizable solutions to measure the online student experience, especially at the postgraduate level.

Postgraduate students often return to the classroom, physical or online, with little or no training for what is expected from them in terms of reflective practice or critical thinking. Students need to adopt new cultural, social, and cognitive behaviors for postgraduate study (Prescott & Hellstén, 2005). Students are also choosing to study online because of conflicting demands on time and location (Miles, Mensinga, & Zuchowski, 2018). At the same time, programs are working to develop models that enhance student participation, following the work of Laurillard (2002, 2009) developing curriculum with students as partners to develop lifelong learning practices (Czerkawski & Lyman, 2016).

This paper examines the student online experience from two online postgraduate programs, focusing on Library and Information Science (LIS) and how it relates to LIS literature. The authors chose not to include articles focusing on programs in general in the literature review (e.g., Lieutenant & Kules, 2016; Lieutenant, 2018). Using social sensemaking, the authors examine the indicators of student success in online programs in order to develop holistic review processes to measure the online student experience. As LIS educators, we are interested in improving the student experiences within our programs. Which leads us to the research question: How do we measure the online student experience?

Literature Review

While no holistic model has been developed, student engagement has been measured through student experiences, teaching and learning practices, program development, and course engagement. Of concern, the LIS literature focused primarily on full-time students, and often explored the experiences of a single cohort. Changes having impact or effect over time. For example, articles from the early 2000s focused on technology needed to set up distance learning programs (e.g., Frey, 2004), however, the focus is moving into discussion of technologies used for mediation of learning and program services. While LIS teaching and learning research continues on themes discussed in early papers, the technology discussions are not relevant for long-term discussions of the student experience.

The literature around the online student experience often focuses on the technological and social dimensions of the learning environment. In LIS, student engagement has been explored in terms of relationships and networking (Bunn, 2004; Dow, 2008; Kazmer, 2007; Luo, 2010; Orguz, Chu, & Chow, 2015; Cherry, 2011), teaching and learning （Dow, 2008; Bunn, 2004； Buchanan, 2004; Aharony, 2011), and course engagement (Bernier and Sandstrom, 2016; Oliphant and Branch-Mueller, 2018).

Methods

We employed social sensemaking to examine the student experience discussed in the literature with our experiences working within LIS programs in North America and Oceania. While students and researchers may have similar experiences, they are not the same. Working within an organizational setting, the authors focused on a sensemaking perspective that is co-constructed between people and is viewed as an interpersonal and an intersubjective process (Gephart, Topal & Zhang, 2011; Weick, 1995), rather than focusing on the intra-personal or cognitive perspective (Dervin, 1998; Patriotta, 2003; Snowden, 2011; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). When people in organizations are faced with uncertainty, the unknown, or a disruption, they often start a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). This retrospective sensemaking is conducted through interpreting actions that have occurred and creating meaning from the information generated from those actions (Weick, 1995). Applying social sensemaking allowed us to interrogate these issues (for example the discussion of pastoral care).

We started with the assumption that there is a need to measure the online student experience that has not been met by current tools or processes. Focusing solely on the student perspective does not provide enough evidence to get a true picture of student engagement within a program. By making these assumptions we are exploring, comparing, and contrasting the articles with a sensemaking perspective.

We mapped our understanding of the student journey, thinking about the why and how of the learning experience during a whiteboard exercise which continued into an online discussion. As the literature focused on both students and programs, and primarily identified experiences before and during a student's degree program, we used that framing to assist our sensemaking.

Results

The temporal aspects of the student journey, as identified by Oliphant and Branch-Mueller (2018), provided an opportunity for us to consider the student experience over time. Most of the literature focuses on program selection (Before) the current student experience (During) and does not provide a longitudinal look at a cohort Plotting the journey students take on a whiteboard, we incorporated key points from the literature, our experiences and reflections into a table (Table 1). We developed an "After" column, identifying the positive influence alumni have on individuals "Before" and "During" experiences.

Table 1. Authors' Sensemaking of the Student Experience

	Before	During	After
Individual/Student (Why)	Motivation Cost to students (time, money) Skills	Student attitudes Work/Life/School balance Student participation Mentoring Professional development Support (from family and instructors	Alumni engagement • Marketing • Mentoring • Professional Development Additional study • Dip/MIS • PhD
Teaching (who)	Pedagogy training	Feedback Assessments	Workshops and presentations (sharing research)
Programmatic (how)	Delivery cost of program Program objectives	Program management Teaching Pastoral care Peer socialization/student learning environment Feedback	Program review Alumni engagement • Meetups • Conferences • Jobs • Research

In addition to time, we did acknowledge the stakeholders and partners involved in learning and teaching throughout a program of study (Figure 1). Stakeholders and partners influence the student experience through processes, learning outcomes, professional competencies, social interactions influence the student experience.

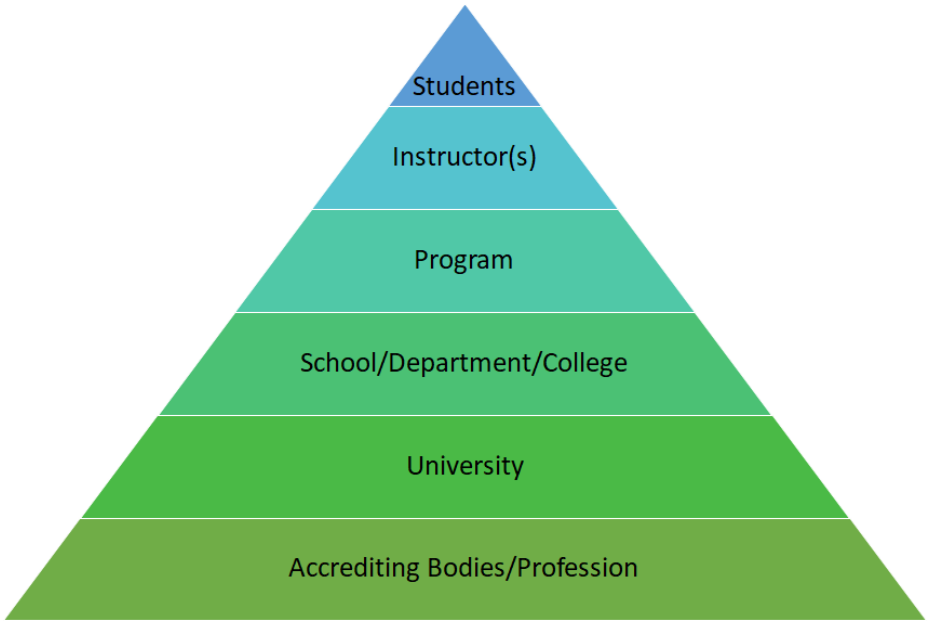

Figure 1. Stakeholders involved in the online student experience.

Comparing our program experiences with the literature, we learnt that there were some commonalities across programs. Students used information provided about courses to make decisions about their courses of study, the importance of knowing the dates was explicitly noted. In addition, postgraduate students tended to be more motivated than undergraduates. The students were more inclined to know what the course entailed before entering the course. In addition, while technology was not a theme that we discuss in detail, the literature noted technology plays a two-fold role in the online experience. Students both need to know how to use the technology and the program needs to know how technologies provide influence to the learning experiences for students.

Implications for Practice

After sensemaking, the authors reflected upon the methods used in the literature review to examine the student experience. Students are typically engaged in a master's program for more than three years. The short program duration does limit longitudinal studies of student experience; however, action research may provide a program with a framework to improve learning and teaching for all students. Rather than focusing on a snapshot of the experience through interviews or a survey, action research provides an iterative approach to evaluation. Riel (2010-2023) identifies action research as "a process of deep inquiry into one's practices in service of moving towards an envisioned future, aligned

with values" (para. 1). Riel notes that "[a]ction researchers examine their interactions and relationships in social settings seeking opportunities for improvement" (para. 3). This iterative process begins with a question that is important to the researcher(s). The researcher(s) then collect and analyze evidence then reflect on the evidence which leads to reviews from a critical friend and another round of evaluation and reflection before being shared with a community of practice (Pine, 2008). For example, as an initial step, we could start with the question: What is the current student experience?

1. Develop user experience survey and gather data from current and recent users.
2. Analyze data
3. Implement testable changes (at course level) to evaluate and assess change
4. Reflect with critical friend
5. Implement changes across program
6. Evaluate and assess change
7. Develop student experience survey and gather data from current and recent students.
8. Analyze
9. Reflect

Reflection and discussion with critical friend(s), provides an opportunity to identify outcomes met or not met in the research process. The reflection period may also identify questions for research in the next cycle or iterations of the research.
Not only does action research add reflection to the evaluation process, it provides a framework for publishing research, adding to evidence based practices. Scoping and Analyzing stages may be written up as conference papers or journal articles. The entire iteration may be of interest to the LIS community, to higher education, or to the action research community.

Conclusion

During our literature review, we found that while research examines aspects of evaluation or teaching or learning. In addition, most of the research relies on a single method to capture the student voice. There has not been a project that reflects upon both the student experience and how that experience may be improved. Action research provides us with a framework to explore both the student experience and its improvement over time. For example, our experiences during the pandemic led us to a discussion about the use of online templates within a program to reduce cognitive load. We can incorporate student feedback, make changes, and test the templates as one iteration within the action research framework. Regardless of the topic, we will employ mixed methods to enable triangulation of data around the student experiences. Reliance on a single method limits generalizability and may focus on fewer voices rather than identifying the experiences of all of the students in the program.

Our next steps are to document the current student experiences at our respective universities and identify, implement, and evaluate changes that can be made within our programs. While no holistic model has been developed, student engagement has been measured through student experiences, teaching and learning practices, program

development, and course engagement, we believe that action research will provide a framework to improve and document the changes we identify in our programs.

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