



Viewpoint

'Student' research on the student experience

Panni Loh,

Panni Poh Yoke Loh completed her PhD with the Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2010 on impact of cultural experiences on the work of five British Chinese artists. Panni has had papers published on learner engagement, British Chinese Artists, cultural diversity and has presented at conferences internationally (UK, Spain, China, South Korea, Australia). She worked as a qualified Social Worker for Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council for over 10 years co-ordinating a respite care scheme for Children and Young People with Disabilities and has worked in community engagement and education for various organisations in both the statutory and community voluntary sectors with a particular interest in creating harmony between diverse groups using creativity. She is currently working as a researcher for Sheffield Hallam University whilst studying on a Creative Writing Masters degree, working freelance as an artist and leading creative thinking courses for businesses.

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Abstract

Panni Loh is currently working as a researcher for Sheffield Hallam University whilst studying on a Creative Writing Masters degree, working freelance as an artist and leading creative thinking courses for businesses. In this viewpoint, she shares her reflections in conducting research under the 2012 Students as Researchers Scheme at Sheffield Hallam University.

In March 2012 I began carrying out some student-led research from the Quality Enhancement Student Success portfolio. An English degree lecturer within the Humanities Department at Sheffield Hallam University identified the need to develop course coherency and identity with online social networking as a possible tool. Although I was studying on the M.A. Writing, I had no contact with the undergraduates on the suite of English degrees, but found that some of my lecturers also taught on them. Initially I contacted course representatives

and course administrators using my staff email to ask them to ask students to get in touch with me to arrange a one to one interview or to be part of a focus group.

There was little response through Blackboard, the Virtual Learning Environment so I took a more proactive approach. I arranged with lecturers to go into the lecture theatre or seminar room just as the English lecture or English seminar had finished to make an appeal for interviewees. Within this appeal I explained that I was leading the research as a student, but working for Sheffield Hallam University based at one of the central buildings. This face-to-face approach proved successful and despite an impending coursework submission date just over one month from the start of the research eleven students came forward. I was flexible in arranging interviews to suit the timing needs of students and held two focus groups as well as individual interviews. Other than the initial appeal for interviewees no further mention of me being a student was discussed during the interviews. All interviewees agreed to the rationale for the project and consented to take part voluntarily, for the interviews to be audio recorded and for the use of anonymised quotes from the interviews to be used in reports and publications. I emailed all the lecturers who taught on the English degree and found staff very responsive. Within the short timescale I was able to arrange interviews with ten members of staff having only met two of them before as they had taught me.

Both students and staff were keen to give their thoughts on the use of social networking as a means of creating course identity on the English degree. Staff and students were keen to open up communication and create more cohesiveness but were concerned over the blurring of professional boundaries through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook. They recognised Facebook's user-friendly interface as oppose to Blackboard which was often described as 'Clunky'. Staff were concerned about the time it would take to administer a course social networking site. The consensus was that a social networking site administered by staff and student course representatives with an agreed conduct of behaviour would be helpful. Further research into the type of site would be useful to progress this.

The experience of being a student researcher enabled me the opportunity to become part of the research community within Sheffield Hallam University. I especially appreciated this working opportunity following completion of my PhD. Interestingly being both a Masters student and a member of staff within the university, whilst not using online social networking, gave rise to both informal and formal networking of the type that made me feel part of the university community. As a result I have raised my engagement of student facilities such as the Enterprise Centre, and have also gone on to work researching internationalisation within the university.

Further discussion of my research titled: 'The enhancement of student success and engagement through collaborative student/staff online networking' will appear in *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences* (ELiSS), January 2013.