

SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR A LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM – SHOULD FACEBOOK BE USED TO SUPPLEMENT BLACKBOARD?

Vinay Kumar Reddy Anumula, Harrisburg University, vanumula@harrisburgu.edu
Chaza F. Abdul-Al, Harrisburg University, cabdul@harrisburgu.edu
Wenli Wang, Robert Morris University, wangw@rmu.edu
Paul Kovacs, Robert Morris University, kovacs@rmu.edu
Loreen M. Powell, Bloomsburg University, lpowell@bloomu.edu

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed web advancements by studying the pros and cons of using social media such as Facebook as a supplementary component for learning management systems such as Blackboard. The theoretical explanation in the research is that online learning innovation can be connected to improve separate instruction in institutions of higher education. The advantages, challenges, and the possibilities of the innovation were also surveyed. The research confirmed the positive effects of using social media in facilitating collaborative learning and student engagement. It is evident that students value the benefits of online social networking in terms of enhancing course identity and collaborative student learning.

Keywords: Communication, Learning Management Systems, Social Media, Online Education

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study is to investigate web developments that can be used to enhance the distance learning programs in institutions of higher education. This research is essential because it is primarily concerned with addressing the various challenges affecting the full implementation of the web-based learning in higher education and fill the implementation technological gaps for the existing distance learning programs. This will also add to the existing literature review on the implementation of web technology to enhance distance learning in the higher education institutions. The research employs the qualitative research approach that will aid in the process of collecting and analyzing the data gathered from the respondents. The researchers choose the qualitative approach so as to be able to gather all the needed information in detail and give answers to all the research questions. The obtained results may also inspire another researcher to do further research on the same topic to come up with comprehensive strategies on how web-based learning can be made more effective and efficient.

The scope of the study was to examine the web-based learning programs and find out some of the solutions to the challenges and technological gaps limiting the use of the technology for distance learning. The study was not focused on any other aspect of the learning in higher institutions other than the distance learning programs using the web. The aim of the study is to increase the effectiveness and the efficiency in the delivery of web-based education.

The main objective was to determine the solutions to the challenges facing the implementation of the web-based learning. The sub-objectives were to examine the level of implementation of the web-based learning in the higher learning institutions. The research questions are:

1. What are some of the variances between using and not using social media in distance learning in higher education?
2. How the use of online social networking in higher education hinder or adds values and benefits to enhancing course identity and collaborative student learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to (Zirkle, 2003), distance learning is a learning process where the learner gets the lessons remotely without being in physical contact with the teacher physically. The distance learning programs allow the learner to gain access to the course content without physically attending the lectures various higher learning centers (Negash, 2008). Most of the distance learning programs are built on flexibility whereby the learners can plan on their own time as well as the place that suites their learning process. Most of the distance learning courses are scheduled within a fixed duration at the specific time of the year. Chen (2010) asserts that most of the activities involved in the distance learning process are scheduled like the online meetings between the student and the instructor. However, in most cases, the students are allowed to get access to the course materials by watching the video lectures and other online activities related to the course involved (Aggarwal, 2003) (Bell, et al., 2017).

Tomei (2007) explains that the online learning environment is divided into synchronous and asynchronous learning. The synchronous online learning entails studies where the students and the instructor interact through videoconferencing and chat (Tomei, 2007) (Bell, et al., 2017). This kind of learning environment is real-time, and it is similar to the virtual classroom, which permits the learners to question the tutor allowing the tutor to provide instant answers by messaging instantly (Pandey, Umesh, Indrakanti, & Verlaxmi, 2017). Instead of taking the course individually, the learner can associate with other students using the synchronous online learning software and thus can interact with other learners and the instructor during the course. Conversely, with Asynchronous learning, the course is not delivered simultaneously, and thus it can be presented while the learner is offline (Buchanan, 2000) (Bell, et al., 2017). In this case, the learner is required to finish the course at their pace by using the internet and having the course outline delivered through the web. Therefore there are no online interactive classes for the learners.

According to the equivalence theory of distance learning, the distance learning program should be based on the concept of equivalent for it to succeed (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006). The concept of equivalency means that when the learning experiences are equivalent for both the local and the distant learners the outcome and the learning activities of the learners will be also equivalent (Michael, Sharon, & Susan, 2015) (Dzakiria, 2008). The idea of equivalency does not, however, mean that the activities involved in learning are equal, but the different learning experiences can be said to be equivalent leading to the production of equivalent learning outcomes. Since students are from different locations, they may require mixed and different learning experiences. Also, the given learning experiences should be applicable to the needs of the learners (Dzakiria, 2008).

There are several technologies employed in distance learning, and they are majorly classified into four groups which include audio, computer, print and video (Kumar, 2012) (Tomei, 2007). The print media was the original form in which distance learning courses were offered where the print material was mailed to the learners and later the feedback returned to the instructor through the postal system. The print material can serve as the primary source of instruction to the students although there can be other options for distance learning (Zirkle, 2003). With the print material, the students can use the textbook and read specific units and other technologies like the email can be used by the learner in asking the instructor questions. The other technology is the voice technology that provided a cost-effective way of offering the distance learning program (Codone, 2004).

The audio component entails the use of telephone with voicemails or the audio conferences. The computer technology is the most popular technology employed in distance learning today (Aggarwal, 2003). With the help of the internet, the computer technology is getting more attention as the best way of delivering the distance learning courses, and this involves the use of technologies like the emails, the web-based education and the online collaborations (Patricia, 2014). The use of the email is the most popular and inexpensive way the learner can be able to communicate with the instructor, in some instances the entire process of distance learning can be structured with the use of the email as the only media of communication.

On the other hand, the online collaboration technology entails the use of online conferencing and internet chat as means of which the learner and the instructor interact. With the online chat, the learner and the instructor are able to communicate with each other in real-time (Aggarwal, 2003) (Buchanan, 2000). The other common technology is the web-based education which is the new arena for the distance learning courses that offers the accessibility of remote

resources. As a technology of enhancing education, the instructors are able to locate relevant web sites for the learners to explore or also have the learners to conduct searches for information that is related to the certain topic they are learning (Dzakiria, 2008). With the video technology, the learners are able to see and also hear the teacher and have the ability to model their behaviours (Tomei, 2007). The video approach for distance learning program is usually characterized by the transmission media like the satellites, the videotapes, microwaves, and computer (Aggarwal, 2003).

Features of Distance Learning

The distance learning program is different from the courses that are offered in the traditional manner. There are various features that distinguish distance learning from the traditional learning approach. The first feature is that the learner and the instructor are physically separated (Buchanan, 2000). The learner and the students communicate through the internet, and most of the learning activities are also take place online, and thus the learner and the instructor have no face to face communication (Kumar, 2012). Secondly, distance learning entails the use of technical media. Originally the print was the best media that was used in distance learning but die to the advancement of technology other electronic media like the computers have contributed a lot to the technical option. The other feature is that there is a provision of a two-way communication between the learner and the students through an arranged telephone conference (Gaur, 2016). In this conference, the learners and the instructor are able to communicate with each other effectively concerning the course and also ask the instructor some questions concerning the course involved. In addition, the distance learning program entails the use of the mixed media courseware that entails the computer-based learning, prints, the audio and the video cassettes (Aggarwal, 2003).

Challenges Facing Web-based Learning

Due to the advancement in technology, distance learning has become the most significant approach involved in delivering education. The e-learning programs do have several benefits. However, when this is compared to the traditional learning approach that involved the use of the classrooms, the e-learning programs have the issue of low learner completion rate (Hafeez, Gujjar, & Noreen, 2014). Some of the issues and concerns that have to lead to this challenge include the inaccessibility of the learning resources (Lamont, Cleborne, & Jacque, 2003). The systems employed do not provide sufficient access to all the required learning resources found in the university, and this can be due to some feasible reasons (Gaur, 2016) (Hara, 2000).

Secondly, the issue of interaction between the learner and the instructor is another challenge. The effective interaction between the student and the instructor is essential for the learning process to be a success and the physical interaction seems to be the best as compared to the one done online (Lamont, Cleborne, & Jacque, 2003). Yet, this is not often guaranteed in web-based learning.

Thirdly, distance learning creates an environment that is non-competitive since it does not matter who gets the best grades but it is only concerned with successful completion of the course (Bell, et al., 2017). The fourth challenge is the confusion that is encountered in the chat rooms (Hafeez, Gujjar, & Noreen, 2014). The virtual classrooms chats may sometimes load very slowly causing some confusion since many windows are opened at the same time (Hara, 2000). It is important to have all the chat rooms organized accordingly. Some of these challenges and many more others together with the technological gaps existing in web-based learning have not been addressed by the previous research works. This is what the proposed study will seek to address. Relevant information will be collected so that these issues can be solved comprehensively as possible.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study assumed an interpretivist paradigm whereby the researchers attempted to construe the elements of the proposed study through the integration of the human interests in the study. However, the researchers have assumed that reality of the data collected lies with the social constructions which include the consciousness and the language of the respondents (Allen & Earl, 2009). The collected information was assessed whether it has conformity with the literature materials that address the topic of this study. In the course of study, the researchers have to appreciate the respondent's diversity and focus on the information given rather than the individuals providing the information (Matthew, Michael, & Johnny, 2013). The required data will be collected about the study questions to be answered. Both the primary data from the participants and the secondary data from the literature sources will be reviewed.

The research design for the proposed study was mainly the qualitative in nature. However, some quantitative data was collected to aid in data analysis. The qualitative research design provided the researchers an opportunity to collection all the required information in depth so that the research questions were comprehensively answered (Matthew, Michael, & Johnny, 2013). As such, data collection was done using several data collection tools which include the conduction of interviews and the study of relevant literature materials such as books, articles, and journals (Maxwell, 2012). This research design is suitable for the proposed study because even the research questions are stated qualitatively. This means that they will be precisely answered by the study.

The participants in the study involved the stakeholders in the distance learning programs of selected higher learning institutions in the state of Pennsylvania in the United States. The participant population included faculty who are involved in the design and management of distance learning, the students who are involved in web-based learning, and the Information Communication Technology (ICT) experts who facilitate the programs of distance learning in the institutions. These participants are believed to be very instrumental in the provision of the suitable information regarding the use of online platforms to enhance the dissemination of education.

The researchers selected a random sample of the population of the participants so that a suitable representative group of participants could participate in the study. This eliminated the issue of biasness from both the researcher's side and that of the respondents. As such, the validity, honesty, and reliability of the data collected are expected to be high above any reproach. The sample consisted of 15 participants and each answered a total of 10 questions. This sample is appropriate since the qualitative responses expected will be enough to answer the research questions (Matthew, Michael, & Johnny, 2013). Additionally, the secondary data that will also be collected will complement the primary data from the respondents to provide the needed facts.

Considering that most of the data sources were from human subjects, there were some ethical issues that were considered when collecting data. Every research participant voluntarily participated in the research. Moreover, any participant had the right to withdraw from the research process. No participant was forced to take part in the research process from the beginning to the end. The privacy of each participant was guaranteed since the data was collected anonymously and no personal information or information about an institution will be published. The respondent participated in the research process based on their full informed consent.

Most of the data that was collected was based on the responses from the key participants. Therefore, some of the participants may have provided incorrect information by either becoming deliberately dishonest or not having enough experience to give the expected information. The incorrect information may, to some extent, affect the validity of the research outcomes. However, to deal with this problem, the researchers attempted to emphasize to the respondents the need to be honest with their responses. The delimitation in the study is to collect information with regard to distance learning in higher education. Any other information outside this demarcation was not relevant.

The process of data collection was mainly accomplished through interviews. The researchers arranged physical meetings with all the selected respondents to ask them questions about the interview schedule (Maxwell, 2012). For the key respondents who were unavailable to participate in the face-to-face interviews, the researchers conducted phone interviews. This necessitates that the researcher had the contacts for all the respondents before the day of the interviews (Allen & Earl, 2009). The interview questions were the same for all the participants in order to maintain consistency. The collection of secondary data from relevant literature materials was completed before the primary data was collected (Maxwell, 2012). This enabled the researchers to have preliminary information about the topic of study for the easy formulation of study questions.

The process of data analysis immediately followed the data collection process. The first step towards effective data analysis involved the transcription of the recorded information on the audio or audio-visual devices (Maxwell, 2012). All the collected data was then analyzed beginning with the coding of the responses so that they can be given values and meanings. The secondary data was also analyzed together with the primary data whereby comparative analysis facilitated in the identification of the recurrent patterns (Allen & Earl, 2009). The analysis of data was instrumental in the drawing of conclusions and the making of recommendations concerning the study (Matthew, Michael, & Johnny, 2013). These recommendations will then be used to uniquely address the challenges and technological gaps limiting

the full implementation and success of the web-based learning. Data analysis will also form the basis for stating the prospects of the web application in distance learning.

RESULTS

Weaknesses in the Blackboard Learning Management System

Blackboard was the Learning Management Systems (LMS) that was under study in this research. The students varied in their relationship and usage of the Blackboard system. The varied relationship and usage of the system are: 1) only using Blackboard when students felt they had to; 2) getting missed-from-class information such as lecture slides; and 3) enjoying the opportunity to access learning support materials and timetables in advance. However, some students found that aspects of Blackboard were not easy to use and cited problems of technical breakdown for over 24 hours, lack of consistency of module site layout, and too many tabs and boxes.

Similarly, some faculty/staff considered that Blackboard was useful as a “repository of information” for some teaching, and as a place to access materials in advance of lectures. However, they also reported the weaknesses in Blackboard as shown below.

For instance, faculty/staff highlighted the need for consistency in Blackboard usage by stating that:

“We possibly need to agree much more clearly on what we title our folders. Where we have standard things, what do we put in module folders, what do we put in learning materials, what do we put in assessment.”
(Faculty/Staff 7)

Some staff/faculty described Blackboard as “clunky,” dated, and lacking intuition unlike the visually aesthetic “slickly driven advertising websites” that students are used to. One of them stated that:

“I find Blackboard a bit ugly and I wish it had been designed by Google, or by Facebook.”
(Faculty/Staff 3)

Other staff members considered that Blackboard was rather like a filing cabinet and that it lacked support for user-friendly, spontaneous social interaction:

“It’s not unplanned social interaction, which I think is something which helps build group identities.”
(Faculty/Staff 10)

There were very few instances where faculty/staff or students used the current Blackboard LMS as a conduit for social networking, apart from the use of an occasional online discussion forum. Most respondents did not equate the current Blackboard LMS with social networking but saw it as a piece of cumbersome academic software that lacked the accessibility of online social networking sites that students used often. Even though the current Blackboard LMS site has blog and forum functions, overall, students made little use of them because very few faculty/staff have set them up.

Strengths of Using Social Networking Sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) for Learning

Building Shared Identity

Both students and faculty/staff spoke of the difficulty in creating/building shared identity in current situations. For instance, the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English degree is one of the degrees in English. Some faculty/staff stated that they did not have a clear sense of the “B.A. English” student group. However, students stated that they liked the subject choice of “B.A. English” available to them on the social networking sites and said:

“If we have any issues or anything, if we don’t go directly to the tutor then it’s through our reps.”
(Student 2, on focus group)

Coupled with tutorials, work-based group projects, and small seminar groups over a longer period, many faculty/staff strongly perceived the need for a conducive physical space as key to building a shared identity such as a course identity. Some faculty/staff recalled a former clearly defined physical space that the English department had in a Victorian house. In this physical space the kitchen was a center for social interchange where drinks were made, and notices read on a physical notice board. In comparison, many faculty/staff considered that the current physical space with faculty/staff offices on a locked corridor was inadequate:

“I don’t think the space we have is terribly conducive to collegiality, there’s not really a common room or much of a common space, so I don’t think that helps.”
(Faculty/Staff 5)

One faculty/staff member went further to say that:

“I think that if things are pushed more into virtual relationship, we are going in the wrong direction. That’s strongly felt.”
(Faculty/Staff 2)

None of the students interviewed highlighted the issue of physical space, but this could be due to an acceptance of the situation on induction. Although faculty/staff complained about the inadequacies of the physical space, some did appreciate that online networking with students could be advantageous.

Further interview questions asked respondents their views on social networking as a means of creating course identity. Ways in which Blackboard could help create course identity were considered, together with other social networking sites that could support this. Students clearly placed emphasis on social networking as a valid tool to enable course identity, especially in view of the complexities of establishing a physical course identity due to the curriculum of English courses and shared module groups.

The Facebook social networking group sites set up independently by students appeared to create a collective sense and shared experience. The ease of access to Facebook also made it appealing to students along with the fact that students associated it with enjoyable personal interaction.

“Social networking helps in terms of it’s something that’s used by everyone on a personal basis, so if it was used for your course, it would be helpful in terms of making friends with other people ... helping each other out with things that they didn’t understand.”
(Student 1)

Sharing Social Support

Students who were part of a current student-led course Facebook group said it made them feel part of the course and that they felt supported because other students responded to queries about the coursework no matter when the query was raised. This apparently prevented the feeling of isolation and lessened anxiety. They described Facebook messaging and writing on the Facebook wall as ‘talking’ and viewing what others had written on the Facebook wall as comforting. Although often working alone on assignments, it helped them to get a sense of the stage others were at and felt that students who were not on Facebook missed out on course communications.

In some instances, the students had set up their own student group on the Facebook website and considered that social networking in this way helped them to feel being part of the course. They saw this as a way of supporting one another, especially surrounding exams, and as a conduit for sharing of information, advice, and common anxieties:

“It’s really good to help each other” (Student 2, B. A. English).

The approachability of the tutors through Twitter and that of faculty/staff via emails were also considered by the students as good means of keeping them connected to the course.

Challenges of Using Social Networking Sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) for Learning

Facebook was the main social networking site that was under the study in this research. However, faculty/staff did consider other online forums that include an element of social networking along with the facilities of virtual learning. Faculty/staff cited sites such as Moodle, used in many universities, google networking, and academia.edu. Academia.edu is an academic version of LinkedIn, which has facilities for uploading academic papers and podcasts plus followers in a similar way to twitter.

Boundary Concerns

Although online social networking allows for enhanced collaboration among students and faculty/staff, there are concerns about such collaboration on these sites. Both faculty/staff and students used Facebook outside of the educational setting, but not with each other, and viewed it as an informal virtual space. This informality posed issues for both staff and students. Some students liked being informal online with one another but considered that communication with faculty/staff was inherently formal. Faculty/staff also echoed the concerns of having an expected formal presentation to students in an informal space:

“I’ve got my profile on Facebook that is, it’s the me that is not at university, it’s the me that’s outside of university, and I wouldn’t want that on Facebook ... it’s not a self-presentation of me that they would expect.”
(Faculty/Staff 6)

Some faculty/staff members acknowledged the benefits of creating course identity through having a shared social networking site with students but expressed concerns as they were aware of problems that had arisen in other institutions where faculty/staff had accepted “friends’ requests” from students.

“I’ve had students requesting to be my friend on Facebook, which wouldn’t really do because I think it’s crossing a boundary between one’s personal and professional lives.”
(Faculty/Staff 5)

Security and Privacy Concerns

Faculty/staff members also expressed concerns about students speaking negativity about faculty/staff members through Facebook on a site that faculty/staff were not able to access but acknowledged that students may want and need such a Facebook page. One staff member, who regularly used social networking in various forms both professionally through twitter, and personally outside of university, set up a discussion board on the Blackboard site, checked it daily and found it useful to intervene in cases of students misinforming one another. This would not have been possible on the closed student Facebook page that the staff member had no access to.

Some faculty/staff members considered using Facebook with students if they could ensure that privacy settings were in place to prevent students from seeing family photographs, for example.

Pay and Workload Concerns

Faculty/staff acknowledged that the building of a shared course identity through a user friendly and chatty online networking tools would be helpful to facilitate student engagement. Faculty/staff appreciated and understood that students were generally familiar with easy-to-use sociable and visually attractive online networking tools. They also commended the benefits of the use of visuals, podcasts, audio links, and video links to create interactive learning environments for students in keeping up with the lively online world that students are accustomed in other arenas. However, paid faculty/staff time to upload such materials and to manage social networking led by the university was a major concern.

Social Networking Site Management Concerns

Faculty/staff often described Blackboard as “clunky” and as an academic tool set up to post information that the faculty/staff thought students should rather have. Faculty/staff considered that it would be preferable to have an online networking tool that was attractive to students and encouraged them to take an active part in collaborative learning with faculty/staff and fellow students. In terms of a student and faculty/staff jointly managed site, students and faculty/staff saw a way forward with both elected student course representatives and faculty/staff jointly managing

such a site. Students and faculty/staff agreed that initial face-to-face meetings between elected student course representatives and faculty/staff could agree acceptable online behavior for such a site.

DISCUSSION

The literary research and findings highlighted the need for staff to appreciate the importance that social networking plays in student life, as a means for collaborative learning and student engagement. Students valued the approachability of staff face-to-face and online interaction with staff as a means of creating a sense of course identity. Those who had access to the student-led Facebook page valued the support of fellow classmates in terms of support, reduction of anxiety and isolation, as a marker for progress and easily accessible informal collaborative learning, in a forum exclusive to staff. Student's online communications helped to create course identity. Although students liked the flexibility of choosing modules from a suite, the course researched could be experienced as lacking a defined identity. Several staff members considered that the physical space prevented course identity, students expressed more emphasis on the importance of having course representatives and the need for the course timetable to enable course representatives to attend meetings, and had in some cases elected to form their own course Facebook page.

Staff and students both considered that Blackboard, the current VLE, acted as a good repository for information, but staff felt that as a piece of academic software it lacked a user-friendly exciting interface, in keeping with the wider online world. Students also complained of confusion in using Blackboard due to too many boxes that prevented easy navigation plus the experience of technical problems causing Blackboard to be out of action. Students and staff agreed on the need for staff to use a common approach to how information was stored on Blackboard.

Staff accepted the need for students to have an exclusively student social networking site but expressed anxiety about possible negativity towards staff and misinformation about the course being spread on social networking sites. Staff expressed the need to protect their professional boundaries and the need for their own privacy outside of work and therefore felt that it was not appropriate for them to share Facebook accounts with students. Both staff and students gave acknowledgement that a student and staff collaborative learning site with an element of social networking may be useful in enhancing student success and engagement, but Facebook was not considered to be the answer. While Lipton (2011) models safe professional use of Facebook in lectures, the small sample interviewed in this research considered that the concerns over the blurring of professional boundaries was too great. Staff and students were both keen to learn collaboratively with one another and recognized a positive step forward would be through social networking, but without an agreed online tool. Both students and staff saw some benefits of collaborative learning through Blackboard, but the difficulty of engagement with the site, due to its interface, viewed it as out of step with the contemporary online world, and technical breakdown problems meant that alternative solutions were considered. Suggestions made in terms of possible software that could achieve this such as Moodle, aacedmia.edu and Google networking.

Staff and students agreed that if an online platform with a social networking dimension was agreed it should be jointly managed by staff and elected student course representatives with ground rules agreed by initial face-to-face meetings. If the control of such a site was mutually managed both students and staff were open to engaging into social networking to enhance collaborative learning, while having reservations about entering into this new territory. However, staff did expressed concerns regarding the time required to manage this level of networking, with those who had sometimes uploaded videos or podcasts to Blackboard noting that it was a very time-consuming activity, although beneficial to student engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to discover some of the variances between using and not using social media in distance learning in higher education as well as does online social networking in higher education hinder or add value and benefits to enhancing course identity and collaborative student learning? The research results confirmed the positive effects of using social media in facilitating collaborative learning and student engagement. This substantiates the literature in the research review that highlighted the need for staff and students to appreciate the importance that social networking plays in student life, and as a means for collaborative learning and student engagement. Furthermore, is evident that

students value the benefits of online social networking in terms of enhancing course identity and collaborative student learning.

Finally, the research study revealed that students benefit from what they perceive as a comfortable virtual space where they can discuss issues in relation to learning. The relaxed and informal way this takes place appears to be easily accessible to them and offers a forum for learning in which they exceed what they may have learnt working alone on a project in their room. From the research, students expressed the need for a place where they can voice their concerns, that were then easily dissipated by the knowledge that others felt the same, or by others offering solutions. If this form of collaborative learning could be opened up to include staff the learning could be greater, not only for students, but also for staff. It would give an opportunity for staff to better understand what students need to know, but also increase their own knowledge base, as students bring into the online collaborative learning community all that they are learning from wider online communities.

For this sample of interviewees collaborative learning through social networking between students and staff was an unknown territory that both were willing to enter into, given jointly owned and managed criteria for behavior. It would seem important given this primary research for Universities to invest in addressing the issues highlighted to enhance the student experience, improve upon student success and retain students. It is hoped the findings from this project will form the basis of further research to inform both students and practitioners, specifically in informing innovative change in course practice to increase a sense of course identity to enhance student engagement through collaborative student and staff learning.

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