

Student UX: the New Socialization for (Post)Graduate Education

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Background

50 years ago, organizational development began to work with socialization theory. It was quickly picked up and has continued as a major theoretical construct in higher education, employed most often in research on graduate retention and completion. Literally, thousands of researchers have found the theory useful as retention and completion are topics which can be addressed from multiple positions. These include for example: supervisor/student relationships (Abernathy, et al, 2008; Barnes, et al, 2010; Pyhältö, et al, 2012; Vekkaila, et al, 2013), work-life balance issues (Eisenbach, 2013; Mantai & Dowling, 2015), or the varying experiences of special populations (Daniel, 2007; Ellis, 2001; Felder, et al, 2014; Hsu, 2010; McKinley & McKinley, 2011). Whatever the starting position, the idea that something went wrong in the layout or process helps to focus the discussion.

Higher education (HE) has failed to respond to this research consistently. As an example, there is an obvious distance between the understanding of the (post)graduate student experience as made clear through this research, and the way finances are invested for development purposes. In a comparative survey on graduate student use of mobile technologies, students reported using their mobile devices: to manage their schedules (76%), read literature for their dissertation or thesis (64%), take notes (59%), capture data (45%), and receive push notifications for degree work or attend webinars (40%). In contrast, university administrators reported that 78% purchased learning management systems and 54% bought technology for plagiarism protection. All the rest (approximately 20% each) invested in CRM and course repurposing, with only 14% providing data analysis tools, the only tool specifically aimed at helping graduate completion (James, 2016b).

Are there other aspects of student experience that HE should reconsider? This article postulates that, with the advent electronic learning/gaming/and applications in general, a shift in language concepts from socialization (which saw solutions in the hands of the university) to student UX or user experience (which studies what is important to learners), will allow for a deeper understanding of both the previous socialization research as well as introducing new potential solutions to our discussions of graduate retention and completion. Graduate student experience may well need to become the new socialization and this article outlines why the shift may produce robust pragmatic results.

It is the hope of this author that as higher education matures and merges with online strategies we can avoid the kind of UX issue seen in this picture...



Usefulness as a Student UX Variable

The user experience of (post)graduate students...

Ambiguity, work/life balance, independence, development, and support appear to be the best overarching categories of student distress prior to the choice to disengage (Gardner, 2006). Our independent research shows that students agree with these categories and are anxious to tell their stories with each. In a study of 313 graduate students, 58% have considered disengaging from their degree path. Forty seven percent report that work/life balance causes enough distress to make them consider disengaging, with 39% reporting that lack of support is frequent enough to contribute to dropping out (James, 2016b).¹

Since IT professionals also experience long term engagement as a critical issue, education has much to learn from their experiences. Similar to socialization research, UX research repeatedly demonstrates that before a student/user adopts a technological tool they may be concerned with a variety of issues such as ease of use, visibility of results and reliability (Karahanna, Straub, & Chervany, 1999). Being goal directed, however, after people have used a tool, the direct and significant **deciding factor for long term engagement is usefulness** (Gefen, et al, 2003; Ma, & Lui, 2004; Novak, et al, 2003).

This article asks two questions:

1. Could the usefulness of programs or events be a mitigating variable and be applied by university administration, when considering the five areas of student frustrations?
2. What would be the result(s) of this switch to student experience from socialization

Usefulness

Companies/universities prioritize research and development focused on improving UX per degree of perceived need (Hassenzahl, 2010; Hassenzahl, et al, 2011). Looking at the top three student frustrations, as per the five frustrations survey, data would point graduate programs toward 1) teaching the intricacies of work/life balance while 2) increasing all types and availability of direct support. Then they would work with departments and colleges to eliminate much of the ambiguity in student guidelines and directives. Statistically, these would address the needs of over half the graduate students on campus, which, coincidentally, is the same percentage as those who are considering disengagement.

Potential return on investment (ROI) outcomes need to be considered. Revamping or re-energizing programs has a cost – often in technology, personnel or both (James & Leasure, 2017). Fortunately, the ROI from tuition saved when students remain engaged proves that only a small retention increase will pay for most outside technology resourced. Making choices based on their UX should, progressively, provide a smoother trajectory through Masters and Doctoral work, benefitting everyone (James, 2014).

UX is creeping into educational research, and not merely in computer sciences, although it may not yet be called by that name. As an example, Pyhältö, et al., (2012) and Vekkaila, (2014) both report that doctoral student engagement is a complex dynamic between the student and his/her environment, but that the level of feeling dedicated is enhanced by legitimate (useful) interactions that advance their work. Other researchers have begun

¹ A white-labeled version of the “five frustrations” survey, personalized for your specific mix of graduate students is available at-no-charge. Just email alana@doctoralnet.com . University data are reported back to that institution, while the totals become part of the aggregate international totals.

to cross theoretical constructs between learning theories and student/user experience. While Scott (2008), did not find a direct correlation or cross reference between student experiences and the learning theories of Knowles, Gardner, and Lessems, Renrol-Michel, et al (2010) found that students engaged in hybrid technology and live situations maintained a greater ability to integrate theoretical concepts into concrete learning.

Long-term results

Universities compete at a cut-throat level for students, who are much more likely to move to another institution, now that distance education has freed them from location based decisions. Will HE learn from other competitive industries that focus on customer satisfaction is inherent in a positive bottom-line? Does your university have students who are all but dissertation (ABD)? Do you realize other university programs are actively recruiting cohorts of ABDs to help them finish? How does a graduate school know that when a student does not re-enroll that they aren't completing elsewhere?

Non-traditional students (minority, international, older, working, non-native English speakers, etc) are a growth market for most universities, one that has specific UX needs. As an example, the percentages of students reporting membership in one or more of these at-risk populations in the five frustrations survey accounted for 91% of respondents. These students present new challenges for the traditional university structure. Research shows the following are useful: repetition, neutral guidance away from the powers on campus, and groups that help them overcome their sense of isolation (Barker, 2011; Daniel, 2007; Eisenbach, 2013; Felder, 2010; Hsu, 2010; McKinley & McKinley, 2011; Thomas-Long, 2010). Addressing their UX needs may be the turning point in their retention.

Conclusion

It is early days yet but the proposed theoretical shift should bring about instant pragmatic results. At DoctoralNet, and with the MastersNet platform, we have seen evidence that an overlapping set of tools proves to be useful and that once students perceive usefulness they attend more professional development opportunities, increasing the likelihood of their success. Of course, mixing enjoyable into the mix is also important (Davis, & Bagozzi, 2006). The three top technological strategies in formative evaluations include: multiple forms of continuous communication, developing micro-learning environments for the research, regular synchronous webinars/groups, and interactive self-assessments (James, 2015a). As with some of the UX research, we have also found that enjoyment is second only to usefulness in positive correlation to engagement.

Whatever strategies are chosen, the ethic of care (Noddings, 2003) reminds us that as educators it remains our duty to continuously improve the graduate student user experience.

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