

Central Queensland University

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‘I feel I have found a tribe’: Investigating the Moodle discussion board writing of regional postgraduate creative practitioners

Abstract:

As higher education in Australia becomes increasingly distributed geographically, regional universities play a key role in supporting distance education. With innovative online learning and strong student engagement levels continuing to be a priority, this is perhaps even more pronounced in postgraduate coursework degrees in the creative arts, a field in which postgraduate qualifications are unnecessary to secure employment in the sector. This article presents the results of a case study investigation of a regionally based postgraduate creative arts degree program that utilised blended learning principles, included on-campus and distance students, and framed discussion board usage/writing as a formative requirement across the units in the program. Alongside writing about their creative and professional practices, students produced narratives that could be described as examples of engaged reflective practice which, this analysis revealed, focused on aspects of the educational experience that assisted in developing a sense of belonging for this widely dispersed cohort.

Biographical notes:

Professor Donna Lee Brien, PhD, is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University. Donna has been researching and publishing on learning and teaching in the creative arts since 2000, with research since 2006 in this area focusing on postgraduate education. Her other main research interest is specialist genres of non-fiction writing.

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Keywords:

digital writing – higher education – regional education – creative arts – postgraduate coursework – discussion boards – online learning

Introduction

Despite a recognition of the role and value of place-based knowledge (Allison and Eversole 2008), a distinctive feature of teaching and learning in Australian regional universities is the often-widespread locations of the students, and their subsequent distance from their teachers and (often multiple) university campuses. As Allison and Eversole suggest, universities can have a problematic relationship with the region in which they are situated (2008: 105); something likely to be intensified by the propensity for such universities to have multiple campuses that may also span multiple regions. This is significantly different to regional campuses in Britain or continental America, where many (although certainly not all) students not only often live *close to* a single main campus where they undertake their learning, studying and other educative interactions, they can also, in many instances, live *on* that campus (see, Waterhouse 1999: 54). As of November 2017, for instance, the Australian Regional University Network had six university members, collectively teaching over 135,000 students, 45 percent of whom were studying externally, with this education delivered across 62 physical locations (RUN 2018). As a result, an advanced take up of the global trend of online teaching and learning, and the use of trademarked learning management systems, has become a prominent feature of Australian regional universities (Tanner 2011: 3).

An ongoing concern in relation to online teaching in the tertiary sector has been to ensure that students engage with the digital program content delivered via various learning management systems (Schaufeli et al. 2002; La Pointe & Reisetter 2008; Paechter, Maier & Macher 2010; Scholl, Hayden Clarke 2017). This is especially so in the case of students understanding how online content and tasks are necessary, and could benefit them, in a degree program¹ that is based around the completion of individual creative projects (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016) and that uses asynchronous digital discussion boards that allow for flexibility and convenience for the predominantly mature-age cohort (Conrad & Donaldson 2004). This is also the case in the blended learning environment, where internal students are expected to engage with online materials alongside external students (Collis & Moonen 2001; Rovai and Jordan 2004; Spring, Graham & Ikahihifo 2018). Lack of student engagement (that is, lack of participation with the learning activities on offer) is also linked to high attrition levels from online and blended learning units and programs. That this is an ongoing problem is shown by research older than a decade (Willging & Johnson 2004) as well as more recent investigations (Patterson & McFadden 2009; Shaw, Burrus & Ferguson 2016).

While some research into online learning works from a deficit model, examining why students do not engage with online discussion boards and other online content, the authors investigated a regional, blended offering of a degree program with an extremely high – and externally commended (Wessell 2016) – level of discussion board usage, seeking to discover the reasons why students participated in this way. This study also sought to extend the information gained from formal unit evaluations and informal student feedback (Sturm, Beckton & Brien 2015), in order to add to the value of compulsory term-by-term unit feedback. This program had, moreover, almost no attrition over the course of its delivery to the date of the study (2011–17). Building

on other published research about this program (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016; Sturm, Beckton & Brien 2017), the authors investigated this program-level discussion board usage and the material written on these discussion boards in relation to student engagement, satisfaction and success.

Background to the study

This research focused on an Australian university postgraduate degree – the Graduate Certificate of Creative Industries (Creative Practice) at Central Queensland University, Australia². This is a degree program designed and created by one of the authors (Brien), and taught and refined by both authors (and others) throughout its seven-year history. Across tertiary-education providers, there is an ongoing process of transformation from ‘site to service’ with the increase of online teaching and blended learning (Cavanaugh, Hargis & Mayberry 2016). Alongside this process there is interest in understanding what online and blended learning participation looks like (Hrastinski 2008). An ongoing concern in relation to online teaching in the tertiary sector has been to ensure that students engage with the digital program content delivered via various learning management systems (La Pointe & Reisetter 2008). Central Queensland University uses Moodle as its learning management system.

Creative Arts programs exist within a context in which employment in relevant industries is not predicated on postgraduate level qualifications. As such, individual student motivations are usually – and particularly in this specific degree have been certainly – less targeted towards specific career outcomes. Yet, general career advancement, and with it the attainment of current knowledge and practices, is considered a key factor for students in determining postgraduate coursework program choice (Kiley & Cumming 2013). These programs are seen to present opportunities to gain contemporary, industry-standard skills and experience, and a robust understanding of nascent trends in practice. The majority of Creative Arts postgraduate programs available in Australia are also predominantly designed to encourage active engagement with what would be described as applied or ‘real-world’ problems and collaborations, which in turn offer students a transformative experience, and the development of constructive approaches to problem-solving. This is sometimes placed in contrast to research-based higher degrees, which have historically been less focused on applied outcomes (although this too is shifting in the contemporary academy).

Where the Graduate Certificate of Creative Industries (Creative Practice) differs from some of the other national offerings in this general area is in how its specific interest lies in creative and professional outputs and embedded reflective practice. In this, it explicitly was designed to mirror the creative practice plus exegesis model of research higher degrees in creative practice and to, indeed, provide an experiential and training pathway to such research higher degrees. The impetus of an independent and individual creative project akin to that in a creative-practice based research degree as the main assessment requirement is somewhat distinct from other coursework program structures that rely on compulsory, core units that are often designed to be transdisciplinary and designed to encourage career planning and management.

Completing individual creative projects – either around the production of creative works or refining an aspect of their work as professional artworkers – is a core component of the program. As students focused on these projects, they were explicitly encouraged – by both teaching staff in their interactions with students and written descriptions of the program – to share and discuss their work throughout the semester, and provide commentary on their fellow students' project work. The process students were asked to follow included providing an initial description of their work, and updates throughout the process, documenting both the successes and challenges they faced. There was encouragement from the teaching staff for students to also share resources and experience. Staff sought to additionally model best practice in discussion board usage (that is, discussion board writing) by making timely, project-focused and encouraging responses to student posts (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016).

As outlined in the unit requirements that comprise the assessment regime for the various units in this program, while engaging in the Moodle discussion board was not assessed in itself, students could use their posts to meet one of the unit's assessment requirements. Embedding this formative component into the unit assessment in this way provided a mechanism for, and reinforced the centrality of, developing the personal practice of self-reflection. The online reflections, in essence, reinforced ongoing reflective practice (Boud 2001) in the unit, in this context not as an internal, private exercise but – instead – within a group setting.

Methodology and process

The student population in this degree program, and this study, includes internal and distance education students. The participants in this study, who numbered 25, were demographically diverse and included a strong majority of mature-age students. The ratios of internal and distance students were approximately equal with a wide geographic dispersment for the period of the investigation. The make up of the student group was also varied in terms of their creative projects, representing a mix of creative practice forms and disciplinary foci, including creative writing, digital media, film, music, and visual arts. Many of the students had previous experience in these artforms, such as undergraduate or equivalent qualifications, and/or considerable professional experience in their individual areas of creative practice. Their enrolment in the program reflected their desire to add postgraduate-level comprehension, refinement and expansion to their existing practice. Some, although not all, were seeking the postgraduate qualification as part of their career planning. A diverse group, these students used a number of different learning approaches for both their developing creative project and their engagement with the required unit assessments. They had a range of goals: some students were interested in honing their artistic practice, while others wanted to pursue further study including higher degree study in creative practice (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016; Sturm, Beckton & Brien 2017).

A qualitative evaluation was designed, which focused on the textual analysis of previously conducted research in this area. The research questions for the study were determined from this literature review. These questions were based around student use of the Moodle discussion board, and student satisfaction with this component of the

program (Cheng & Chau 2016). After receiving the necessary university ethical approval to conduct the study³, we reviewed the past discussion board postings from 2013 to 2016; current students enrolled in 2017 and 2018 were not included. Data included information gathered from Moodle such as posts, resources shared, and levels of engagement with other students. Responses from the Moodle discussion board were anonymised and analysed before being categorised and coded thematically. In this, we used a framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer 1994) of this data. In analysing data, we were looking for, and indexing, participants' responses to the aspects that supported – or hindered – an engaging experience with Moodle while they undertook the program, as well as their overall participation in the units themselves.

Findings

Key themes of student writing

Several key themes emerged from analysis of the student writing on the Moodle discussion boards. These themes focused on the following: relationships, belongingness, self-confidence, engagement and community. While distinct, these themes are not rigid, as they have fluid boundaries and frequently overlap with each other. Within these overarching themes there were also further sub-categories which could be identified. In the case of relationships, for example, there were multiple dimensions that could be grouped together, including the relationships of students with other students, and the relationships of students with the unit and program facilitators. In terms of the theme of engagement, students demonstrated engagement with the program material, engagement with their personal projects and process, and engagement with other students' projects. Self-confidence and a sense of belonging were strong themes that appeared throughout and were frequently interrelated. There were many expressions of gaining a greater sense of confidence because students felt that they had a group to connect with, a place to express challenges about their artistic practice and projects as well as in some cases sharing elements of their personal lives, which served to build a sense of community. Within these exchanges there were also discussions on the diverse ways of being, and challenges of making a life as, an artist.

Relationships

Throughout the Moodle discussion board postings, a sense of the relationships developed between students emerged from their responses to others' comments as well as how they chose to offer information from their own experience and personal creative and scholarly practices. As a component of building relationships, in this program there was an emphasis on learner-learner interaction, with some students leading and maintaining discussions (Cela, Sicilia & Sánchez-Alonso 2016).

Thanks for your participation during this term everybody. This forum really helped me to related [*sic*] to the course, knowing that there are other people involved in the same process. (S1, 4 June 2016)⁴

For many of the students, the connections to other class participants and to their own personal practice were clearly articulated.

This course is helping me to become more dynamic again. So far it has stirred a few vital issues. My proposed project has undergone a change which would probably make it less impressive but also more meaningful as an expression flowing from my mind. I'm no longer concerned with the end product as much as with the process towards deliverable goal. (S1, 1 April 2016)

While there were also expressions of connections between the students and the teaching staff, due to the fact that both the teaching staff, and their approaches to interaction, changed throughout the cohorts, it is less of a focus for this particular research. This may, however, be an area of future investigation and is an important consideration in online learning (Mazzolini & Maddison 2003).

Belongingness

Belongingness is a personal and contextually negotiated experience that is reflective of how secure and accepted an individual feels, how connected to the group, and if their professional and/or personal values are in tune with the group (Levett-Jones & Lathlean 2008) and this was reflected online. In a number of postings, students expressed a strong sense of belonging and a recognition of the value of being part of a community.

Thank you both for your amazing contribution to mental health awareness ... I repeat the words I have used before that now I feel I have found a tribe. (S3, 3 April 2016)

It's so good to hear from 'A' and 'B' to see their progress, successes and light bulb moments. It's also very encouraging to see what threats or what they identify as weaknesses in themselves and in the progress of their projects. It makes me feel more level, that I have a community that I identify with, and somehow gives [*sic*] me feel less stressed, a bit more hopeful and more energetic. (S17, 16 August 2015)

At Last ... I seem to be getting somewhere, my patience and perseverance has paid off, and I'm sure it's all thanks to this weekly (often more), discussion issues that we are sharing on the Moodle Discussion Group. I have read every one, feeling everyone's struggle and frustration at times, then thinking I am not alone, understating in my case it was best to ride it out, and keep working in other areas until I found my way. (S7, 2 May 2016)

Some of this feeling of belonging was encouraged by work on the end-of-semester exhibition (discussed below), while others mentioned the sharing of resources online.

Self-confidence

The sense of belonging can also be seen to build a growing feeling of self-confidence around the project work as part of the program, as well as with elements of personal artistic practice and identity.

Now we have our entire exhibition pieces submitted I feel as though I can move forward. I must say, I am inspired by everyone's creative work and the art space looks immaculate. Well done everyone, I am so proud of all your hard work. (S19, 25 July 2015)

I feel by doing this course I now have so many resources to spur me along. I feel so much more confidence in myself and value what I create and produce as something valid. If only you knew how little I valued my creativity before study, so if nothing else this outcome alone has been worth every long day, weekend lost and sleepless night. (S17, 6 September 2015)

Mature-age students also found the student-to-student connections important for establishing a sense of belonging (Kahu 2014), which also increased their self-confidence. This idea of finding confidence through practice, and through the shared experience of achievement with fellow peers, is powerful, and in some cases helped students feel able to identify as an 'artist':

Over the last seven weeks my artistic journey has evolved so much that I feel I have developed an inner confidence about my artwork that was never there before. Today I feel I'm not just doing art but am an artist feeding my passion. The interaction with you guys [and] the overwhelming awareness that creativity really is a part of me ... have now instilled in me beliefs will stay forever. (S3 28 April 2016)

My interaction with you, my fellow students via Moodle has given me the courage to speak up. I believe the Moodle site has given me a huge stepping-stone 'to putting it out there' and to apply my thoughts to writing without the face-to-face contact. It's the beginning of find a voice and your personal responses to my personal journey have been such an incredible emotional support that I will remember so kindly. Thank you. (S3 28 April 2016)

Some students voiced a sense that Moodle, and the discussion board that provided a place for their writing, was a key component in this sense of belonging:

Moodle has reminded me that I'm not alone that I have a tribe of over thinkers here to play with. (S10, 26 April 2016)

Moodle and class discussions has made me aware that most of, if not all of my class has the same doubts and insecurities even though on the outside everyone looks amazingly confident and very well put together. (S10, 26 April 2016)

One student explicitly reached out to thank the Moodle discussion boards directly, a response we thought is important to note when considerable student negativity is often expressed towards online learning (Selwyn 2016):

Thank you Moodle and this group for sharing and to help us all connect and feel good to be ourselves. (S10, 26 April 2016).

Engagement

From the key theme of engagement emerged two key elements of how students engaged with others: living as artists, and sharing their practice. It was clear that

students were interested in discussions of the diverse ways to make a life as an artist. This included sharing artistic practice strategies, logistical and practical elements around financial considerations, time management and additional resources, and meant that a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998) emerged organically. In some cases, these discussions centred on the resources provided, in other cases they were prompted by individual experiences that were shared on the Moodle discussion board. For example, one student posted a reflection sharing how they were feeling proud of their work and then, when asked if they would give away a piece of artwork, struggled with their sense of value around the artwork and their artistic practice. Another student encouraged them to see the value in the work and shared some other ideas, such as offering the artwork for purchase through an exhibition or producing a limited run of prints.

I guess thinking like this is something I need to keep in mind as I may feel burnt out throughout the creative process. Seeing something through and completing it is better than a half-finished creation with a great idea that nobody will ever see. (S5, 29 May 2016)

Use your imagination and creativity and channel it into something positive, and if possible encourage others who are in a difficult situation. Our artistic endeavours can be a catalyst for change, not only in our own lives but in the lives of others. (S4, 30 April 2016)

[G]enerally I work my practice around my family. Being sporadic and undisciplined would mean that exhibitions would not happen, my work would not develop and my career as an artist would grind to a halt! (S14, 29 April 2015)

Other students shared their strategies for coping with burnout, time management or how to navigate some of the logistics around accessing other websites.

The second key element of engagement emerged when students discussed their own practice. These discussions around artistic practice were directly prompted by the program requirements and the way it was taught. For example, one term that the program was offered, a peer-to-peer exchange was facilitated through an online competition. Students were requested to post a favourite interactive resource onto the Moodle site accompanied by commentary regarding its importance and how it could be used. Students seemed to be highly engaged with this form of sharing and collecting resources and the sense of exchange of knowledge. This builds on previous research regarding the value of peer-to-peer mentoring (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016). Frequently, creative practitioners gather data in the form of objects, resources, tools, and memories in order to progress their work and this habit has been termed that of the 'bowerbird' (Brady 2000). Many of the students already have a practice of gathering resources and thus facilitating the exchange of information provides a kind of peer-to-peer relationship building and mentoring (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016). It also demonstrates a form of networked learning in which the students are asked to contribute their skills and knowledge to the group (Cheng & Chau 2016).

In some cases, students' written contributions involved engaging in a dialogue across disciplines and artistic practices. In other instances, the sharing of practice and resources was self-generated. Students shared photos of paintings or experiences,

poems, passages of writing and quotes. For example, when one student shared photos of their paintings there were immediately three responses from other students. Another student shared an experience surrounding an exhibit at an RSL (Returned and Services League of Australia) centre and a fellow student responded with personal experiences from the army and air force, and resources on how art is valued within the armed forces. This mechanism of sharing experiences about individual project work or artistic practice, as well as the shared interactive resources, also contributed to the building of relationships and sense of belonging.

I got a bit excited about [a video posted online in the unit materials] today. It may not interest everyone, but I found it useful for my arts practice. When I glaze my paintings, I get a little impatient, always in a hurry, take short cuts, but watching this today proves that you should not take short cuts. (S7, 19 May 2016)

The third presenter said that creativity grows out of everyday experiences, paying attention to the world and listening to stories. This advice reiterates what I have said in my earlier reflections, and this is how I create my stories. I hope to continue observing, learning, reflecting and writing and if one day my stories are published, well, that will be an added bonus. (S4, 4 May 2016)

I love the fact that now I can refer my coincidences or serendipitous moments to creative thinking. This course is filling many blanks. (S3, 21 April 2016)

It is clear that, in this type of posting, students were sometimes inadvertently undertaking reflective journaling (Boud 2001) on their practice. This process of writing to share their practice with peers through the lens of the unit content allowed them to reflect on their own creative processes and sometimes shift their own definitions or understanding of ideas.

From this move towards small objects I have started looking at the work of so many artists I did not know before, I am finding inspiration in new places and though my small objects so far are rushed and perhaps more gestures than well conceived pieces I feel like my horizons are expanding and it's exciting (S18, 6 September 2015).

By engaging in the learning materials on Moodle, it made me consciously aware of my own power of words and what environmental messages I am portraying through my creative works. (S19, 8 September 2015)

Community

There was a wide range of types of personal details and experiences that were shared on the Moodle discussion board, and the levels of disclosure that emerged were varied. In some cases, the sharing of a personal experience prompted further discussion and exchange between students and in some ways contributed to the development of relationships and sense of community. Some students chose to share about their own personal experiences around mental health while another student shared reflections on the anniversary of the death of a close relative and how it connected to their artistic practice. Others offered diverse points of view about their lives and professional experiences and exchanges occurred between students working

in different art practices. There seemed to be some blurred boundaries regarding discussions of personal matters and artistic practice and this is a potential area for further investigation. In some cases, writing about personal details seemed to provide a pathway to engaging in discussions regarding the various ways to make a life as an artist while discussions of personal mental health were framed in relation to its connections to creativity and artistry. Interestingly, in the below example, the student is referring to an event outside of the scope of their studies; however, the lens through which they are reflecting on this experience lets them connect it with their identity within this community of creative practitioners, and their shared learning journey.

In some ways I find it reassuring to know that many other creative people battle with the same or similar problems as those I face. Admitting to a mental health problem takes courage but doing so opens the door to managing it. Just a few weeks ago, I had a number of public speaking engagements. The largest audience I delivered to was over 300 people. I had to do an hour-long presentation and naturally was quite nervous. Before I went on stage, I did a bit of power-posing using Amy Cuddy's techniques. I'm not sure if it was the power-posing itself that helped or the fact that I was momentarily distracted, but afterwards I was able to take the microphone and speak for an hour without being overwhelmed by nerves. (S2, 2 April 2016)

Discussion

Overall, the student responses within the Moodle discussion board about the use of the Moodle platform were positive. These responses created a means for all students to participate in the program not only as individuals, but with a sense of created community. As described earlier, there are ongoing challenges regarding the development and delivery of a blended experience for a program that includes both online and on-campus students. In this program, there were requests from the virtual community for opportunities to have further connections, such as video conversations and on-site residential workshops. The emphasis on the benefits of both the online and in-person interactions suggests the persistent strength of a blended program rather than an online-only program (Rovai & Jordan 2004). This is a potential area for further investigation, especially considering the ongoing improvements in technology and online platforms (Wong 2013).

I'd love to see some of your work, even ones your [sic] not happy with. I'm a distance student but would love to see a photo on here if you can manage. (S6, 5 April 2016)

The experience of working through shared content, and then responding to this content through the discussion boards, provided significant stimulus for students. This of course is not an unusual idea in creative arts teaching, which frequently exposes students to examples of creative practice to showcase best practice and contemporary industry trends. However, these responses showcase an independence in embracing further exposure:

I was blown away with how clever this group is, and loved all the works so much. It's so nice to see others [sic] works and I completely underestimated the feelings it would conjure in me. I am inspired to try harder and to visit more art showings and

exhibitions in the future. Art is great for the soul, I've decided. (S6, 23 September 2015)

The Moodle resources have stimulated a very meaningful process of self-guided exploration. The materials provided served as a catalyst which initiated a spontaneous process guided by more acute awareness and driven by my own curiosity. (S1, 25 April 2016)

Each semester struck a different balance of personal and program-related reflection. In some cases, students shared a large amount of personal information, some including more intimate details around challenges of mental health or loss of family members. Others included reflections on the challenges they were facing in juggling family life and artistic practice, or difficulties in their artistic practice or perception of their artistic identity. The sharing of personal stories and experiences prompted further engagement and online exchange and contributed to the building of the sense of community and relationality within each class. While all discussions were connected in some way either to their project or to their ongoing journey as an artist, it also prompts further questions regarding the boundaries of discussion and the fact that some participants became more disengaged when classmates shared detailed personal stories.

An important differentiation, and one which would benefit from further exploration, is looking at student engagement in such online communities, and their perception of this engagement, as compared with their satisfaction with the Learning Management System through which this engagement is enacted. While some students, for instance, in this program, expressed criticism of the Moodle platform in the formal term-by-term feedback, there was no such criticism of the online engagement expected in their studies.

Shared goals

As part of the program, each semester's work required that the student cohort collaborate to create a group exhibition of their creative work (Sturm, Beckton & Brien 2016). This incorporates both internal and external students, as well as those studying part-time and full-time. For some, the work they exhibited was completed while others exhibited work in progress. This was an opportunity for the group to participate towards a shared goal as well as to engage in a multidisciplinary activity as the exhibition regularly includes creative projects in the fields of at least creative writing, music, and visual art (Beckton, Brien & Sturm 2016). It was also a highly anticipated event for many of the students and, as such, prompted ongoing communication between internal and distance students regarding the logistics of display and the production of the event, as well as curatorial decisions regarding the work selection, display set up and show's name (Beckton, Brien & Sturm, 2016). The exhibition as a goal appears to be a key element of the program in that it both activates the real-life experience of artistic practice, while simultaneously engages the class community in further interactions and communication. Goal setting can be an element of clarifying future career goals and encouraging engagement in online learning (Antonio & Tuffley 2015). The exhibition provides a concrete goal with a

fixed deadline. The exhibition also provides an opportunity for a collaborative meeting in physical space, with some distance students traveling to the campus at Noosa to view the final exhibit and/or attend the exhibition opening event. This physical meeting serves to reinforce the relational connections established through the online interactions and supports diverse learning approaches (Cheng and Chau 2016). While not feasible (and not required) for all students, all expressed how valuable this was for them and how much they appreciated being a part of a community while engaging in this activity.

Student feedback regarding the exhibition continued to be very positive with its collective nature frequently remarked on in both formal and informal feedback. Further, prospective students applied to the program with a knowledge of this group exhibition and some information about how it is achieved (Beckton, Brien and Sturm 2016).

I'm continuing with my weaving this week ... I began weaving on CDs and morphed onto only Vinyl LPs. It's hilarious to see the faces of the assistants in the Op shop when I buy the LPs and tell them what I do with them. I've always been asked. I think they are pleased that someone is actually buying them. I hope to have quite a few ready for the Exhibition in May and my piece may even be finished by then. (S2, 6 April 2016)

I will put this into practice with my paintings for the exhibition with only one half done at this stage, the other not commenced yet, ugh!! I work well to deadlines fortunately. I'm looking forward to sharing and seeing everyone else's submissions for the exhibition at the end of the month. Should be an exciting opening. (S7, 19 May 2016)

Conclusion

By investigating the online behavior of creative arts postgraduate students in this particular program offering at a regional university, it is possible to see that the key themes that emerged in the discussion board responses from the students – relationships, belongingness, self-confidence, engagement, and community – are not content or discipline specific. While the students engaged with these themes usually through, or in connection with, their own creative or professional practice, their experience online was – our analysis revealed – more centred on the support and assistance with self-management that their fellow students could provide.

This study revealed that the creative project-based model of the program was highly valued by students due to its flexibility and inclusivity. This was especially true for students who identified themselves as 'senior' or mature aged. A broader consideration of research into adult learning, particularly Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy (that is, adult learning) (1980; 1984a,b; Knowles, Holton & Swanson 2005), is pertinent in terms of thinking about how adult learners have different expectations of, and motivations for, their study, but we did not conduct this research into these learners with this in mind, or include any way of identifying or dividing the participants by age. The students also expressed the perceived value of engaging across different art forms and practices, and the opportunity to see and share examples

of their artistic work. Students extended their knowledge beyond their existing expertise in their chosen discipline through responding to the work and offerings of other students. This diversity of arts practices also provided opportunities to diversify the available resources and perspectives, such as in the range of videos suggested as resources by the students. Further research needs to be conducted in order to explore, and more clearly articulate, how engaging in a project-based learning model may influence student engagement.

While the findings of this project are not representational and cannot be used to speak to the wider, national context of postgraduate creative arts students, the key themes that emerged are not dissimilar to the transformational experience that is often touted as part of higher research degree students as they transition from identifying as students into researchers (Mantai 2017). The experience of working through an individual creative project alongside a small cohort of diverse students is very valuable. While the learning management system itself can cause its own challenges, the evidence in this small-scale project suggests that facilitating online, shared discussion is an important component in engaging regional and distributed students. The blended format of the program addressed in this study provided the opportunity for students in regional areas to participate. A further area for exploration would be ways of supporting the distance participants to be more visible.

Considering the increased attention on maintaining connections with, and supporting the enrolment of, distance students across the regional university landscape, it is important to also consider what these findings suggest for further investigation. An initial line of enquiry could investigate whether there is any difference between engaging in an online community and engaging specifically in the Moodle platform. Useful further research could also focus on the ways students self-set the boundaries of such discussion and how the sharing of details regarding personal life and artistic practice was conducted safely in this space, including an investigation of the benefits, or not, of students using their real names as compared with anonymous avatars. The way individual reflective practice operated within the context of the group online community in the Moodle discussion board is also worthy of further consideration, especially if a much larger group could be studied. It would also be interesting to investigate whether, and if so how, the sharing of personal practice in a blending learning context contributes to the development of lasting relationships once the relevant program is complete. This could lead to an investigation of the viability of developing and supporting alumni networks and opportunities to continue such online communities.

Finally, we believe it is crucial to consider these findings in relation to the isolation that students and graduates working in the creative arts in regional areas of Australia often profess to feel. These results certainly suggest a potential manner in which writing in such ways can assist practitioners living in such areas to feel engaged and connected with peers who may live in far distant locations. The importance of the 'tribe' and the sense of engaged belonging that comes with successfully connecting with peers is something that regional artistic communities already understand, meaning that the outcomes from this type of investigation may contribute to the development and ongoing sustainability of communities in the regions.

Endnotes

1. In the following discussion, 'program' has been used to describe the degree level offering, and 'unit' to refer to the individual offerings within that program.
2. This program has now been revised and, as of 2018, replaced by the Graduate Certificate in Creative and Professional Practice.
3. Ethics approval: CQU 0000020897
4. Student postings are quoted verbatim.

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