

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 (See References). Retention and completion are topics which can be addressed from multiple positions, i.e.: 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). All have found this theoretical base useful.

That HE currently demonstrates a distance between understanding the graduate student experience and how finances are invested for development purposes, becomes evident when you look at the results from a comparative survey on graduate student use of mobile technologies. Graduate students reported that they use their mobile devices in the following ways: 76% manage their schedules, 64% read literature for their dissertation or thesis, 59% take notes, 45% capture data, and 40% receive push notifications for degree work and attend webinars. In contrast, university administrators reported that 78% purchased learning management systems and 54% bought technology for plagiarism protection, all the rest (approximately 20% each) were investing 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 user experience in technological settings, 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.

Variables Across Socialization and UX Research

The user experience of 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. In a study of 150 graduate students, 56% have considered disengaging from their degree path. Fifty four percent report that work/life balance causes enough distress to make them consider disengaging, with 48% requesting more support from their universities than they currently receive (James, 2016b).

Technology also experiences long term engagement as a critical issue. 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). Could the same mitigating variable be applied by university administration, when considering the five areas of student distress? What would it entail?

Research recommends companies/universities prioritize research and development aimed at improving UX per degree of perceived need (Hassenzahl, 2010; Hassenzahl, et al, 2011). In this analogy, using that same lesson for higher education, student data would point to: 1) teaching the intricacies of work/life balance while 2) increasing all types and availability of direct support. Thirty percent would ask also to eliminate much of the ambiguity they experience from academic guidelines. 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.

To advance the comparison of graduate student retention needs with technology UX, potential return on investment (ROI) outcomes needs to be considered. Fortunately, the ROI from tuition saved when students remain engaged proves that only a small retention will pay for most outside technology resourced. With a wider understanding of this variable, perhaps the ROI on employing safeguards for students will also become more popular (James, 2014).

Higher education is becoming drastically more competitive. Will it learn from other industries? How does a university know that when a student does not re-enroll on campus that they didn't complete somewhere else? Entire programs are now in the business of giving ABDs from other universities a second chance.

Finally, the needs of the non-traditional student, now a growth market for many universities, need to be considered. Research makes it clear that graduate students at-risk of disengagement are frequently members of ethnic or racial minorities, non-native English Speakers, international students, working or more mature (Barker, 2011; Daniel, 2007; Eisenbach, 2013; Felder, 2010; Hsu, 2010; McKinley & McKinley, 2011; Thomas-Long, 2010). These users have proven needs for repetition, neutral guidance away from the powers on campus, and groups that aid their perceived sense of isolation from their peers. Again, addressing their UX needs with tools proven to be useful may be the turning point in their retention.

Conclusion

It is early days yet in this discussion. Fortunately, some researchers have begun 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 in hybrid technology and live situations maintained a greater ability to integrate theoretical concepts into concrete learning. The use of video podcasts, webinars and other virtual interactive learning tools "may have contributed to deeper learning" (pg 23).

At DoctoralNet, and with the MastersNet platform, we have seen evidence that an overlapping set of tools proves to be useful. The three top technological strategies include developing micro-learning environments for the research basics, regular synchronous webinars and interactive self-assessments (James, 2015d). 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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