Chapter Ten:  
Using Conversation to Transform the Marginalisation of Distance Education Students  

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Abstract  

Historically, distance education has enabled access to higher education for traditionally marginalised groups in society. However, within the university community, the distance education student has often been relegated to the margins. Activities which allow these students to engage in unfettered conversation with their peers can encourage their participation as full members of the community and help to transform this marginalisation. Such activities may be incorporated as part of the teaching approach but can also be mediated by centralised support units. The essence of such support is the opportunity to engage fully in public dialogue which not only reflects the institutional view but also shapes a new understanding based on the student’s own lived experience. In this chapter we explore the importance of the use of conversation to underpin the activities of a centralised learner support unit and discuss strategies to transform the marginalisation of distance students by providing opportunities for open, student-led conversation.  

Introduction  

In the latter half of the 20th century, there was considerable change in the face of higher education in Australia and the western world, moving away from being an elite activity pursued only by a privileged few on completion of secondary schooling to provide ongoing opportunity for a more diverse population with different experiences and a variety of expectations. Social, political and economic factors have all played a part in redefining not only who attends university but also why they attend, when they attend and the form that that “attendance” may take. For many, the flexibility in time and place of study offered by distance education has enabled the pursuit of
continual learning, *doctrina perpetua*, whether for economic advancement or for personal fulfilment.

However, while the number and diversity of people commencing university study have increased, not all commencing students achieve the same degree of success with their studies. Distance education students tend to have lower rates of academic success and a higher attrition rate (Long, 1994; Bowser, Danaher & Somasundaran, Fig. 12.5 in this volume). For institutions like Central Queensland University (CQU), where a significant proportion of the student population study by distance education, it is important to consider the factors that may be having a negative influence on the learning experience of these students. McInnis, James and McNaught’s (1995) influential report on the experience of first-year students suggests that the student’s sense of engagement with the institution is an important factor in their success.

At the same time, the question must be asked what form such engagement might take for students who are physically removed from their institution, their teachers and their fellow students. Their lack of physical presence in the classroom gives rise to a lack of social presence and their very existence in the class is easily disregarded by their fellow students and even by the teacher to some degree. Even though the number of distance education students in some classes would preclude the use of the word “minority” to describe their status, this lack of regard is a form of marginalisation. This chapter discusses one approach that has been taken to attempt to transform the position of such students from the margins to active participation in the university community.

In this chapter, we review the history of distance education as a background to a discussion of the issue of marginalisation of distance education students. The value of unfettered dialogue or conversation as a means of engagement in the university community is discussed, with reference to the usefulness of electronic media to make such conversation accessible to remote students. The particular case of the activities of a centralised learner support unit at CQU is also examined and the conclusion suggests the use of conversational strategies in dealings with distance education students as a way to enhance their engagement in the university community.

### History of Distance Education

Many of the pioneers of distance education such as Charles Wedemeyer (1981) were motivated by an agenda of social reform and opportunity for new groups, such as mature age students, people from lower incomes and the
geographically isolated to participate in university study. Either intentionally or incidentally, the rise of distance and flexible education has worked to overcome the marginalisation of these groups in society by allowing them to participate in higher levels of education with the resulting access to improved opportunities, as described by Tait (2003). For example, the world’s first fully distance education institution, the University of South Africa, made university education available to “black” and “coloured” citizens who were excluded from attending universities by South Africa’s prevailing apartheid laws (Tait, 2003). Similarly, the Open University in the United Kingdom, established in 1969, became known as a university of “second chance” because it actively encouraged the enrolment of mature aged people without the traditional university entrance qualifications (Tait, 2003).

In countries such as Australia and Canada, the leading factor in the rise of distance education was the spread of a sparse population over great geographical distances, putting traditional on-campus university education out of reach for many. Isolated and rural students were identified as one of the disadvantaged groups to be targeted for greater levels of inclusion in higher education in the Australian government’s *A Fair Chance for All* report (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990).

The history of CQU has been intimately tied to distance education from the earliest days (Central Queensland University, 1999). The first distance education course was offered in 1972 by the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education, as it was then known. In 1989 the Institute became one of eight accredited Distance Education Centres in Australia and has been a major provider of distance education since, with over 8,000 students enrolled in the distance education mode in 2005.

The editors’ introduction to *Doctrina Perpetua* describes in some detail how the history and growth of distance education have also had a close “partnership” with the development of technologies of communication. Distance education became possible with the development of a fast and reliable postal service and public transport to deliver learning materials (Tait, 2003) and has continued to evolve with developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs). In common with many institutions, CQU has utilised the various forms of ICTs to support the learning of remote students as described in Nipper’s (1989) generational model. The University uses ICTs for one-way delivery of study materials in digital formats and for more interactive two-way technologies such as automated activities and multi-user online communication tools such as discussion boards, email lists and synchronous chatrooms (Sturgess & Kennedy, 2003). The technologies continue to evolve and more and more online services are being offered to off-campus students.
Over its relatively short life, distance education has been both influenced by, and influential in, the changes that have taken place in the higher education sector. The growing interest in university education has required the development of ways of dealing with large numbers of off-campus students and the new approaches that have developed have increasingly been adopted to provide greater flexibility for all students. However, the question of the status of geographically isolated students within the university community remains.

**Marginalisation and Conversation**

Although it cannot be disputed that distance education has provided opportunities for many marginalised groups within society to participate in higher education, it can be argued that, within the higher education community, distance education is positioned as being outside the norm. Students participating in this mode are frequently framed as “other” and marginalised in both teaching and administrative activities. Institutions engaged in teaching exclusively or predominantly in the distance mode are perceived as being of lower status than traditional universities. This is in part because they tend to be younger, and institutional status is often tied to tradition. It is also related to the teaching method itself. Many teachers decry the limitations of teaching in the distance education mode.

Even within institutions such as CQU, where distance education students make up a significant part of the student population, off-campus students can still be relegated to a marginalised status, although this is probably due more to apathy rather than antipathy. Tucker (1990) describes marginalisation as “the process by which, through shifts in position, any given group can be ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized, ‘other’, or threatening, while others are valorized” (p. 7). This characterisation of marginalised students as “invisible” and “unheard” is particularly relevant to distance students, who are literally not seen or heard in the classroom or in the normal day-to-day teaching situation. They are easy to ignore and attract attention only when they explicitly ask for assistance or tender their work for assessment. There are no easy routes for these students to be seen or heard, with opportunities for interaction being dependent on the teacher deliberately making such opportunities available. When the student is “seen” s/he is seen as “other”, not as part of the normal group of students.

In addition to removing the student from the regard of her or his teacher, the lack of physical presence in the classroom creates a social distance between distance students and their peers and teachers. Moore (1993) describes the transactional distance that occurs with separation as
“a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (p. 22). This social distance with its potential for misunderstanding occurs among physically absent students and their peers as well as between instructor and learner.

Tait (1996) describes community in the educational setting as being based on conversation—spontaneous, non-instrumental interactions with a human focus, not dominated by management concerns. As Simpson (2000) asks, “Can we claim to be offering any kind of education if we do not offer our students the opportunity for dialogue at the same time?” (p. 9). For the on-campus student, this dialogue may be formal or informal discussions involving teachers or fellow learners. For the distance student, there are very few opportunities to participate in such conversations and become active members of the community. The lack of opportunity for spontaneous interactions with their peers prevents them from seeing what activities are potentially available within the community. Their sense of how the community functions and their potential role in it is limited to the view that is afforded by the institution. They don’t have the opportunity to see how the community functions, how other students are within that community or what the potential is for other ways of being. The view of learning as a solitary pursuit engaged in privately rather than through engagement with a community of practice is reinforced, and so the student remains separate from that community.

In addition to issues of social equity, developing a sense of belonging to the community of the university has been suggested as an important factor in the persistence of students commencing at universities (Long, 1994; McInnis, James & McNaught, 1995). However, the traditional model of distance education is based on materials being self-instructional and self-paced, a model which requires of learners a high degree of independence and autonomy. Many traditional distance education support services that are provided for students reinforce these notions of solitary activity rather than encourage greater participation and interaction in the learning community.

The relationship between the institution and the distance student has been explored by Sumner (2000) using the framework of Habermas’s theory of communicative action. She discusses distance education in terms of the competing interests of the “system”—the socio-economic world in which capital is coded in terms of money and power—and the “lifeworld”, which is characterised by dialogic discourse and interpersonal relationships. Sumner suggests that most of the trends in contemporary education, including distance education, tend to be based on economic considerations—the system—rather than supporting the personal experiences of the learner—the
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lifeworld. As Campion (1996) observes: “The language and structures of business, industry and advertising are now frequently interwoven in the activities of open learning” (p. 149). This managerialism tends to focus on the instrumental and to judge success in terms such as efficiencies of delivery, reducing interactions between student and institution to a minimum usually centred on assessment tasks. However, activities which are centred on the individual student’s experience, while difficult to measure in terms of a dollar value, have the potential to enhance not only the individual’s personal satisfaction but also her or his engagement with the community of learning.

The growing use of two-way ICTs, described by Nipper (1989) as a feature of the third generation of distance education, has the potential to allow students greater interaction with teachers and with other students, and thus affords students a more centralised position in the learning community. This interaction may occur through the use of multi-user online communications tools such as bulletin boards, email lists or synchronous chatrooms. However, as Sumner (2000) warns, the use of such technology can also be used to reinforce the system’s power: “Computer conferencing can serve the system by being closed, circumscribed, non-exploratory and hierarchical, or it can serve the lifeworld by being open-ended, wide-ranging, democratic, participatory and ‘noisy’” (p. 281). Closed, hierarchical communications, such as online tutorials with discussion limited to a narrow topic or online chats where the teacher controls who can post messages, can serve to marginalise students further by framing them as powerless observers rather than as active participants in the dialogue. However, while on-campus students may have other, less controlled opportunities to interact with one another face-to-face, such opportunities are not available to distance students, who are dependent on the institution to provide channels for communication.

It is worth noting that all communications among distance students must be mediated by the institution to some extent, because physical separation prevents the accidental meetings which occur among students in the same physical space. So the institution has the capacity to control conversation, either explicitly by removing access to the medium of communication or implicitly by social controls such as the giving or withdrawing of approval or information. Whether the allowed communications will be “noisy” and support the participation of distance students in the community or will be constrained by the requirements of the “system” will determine the extent to which such conversations can transform the marginalised status of distance students.
Another concern is that the use of these technologies in teaching has blurred the lines between the traditional distance education student and the on-campus student. In some cases all students, regardless of their designation as on-campus or off-campus, receive the same set of learning resources and interact through online activities. Although this could be seen as providing an equal educational experience for all students and thus benefiting the isolated students, it could also be argued that this format simply masks the isolation of many students, making it less likely that they will be identified as requiring additional support. The on-campus student, although interacting with the learning materials online, also has the opportunity to interact freely with other members of the university community, an opportunity that is denied to the distance student. Such universal adoption of online technologies as a key teaching tool also runs the risk of creating new forms of exclusion. Wheeler and Amiotte (2005) point out that not all students have equal access to online communications, owing both to practical issues of access to technology and to attitudinal issues such as resistance to using new technologies. Ironically, it is often the already marginalised groups, such as distance students, who are most disadvantaged in these ways.

**Learner Support at CQU**

Support activities for students can be defined as either learning support or learner support. The first is predominantly provided by the teaching staff associated with the specific course of study and is aimed at supporting the learning processes in that course. Learner support is aimed at supporting the learner as a person and can be associated with a course of study or with the many other aspects of the student’s life that can impact on their educational experience. This can be offered within the context of a course of study or it can be facilitated independently of any specific learning context—for example, by a centralised support agency.

In addition to the support that students receive from their teachers, centralised support for external studies has been offered by CQU since it first engaged in distance education, although the exact nature of this support has varied over time. This support has included administrative assistance to lecturers in preparing and despatching materials, pedagogical support for the design of instructional materials and direct support for the student, such as counselling services. This centralised support has been through many incarnations over the years and is currently manifested in various activities of the Division of Teaching and Learning Services, particularly the services provided by the Communication and Support Unit (C&S), which has responsibility for providing a range of non-academic support services directly to assist the distance education students.
For the purposes of this discussion, we have categorised the activities undertaken by C&S in support of distance students as being of three kinds:

1. providing an interface to institutional processes;
2. providing literature and information; and
3. mediating, open-ended interpersonal contact among students.

Each of these categories of activity works in its own way to encourage greater engagement with the university community.

**Support services as providing an institutional interface**

As the primary centralised contact point for distance students, the Unit provides an interface for various institutional processes. For example, it is the central submission site for assignments from off-campus students, recording their receipt and forwarding them to the appropriate marker. Although not directly involved in preparing and despatching study materials, the unit provides a helpline function for students with queries about study materials that have not been received or have components missing or damaged. With increasing diversity in modes of teaching utilised for course delivery, students are often unsure about what materials they can expect to receive for a specific course and the unit is able to assist students with such enquiries.

These activities can enhance the student’s sense of self-efficacy by providing the student with a means to understand and access the institutional systems and by providing a point of entry into the systems which may not otherwise be available to the remote student. However, there is also the potential for such interactions to become alienating rather than empowering if the focus becomes too firmly institutional, with the university deciding what information is provided and how it is to be provided. Bailey, Kirkup and Taylor (1996) suggest that:

> Personal support, even if mediated by letter, telephone or computer, is vital in humanising the institution and in helping the student to ‘bond’ with it. A sense of personal contact and community comes not only from academic assessment and feedback but equally from help to the student in managing the administrative process, developing learning skills and surmounting obstacles thrown up by the complexity of adult lives. (p. 141)

Thus, even predominantly informational interactions provide some opportunity to combat marginalisation by virtue of personal interaction. The unit is constantly aware of the importance of the humanising role of its contact with students and the importance of a human “voice” in all correspondence. The predominant style of speaking adopted in dealing with
telephone calls or other queries is informal and appropriate for conversation among adults, rather than adopting an authoritarian voice. Thus the Unit acts to acknowledge the interests of the student as an equal partner in the community, at least within the parameters of this interaction.

**Support services as providers of information and guides**

The second category of C&S activity is the provision of information about studying at CQU. This includes developing and distributing literature relating to the experience of study, such as a study skills handbook, tips for the family of a distance student and information about other support services available to students. As well as formal publications, there is also more informal literature such as a regular newsletter which includes stories about other students and letters of welcome as well as updates about university happenings and reminders about important dates. These activities again help to provide information about the institution, but this time it is more focused on the personal experience of being a student, allowing the isolated student to tap into a shared wisdom that would normally be available only to students meeting and talking face-to-face. Again an important element in using this activity to help the student “bond” with the institution is the “voice” adopted in writing. The writing style tends towards informality, humanising the information and the author. These materials tend to position the reader as part of the student community, allowing them to see themselves as similar to other students and no longer as “other”.

**Support services facilitating student-mediated interaction**

However, it is the third category of activity, focused on mediating student-to-student conversation, that has the greatest potential to reduce the marginalisation of distance students. In this role the Unit acts as a conduit, enabling communication among interested students. For example, the Unit supports the organisation of self-directed study groups by providing the contact details of interested students to others in the same geographical area or the same field of study. Substantial use has also been made in more recent years of the two-way communication capabilities of computerised systems. Online discussion forums have been provided for the use of students, originally using email and more recently with a discussion board integrated in the University’s widely used learning management system (Sturgess & Kennedy, 2003). These forums have also been used to support a student mentor scheme linking first-year distance students with more experienced students who provide non-academic support during the first year of study (Sturgess & Kennedy, 2004).
In each of these cases, the contact among students is mediated by the Unit, providing the technological infrastructure to allow contact and using centralised information to match groups of students with shared interests. However, the nature of the interactions among the students in these various relationships is self-determined. Although the systems, including the ICTs used to support the interactions, are the same communications systems that are used in teaching situations throughout the University, this use of it differs in that participation is not coerced in any way, there is no possibility of penalty and the topic and nature of any discussion are generated by the students and are not subject to an institutional agenda. By providing this opportunity for participation through free conversation, students who might otherwise be isolated from their peers are provided with an opportunity to construct and participate fully in a community of students with similar experiences and interests.

Except for a minimal level of monitoring that is maintained to ensure the safety of all participants (and it is worth noting that intervention to prevent threatening or intrusive behaviour among students has never been required), the types of conversations that occur in these various situations are determined by the participants—the students. Activities such as the mentor program are deliberately designed to encourage students to construct a view of the institution that is based on student experience and needs, not based on the system’s needs.

While all distance students are advised of the availability of these services, not all choose to utilise them. This is a matter of personal choice and participation is not coerced in any way. However, a significant number of students do make use of these services. For example, hundreds of messages are sent to the online discussion board each term discussing a range of issues including personal introductions, study tips and suggestions for improvements to the University. The Distance Education Mentor scheme is also well utilised, with 466 first-year students placed with 88 student mentors in 2006. Student feedback about both these services is overwhelmingly positive about the experience.

However, while the use of ICTs has been beneficial in supporting the personal contact among students and between student and university, further development in the use of computerised systems for student support also has the potential to work against the lifeworld. Taylor’s (2001) extension of Nipper’s (1989) generational model suggests that the fifth generation of distance education involves the use of databases to allow students to access institutional information without the need for human mediation. Although this is conducive to the efficient management of large numbers of geographically remote students, the results in terms of human satisfaction
and engagement are not so clear cut. Wheeler and Amiotte (2005) warn about such depersonalisation occurring with new techniques and methodologies: “Some of these practices were industrialized, reducing the teaching and learning process to activities akin to factory manufacturing, representing division of labor, economies of scale and a conveyor belt mentality” (n.p.).

Likewise Tait (1996) cautions that the rise of managerialism in higher education, with its demands for increased volume and resource-based learning, may lead to support services becoming more bureaucratised and impersonalised at the expense of their capacity to support the interactions of conversation and community. The institution defines priorities for C&S in the first two categories of activity listed at the beginning of this section, while much of the community-building activity in the third category has been undertaken at the instigation of the support unit, often with no additional resources to develop and run these activities. This tension between the need to support the institutional agenda and the desire to support the human needs of the student has been noted by authors such as Simpson (2000) and Harreveld (cited in Danaher, Coombes, Simpson, Harreveld & Danaher, 2002).

**Conclusion**

Although distance education has historically been a means of offering greater opportunities to marginalised groups by providing access to higher education, the distance education student has often been relegated to the margins of the university community. Students who do not have the opportunity to interact with their teachers and fellow students in the same physical space are at risk of being marginalised because of their diminished presence in the public discourse of higher education. Activities which allow these students to engage in unfettered conversation with their peers can enable their participation as full members of the community. It is hoped that such engagement will not only benefit the students in their current studies but also encourage development of an ongoing sense of personal identity as capable learners.

We have discussed the importance of conversation—informal unstructured dialogue—as a means of placing isolated students at the centre of the community discourse. The essence of such support is the opportunity to engage in open dialogue with other members of the community in a context which is not restrained by the institutional view and which, while acknowledging the institutional view, shapes a new understanding based on the student’s own lived experience. Opportunities for such conversation can occur as part of the learning context, but they can also be provided by
centralised learner support units. The challenge for such support units is to continue to provide a humanised support which recognises the individuality of each student in the face of increasing pressure to adopt practices based on economic principles such as the mass production of services.

The support unit discussed here has a specific focus on distance education students. However, as the philosophy of *doctrina perpetua* suggests, people are now continuing to learn throughout their lives by engaging in higher education, often using online learning and other variations on flexible delivery of learning to fit studies into their other life commitments. This has led to an increasing number of students studying in physical isolation from their peers and teachers. Enhancing engagement in the university community is important and relevant to all students who are removed from their institution for any reason, and the strategies adopted by C&S to encourage engagement are valid for all students and for providing both academic and non-academic support.

In summary, the main strategies used by C&S to encourage a sense of community are:

- **The use of ICTs to provide opportunities for students to interact with one another in an informal and unstructured way, building community related to the institution and the shared experience of study but not constrained by the institutional view.** Providing computer mediated communications tools, such as discussion lists and chatrooms allows students to interact with one another as part of a community independent of the constraints of a specific study context. However, the fact that the provision of infrastructure for such interaction is dependent on the institution should not be allowed to influence the content or type of conversations if true participation in such communities is to be achieved.

- **The use of a human “voice” in interactions with students, in both written and oral communications.** While acting on behalf of the institutional systems, the support unit also has the opportunity to shape students’ sense of their own position in the university community as equal partners and active participants in that community. The need to maintain a human voice in interactions with remote students as a way of reducing their isolation must be recognised by universities as they move to increase efficiencies by the adoption of computerised “intelligent systems” to provide information.
Opportunities for dialogue between isolated students and other members of the university community are limited by the practicalities of distance. It is important that when such opportunities do arise they are used to support the student’s sense of personal engagement in the community and to support the lifeworld rather than to focus on the needs of the system. By creating opportunities for conversation—spontaneous, noisy and human-focused—with both students and staff, we can allow the distance student to move from the margins of the university experience into the centre of the community.

References


