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Staff Accessibility and Online Engagement With First-Year Students: An Autoethnographic Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Studying online is becoming an increasingly attractive option to prospective students worldwide, yet external completion rates tend to be considerably lower than those enrolled on campus. Through an autoethnographic critical reflection process of teaching 27 first-year online students at a regional Australian university, this article considers methods for increasing accessibility and student engagement as well as managing personal challenges supporting online students from non-traditional backgrounds. Among seven key implications for practice, this article argues the need for genuine and open-ended interaction with online students at the early stages of a semester. It also recommends that teaching staff consciously recognize the limitations of providing academic support to non-traditional students. Based on these practices, this article confirms the benefits of critical reflection in higher education settings and the broader impact it can have on pedagogic approaches to tertiary teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, Autoethnography, First-Year Experience, Non-Traditional Students, Online Teaching and Learning, Reflective Practice, Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Online students are making up an increasing portion of total higher education enrolments worldwide, due at least in part to this study mode offering greater flexibility around family, employment and living commitments. However, online completion rates tend to be considerably lower than those enrolled on-campus or in a blended delivery mode. For online students, many recent studies cite student difficulties with finding an appropriate work-life-study balance, feelings of isolation, and understanding academic culture in an online environment as key reasons for withdrawal (Cochran et al., 2014; Davidson, 2017; Merrill, 2015; Sutton, 2014). These developments have been especially concerning in the Australian higher education sector, with a recent 2018 federal report urging universities to give greater support to online students because the respective attrition rate is approximately double that of the rate for internal and multimodal students (Department of Education and Training, 2018). This report followed on from a previous government study that emphasised the role university educators must play in supporting low socioeconomic status students; a cohort that is highly represented in online enrolments due to the flexibility it offers around work and family situations. The report stressed the need for university teaching staff to engage regularly and ensure that students can access support

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easily. It also highlighted the importance of becoming a reflective practitioner (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012).

University educators cannot control the individual circumstances in students' lives that impact their respective ability to study successfully online, yet support can be offered if staff are accessible and engage regularly with online students. Teacher presence plays a key role in keeping students motivated and building a sense of belonging in an online tertiary environment. One method for continually developing these capabilities is for teaching staff to reflect critically on experiences and perceptions of online study and adjust practices accordingly (O'Shea, Stone and Delahunty, 2015; Stone, 2017). To this end, critical reflection must become a greater focal point for the development of university teaching staff, especially when teaching diverse learners that are studying at university for the first time. Assessments with a focus on critical reflection are used widely across experience based learning units¹, yet there is still contestation over what reflective practice actually constitutes, how critical reflection skills can be developed, and the overarching importance of reflecting critically in a tertiary teaching environment (Harvey, Coulson & McMaugh, 2016; Merierdirk, 2016).

Framed in this light, this article details a qualitative reflective practice study that analysed methods for increasing accessibility and student engagement in an online teaching environment. The study also contained elements of an autoethnography, in which these self-reflections were considered in relation to the broader socio-cultural and educative context in which these students were studying (Chang, 2008; Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015). Looking introspectively over one semester teaching first-year undergraduate students online at Charles Darwin University (CDU), critical reflections were recorded based on how the researcher increased accessibility and engaged with students about academic content. Contrary to most studies that focused on "accessibility" in relation to greater student access to higher education or supporting students with learning disabilities, this study defined the term as the extent to which students could easily contact teaching staff during a teaching period (Lee, 2017). It also adopted a limited definition of the term "student engagement", focusing specifically on the multimodal ways in which students learn through interaction with teaching staff regarding academic content (Kahu, 2013). Reflections were also recorded on personal views about interacting with students facing difficult study challenges, in the hope that it would challenge underlying assumptions about student learning in this context. Finally, this article outlines seven key implications for practice based on these reflections and offers broader conclusions about the need for reflective practice in supporting online university students, particularly those in the first year of study.

TEACHING CONTEXT: SUPPORTING NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ONLINE

Online study options offer flexible opportunities for students who have previously been unable to attend university due to family or work commitments. This delivery mode is especially appealing to "non-traditional" students, a cohort that has been characterised elsewhere as "low-socioeconomic status, mature-age with family commitments, the first-in-family to study at university, or studying part-time externally while working full-time" (Kelly, 2018, p. 73; Trowler, 2015). It can also include indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. However, due to these varied backgrounds and commitments, non-traditional students tend to face additional challenges when studying at the tertiary level (Devlin et al., 2012; Probert, 2013; Rolls, Northedge & Chambers, 2017). Some common examples include conflicting priorities related to raising children, as well as little to no background in using computers or reading complex literature. While recent studies demonstrate that non-traditional students often have high resilience in relation to academic studies and general well-being, current university teaching practices are not necessarily inclusive of non-traditional student experiences (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2017; Meuleman, Carrett, Wrench & King, 2015).

This project was conducted at CDU, a regional Australian university based in the Northern Territory which enrolls a high number of non-traditional students in its online programs. In this context the researcher taught CUC100 (Academic Literacies through Exploring Sustainability), a first-year

academic skills focused unit that explores sustainability issues over a twelve-week semester. For the external cohort, weekly classes are delivered online by the unit coordinator. General teaching tasks for online teaching staff include penning a personalised weekly email, answering email and phone queries, following up with students that have not accessed the Learning Management System (LMS), and grading assessments. Overall, the unit is designed to be one in which new undergraduate students learn how to communicate academically, and as such, there is a high degree of responsibility for teaching staff to facilitate the academic development of a diverse range of students at a critical time in their undergraduate study (van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen & Meijer, 2018). Encapsulating this student diversity, a 2013 report by Alex Barthel—former President of the Australian Association for Academic Language & Learning—described a “typical” CDU student as a “38 year old single mum with 2 school aged kids, living in South Australia and completing an undergraduate degree via distance education” (Barthel, 2013, p. 26). This description provides a sharp insight into the challenges many non-traditional students face when studying at university, both at CDU and other higher education institutions.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING

While greater online access to university study has only led to a relatively recent increase in non-traditional student enrolments, exploring characteristics of quality tertiary teaching has attracted scholarly attention for decades. Weimer (1990) noted that research into this area extends as far back as the 1930s, commenting that there is no predefined criteria or guidelines for what constitutes quality teaching in a higher education environment. While aspects of quality tertiary teaching are still open to debate and interpretation, there is a growing consensus that the ability to reflect critically on one’s practice is an important characteristic for university educators to develop (Harvey, Coulson & McMaugh, 2016; Merierdirk, 2016). Coghlan and Brannick (2014, p. 52) provided a useful definition for critical reflection, describing it as:

“a process of interiority and is normally explained as a process of stepping back from experience to question it, and to have insights and understanding with a view to planning further action. It is the critical link between the concrete experience, the judgement and taking new action”.

Another valuable definition is Larrivee’s (2000, p. 293) outline for reflective practice, which described it as “critical inquiry, the conscious consideration of the ethical implications and consequences of teaching practice, with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs, and assumptions about human potential and learning”. Both definitions touch on important elements: Coghlan and Brannick (2014) emphasised the ability to step back from oneself and reflect in order to act, and Larrivee (2000) additionally pointed out the need to deeply question underlying beliefs and the implications of these for student learning. In the context of university teaching, this involves looking introspectively with a critical lens on how students are taught and supported. It also involves questioning assumptions about students and the learning process, as well as using these observations meaningfully to improve teaching practice. Without thinking about implementing change based on reflective observations, the effectiveness of reflection is severely limited for both teachers and students (Fook, 2015).

Critical reflection can encompass several aspects of university teaching, including assessment design, curriculum development, teaching delivery, and feedback practices. Regardless of the focus, however, students’ academic development is strengthened when university educators can reflect on practice to provide greater support as well as consider methods for students to take greater responsibility for their own learning (McCabe & O’Connor, 2014). It is also an interdisciplinary tool; all university educators, regardless of subject area and expertise, can and should be a reflective practitioner. Broad thinking about the importance of being a reflective practitioner was notably

championed by Schon (1983) in the 1980s, but its relevance to contemporary higher education teaching contexts remains ever critical.

Yet, despite increasing recognition that critical reflection plays an important role in university teaching, there has not been widespread acceptance of the practice. At the turn of the 21st century, Davis (2003) argued that reflective practice in higher education was not universally accepted because of barriers such as a lack of resources, recognition, and the challenges involved in supporting non-traditional students. While acknowledging its benefits, she was simply not convinced that reflective practice “will not take place within the working lives of current academics” (Davis, 2003, p. 243). These types of reflective practices—or, to be more precise, lack of reflective practices—are more common at some institutions than others. McCormack and Kennelly (2011, p. 515), for instance, noted particularly that over time “reflective conversations seem to have disappeared from everyday academic practice” when reflecting on both of their careers. Other studies, however, have contested these claims, pointing out that university educators already reflect critically on practice, and that it is also a common trait of high quality teachers (Bell & Mladenovic, 2015; Bell & Mladenovic, 2013; Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2004; Winchester & Winchester, 2011). The consensus, overall, appears to be a recognition of the importance of critical reflection, but that the realities of working in a busy teaching environment ultimately restrict its widespread practice.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopted a critically reflective methodology to explore personal experiences of teaching non-traditional first-year students online over one semester. It also adopted an autoethnographic approach, in which critical self-reflection was considered in relation to the wider socio-cultural and educative context in which the research was conducted. As Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2014) outlined, autoethnographies collect qualitative data using a deep reflective process and then connect one’s own reflections to a broader audience or culture. This research methodology is becoming increasingly popular in the humanities and social sciences disciplines but requires an honest and meticulous approach to the analysis that is assessed against set criteria (Le Roux, 2017). As autoethnographies rely on an unorthodox methodology of critical self-reflection and analysis for data collection, this study applied Le Roux’s (2017) criteria for reliable and authentic autoethnographic studies: Subjectivity, Self-Reflexivity, Resonance, Contribution, and Credibility. This set of criteria was created in light of previous studies that explored aspects of high quality autoethnographies and how academic rigour could still be upheld despite a focus on the self (Méndez, 2013; Tracy, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Le Roux’s (2017) five criteria were addressed throughout the development of this research process. Subjectivity refers to the reflective practitioner being primarily visible in the research, and as a result, data collection included personal views on the teaching process and frequently used the first-person to articulate events and actions. Self-Reflexivity refers to awareness of the broader historical and cultural context of the self-analysis, which in this case the pedagogic implications for staff accessibility and engagement with students were connected to the learning context for non-traditional students and the wider teaching context for online educators. Both Resonance and Contribution relate respectively to developing an emotional and meaningful connection to others and generating new best practice models. This was achieved by a genuine attempt to write honestly and openly in each reflection, as well as propose improvements to practice based on experiences that were recorded. Finally, in order to address the Credibility criterion, the Dean of the College of Education oversaw the research project for quality assurance purposes in place of formal ethics approval (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2014). The study was exempt from a formal ethics review process due to the negligible risk of the project and that the research methodology was principally a self-evaluation activity.

The researcher observed relevant staff and student activities during the teaching period and wrote weekly reflections regarding the engagement with 27 online students enrolled in CUC100. These

students had diverse educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most of the cohort comprised of mature aged domestic students living in the major Australian capital cities such as Melbourne and Adelaide, but it also included students that originated from another country (South Asia and Africa were the most common regions of origin), spoke English as a second language, or lived in remote areas of Australia. One student had a recorded history of dyslexia, attention deficit disorder and anxiety.

Reflections were based on email and telephone communications, as these were the two primary methods of individual student interaction with online teaching staff. Student engagement with unit content on the LMS and discussion forums posts did not form the basis of the reflective analysis because these duties are primarily managed by the unit coordinator and not individual teaching staff. Assessment feedback was also not considered; however, student enquiries regarding assessment items were included. All specific references to students were anonymised in the reflections and have subsequently been given pseudonyms to protect student privacy.

As part of these reflections, responses were recorded based on three thematic areas: increasing accessibility, engaging with students about academic content, and personal views about interacting with students facing difficult challenges impacting the likelihood of academic success. These questions were adapted from suggested reflective questions posed by Brodie (2012):

1. What ways did I make myself accessible for students should they wish to contact me? Did I feel this was effective? Why or why not?
2. How did I encourage students to communicate with me about their academic study? What evidence was there that this worked this week?
3. Did I feel in any way frustrated or demotivated by student behaviour such as non-submission or failure to respond to follow-up contact? How did I manage this? What could I do personally to respond more positively to these professional challenges?

Weekly responses were categorised into these areas and recorded in a journal. These responses were reviewed and analysed at the end of the semester by looking for salient themes relevant to improving staff accessibility and engagement with students. Based on these responses, this article was developed with a mindset to challenge broader assumptions and perceptions of teaching first-year undergraduate students, as well as provide a basis for altering future teaching practices to better support the needs of online cohorts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIVE PRACTICE APPROACH

Increasing Accessibility

Like every semester, mindfulness about accessibility and student engagement was a key focus in Weeks 1-3. I reviewed my staff picture and contact details on the LMS, and sent out the standard weekly emails to my student group after some small customised edits to make it more personable. I also added a comment at the end of these emails to encourage students to contact me via phone or email if they had any questions or concerns, as “I would be very happy to assist them”. This felt routine and administrative instead of intellectually stimulating, but I acted as if I was genuinely enthusiastic and excited for the upcoming semester. I recorded in a Week 2 journal entry that this felt “somewhat disingenuous” and “insincere” because in truth I did not feel particularly excited; I had already taught the unit before and had just finished a busy teaching period during the previous semester. I wrote, quite candidly, that “I hoped I would not be inundated with student phone calls and emails” in the early weeks because I had other tasks to complete and felt like I was still mentally recovering from marking many final reports and finalising grades from the previous semester.

On reflection, I exaggerated my interest and motivation for the new semester because I wanted students to feel comfortable and determined to start their studies positively. I also knew such an approach was supported by a major Australian research study by Krause and Coates (2008) into student views on their first-year university experience, which suggested students respond well to academic staff members who show enthusiasm and demonstrate a personal interest in their students. While I recognised that there were good reasons why I would exaggerate my excitement and interest, I also reflected that it would be important to show genuine empathy to first-year students and remind myself of the new learning situation they are in, particularly in an online context which can often be isolating. This would not only encourage students to make contact if needed, but also to encourage students to continue to engage with the unit content.

By Week 5 and 6, I received a larger amount of student communication because a major assessment, an annotated bibliography, was due in Week 7. I anticipated this increase in communication and was in fact encouraged that I received questions about the assessment before it was due in the hope that students would better understand the task requirements and subsequently produce a higher quality piece of work. In emails leading up to the assessment due date, I emphasised that I was available to talk with students about any concerns or questions that they had about the assessment. I also indicated that they could make contact by phone or email at any time and I would respond as soon as I could. I thought this was important, as an annotated bibliography can be a difficult task for a first-year student to complete and online students would potentially have less opportunities to understand the task through peer discussions if they had not made connections with other students in the same unit. Based on the responses I got to my email, I felt that I had successfully made myself available to students for the assessment in this instance. I recorded in a Week 6 entry that:

Six students replied to my email asking follow up questions about the annotated bibliography. I think this is a decent level of engagement from a cohort of 27 students and shows that they can contact me easily. One student also requested a phone conversation about the task ... Sandra was a mature aged student living interstate, so perhaps she felt more comfortable speaking rather than through email. It was encouraging that she made contact and felt confident to ask about having a discussion in a way that best suited her needs.

I felt positive about this experience. It also confirmed I should continue to explicitly offer both phone and email communication choices, as I had noticed school leavers tend to prefer contact via email whereas mature aged students often opt to make contact via telephone.² In this case, however, upon viewing that Sandra's assessment submission did not quite address the requirements we discussed, there seemed to be some miscommunication or misinterpretation in my conversation with her. Upon reflection, I recorded in a later week that I should follow up every important phone call with an email summarising the topic of the conversation. This would ensure that there is a written record of what was discussed and there is a reduced chance of any ambiguity in the advice or support I offered. It also provides another opportunity to show empathy to students' situations or learning needs and assure them that they will be supported during their study (Mikkonen, Kyngäs, & Kääriäinen, 2015). My only hesitation to this extra step was the additional time it would take to write a detailed email after lengthy phone conversations. To address these time management concerns, I considered that it might be useful to provide myself with general guidelines as to how much time I should aim to spend on each student interaction via email or phone.

By the final weeks of the semester, I had engaged with most of my online students outside of assessment feedback. I developed a pattern of encouraging students to make contact for any study-related questions and included contact details clearly in all correspondence. Nearing the final essay assessment (which was weighted 50% of the unit grade) due in Week 12, my reflections became focused on student engagement with academic content rather than accessibility. However, by the end of the semester, I did note that I felt "disconnected" with my online students when compared to those

I taught on campus. During face-to-face classes, I felt that I got to know students' background, their reasons for studying, as well as their strengths and areas of improvement. Online students, in contrast, felt harder to recognise and remember because I did not see their faces or engage with them on a weekly basis. Looking forward to future teaching practices, I recorded that I should invite students at the start of a semester to make contact by email or phone and share a little about themselves, such as their academic background and reasons for study. I envisaged that this would be just an optional exercise, and one that aimed to relate these details to their academic study rather than discussing irrelevant personal details. While this may be time consuming, I pondered that it would be an effective method for increasing accessibility with online students, as well as potentially motivating oneself for sharing the learning process with students throughout the semester.

Engaging with Students about Academic Content

Regular engagement with students about unit content is a critical component of teaching online. In this context, academic content refers to two elements; as CUC100 is a literacy-focused unit, it refers not only to the study of sustainability but also to the understanding and application of academic skills. In early communications with students through email, I made a conscious effort to include an open-ended content-based question at the end of the first correspondence with each student. This was a simple yet effective exercise. For example, as the content in Weeks 1 and 2 prompted students to reflect on their understanding of sustainability and to list examples of sustainability concerns they have come across in their community, I found it relatively easy to include follow-up questions by simply asking students to consider the economic, environmental and social elements of the examples they provided (Collins, Galli, Patrizi & Pulselli, 2018; Herremans & Reid, 2002). As I recorded in Week 2, this exercise produced a response from almost every student that was asked. I also recorded that I felt "positive" and "confident" that these communications were engaging online students and developing their understanding of key unit concepts at an early stage of the semester.

As the unit concepts and literacy skills increased in complexity over the course of twelve weeks, engaging students academically became progressively more difficult. For instance, it was time consuming to explain the literary and delivery features of an annotated bibliography or oral presentation, and doing so would often prompt students to ask additional clarifying questions about how to approach each task. One student, Ryan, requested an extension for his online oral presentation in Week 8 because of personal difficulties relating to his living situation. He also sent two emails and telephoned once, asking for further guidance on how to put the presentation together as well as how he should deliver it. I recorded in Week 8 that:

From the records available to me, Ryan completed high school in Australia less than ten years ago. I write this because I would expect a student from his educational background to know how to use PowerPoint and have a general understanding of how to give an oral presentation. He either seems quite confused about the task or determined to ensure he completes it perfectly. In any case, I think if I provided more guidance when he first contacted me or engaged with him earlier in the semester it may have saved time and/or put him on an earlier path toward success.

This was an interesting case in which there was clear overlap between my efforts to engage students academically and the personal circumstances which were affecting their respective abilities to study. While I acknowledged in the subsequent weekly entry that I needed to recognise the limitations in engaging students with unit content if they faced challenging personal situations, it was important to note that I reasoned having "a supportive discussion around meeting study commitments" as well as providing clear and comprehensive advice about assessment items would ensure best practice for teaching online students in this context.

Another student, Jenny, also contacted me via email to ask for guidance on the oral presentation. She appeared confused about how to record her voice for the presentation as well as how to develop

her thesis statement for the final essay (the presentation requires students to present their research and proposed plan for the final sustainability essay). In Week 8, I reflected:

Much like Ryan, Jenny seemed to struggle with understanding the assessment task guidelines. Perhaps rather than taking a deficit view on students' lack of understanding, these student queries may reflect a need to revisit the instructions given to students and ensure that these guidelines provide enough support to complete the task (such as providing instructional videos for recording audio in PowerPoint or how to refine a thesis statement).

Over and above rethinking ways in which university educators engage with students, this reflection implies that adjustments to practice should also prompt possible revisions to assessments and curricula, particularly when more than one student demonstrates a lack of understanding. Supporting non-traditional university learners, in short, additionally involves regular reviews of the unit and consider ways in which content and guidelines will be clear and simple to understand for students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds (McKay & Devlin, 2014).

Personal Challenges Supporting Online Students

The emotional state of a teacher can have a decisive impact on student success. A study by Klusmann, Richter and Lüdtke (2016, p. 1193) into over 1000 German elementary school teachers, for instance, found that emotional exhaustion “significantly” negatively impacted student achievement. Similar studies have explored this relationship in higher education contexts, with one study noting that negative emotions need to be controlled as part of professional teaching behaviour (Hagenauer, Gläser-Zikuda, & Volet, 2016). With this research and past teaching experiences in mind, I approached the semester cognisant of the fact that supporting non-traditional learners in their first year at university can be difficult, especially when studying online and potentially facing personal challenges that will affect their study. In Week 1, I recorded that I wanted to be “honest with my emotions” but aimed to “channel any negative energy constructively” when I felt frustrated or demotivated by poor student engagement or performance. I developed a few proactive strategies by Week 2, including imagining “putting myself in the shoes” of a new university student and taking a short walk before responding to a frustrating email. Another useful strategy I considered was to share difficult experiences with colleagues, as this presented opportunities for peer support.

Usually students’ personal issues do not begin to impact academic progress significantly until the middle of semester or when the first major assessment is due. However, by Week 3, I had received notice via email of a student, John, who would likely struggle to complete the semester. John’s email was poorly written, so much so that it “led me to think that it was spam ... until I confirmed it was one of my external students”. He presented a medical certificate and told me he had learning difficulties, including dyslexia and attention deficit disorder. I also noticed he had already misunderstood the first assessment and incorrectly submitted the required document. After consulting with another colleague before replying, I gave a detailed response which included directions to relevant support services and strong encouragement to keep in contact with me throughout the semester. As I reflected on this correspondence:

I spent at least 10 minutes writing out a detailed reply ... [it] was an immediate distraction from other work. It was somewhat frustrating, but I also felt a sense of accomplishment from writing such a comprehensive and supportive response. I was doing my duty.

Unfortunately, by the end of Week 4 John had not replied and had withdrawn from the unit. I recorded that I felt “deflated” and “annoyed that I spent so much time trying to help and did not even get a response”. By Week 5, however, I reflected that the factors driving John’s decision to

withdraw were clearly for personal reasons and not due to efforts to engage and support him. “I did everything I could without overstepping professional boundaries”, I wrote in Week 5, adding that “I should try to avoid becoming too emotional over students that will struggle academically regardless of any teaching support”.

Throughout the semester I made regular comments about feeling exhausted, principally when receiving assessment extension requests and assisting students to meet submission deadlines. In Week 7, I noted that I felt “constantly tired of saying the same things to students about getting in contact earlier and trying to stay on top of their study”. In this regard one particular student, Matthew, presented an especially difficult challenge throughout the semester. He had unintentionally plagiarised a learning reflection in Week 5. Afterwards, he completely misunderstood the task requirements of the annotated bibliography assessment and needed two extensions to resubmit it. I had spoken with Matthew on the phone and had no doubts that he was making a genuine attempt to complete the unit, but I could not help feeling frustrated at the extra efforts I had to go to just so he had a chance of successfully completing the unit. I recorded in Week 8 quite candidly that “it didn’t feel fair that I had to go to such lengths to support him ... he was clearly not capable of studying online nor studying at the tertiary level altogether”. Again, I took this opportunity to remind myself of the limitations of my role in an online first-year teaching setting and sought to support him as best I could without becoming too emotionally invested in his learning journey. I also found it “calming” to “imagine myself in Matthew’s study shoes”, as this gave me greater perspective for the academic challenges he could be facing. Teaching colleagues were also empathetic to these challenges, and through sharing these experiences with them I felt supported and assured that it was not an issue that I faced alone.

Implications for Practice

During this reflective process, a final important step was to contemplate the pedagogical implications of the reflections documented and consider how these could inform adjustments to the teaching and learning process, particularly in a first-year online teaching setting. After all, as Fook (2015) argued, without considering the implications for practice the effectiveness of the critical reflection process is severely limited. Derived from the results of this reflective process, seven key practical suggestions to improve accessibility and student engagement in an online tertiary teaching context were developed:

1. Genuinely encourage students to contact teaching staff early in the teaching period to discuss briefly their motivations and concerns for studying at the tertiary level. Ensure that contact details are readily available in all online learning platforms and correspondence to students;
2. Avoid providing short responses to students that reduce the likelihood of continued dialogue. Instead, use open-ended content-based questions in discussion forums and email replies to promote critical thinking and student inquiry into the unit topics;
3. Compile a list of common student queries relating to teaching and learning issues at the end of the semester and use this as evidence for ongoing curriculum review;
4. Recognise the limitations of providing academic support to non-traditional students, as they often face many personal challenges that can significantly impact their study;
5. Be honest with oneself when dealing with feelings of frustration or exhaustion, and ideally look for appropriate methods to channel that energy constructively before having difficult conversations with non-engaged students. Some examples include taking a short walk and sharing difficult experiences with colleagues;
6. Barring exceptional circumstances, spend no longer than 5 minutes writing an email to a student or 10 minutes speaking to a student on the phone;
7. Consider the use of a Week 1 graded assessment in which students write a discussion forum post about their background, reasons for studying at university and interest in the unit of study.

While this list of recommendations is not exhaustive, it appropriately encapsulates the key elements that informed future improvements to teaching and learning practice in this research context. Other notable recommendations included following up difficult phone calls with online students using a summary email to minimise the possibility of miscommunication or confusion, as well as rewarding oneself through self-praise when experiencing positive feedback from students.

CONCLUSION

While supporting first-year non-traditional students can be a difficult challenge for universities and their respective teaching staff, it is important that university educators are constantly mindful of how staff are accessible, engage students with academic content, and manage personal views about troubled students in an online learning environment. Through an autoethnographic critical reflection process, this article considered these elements throughout an online teaching semester and provided practical suggestions for improving accessibility and student engagement practices in this context. Key outcomes included the need for genuine and open-ended interaction with students at the early stages of a semester as well as recognising the limitations of providing support to non-traditional students. Another important outcome was to consider methods for managing frustrating situations when students do not engage or require significant additional assistance. In this way, this article provided practical strategies for developing meaningful academic relationships with non-traditional students in an online context, which can consequently reduce the likelihood of first-year students withdrawing from study. It also confirmed the benefits of critical reflection in higher education settings and the broader impact it can have on pedagogic approaches to tertiary teaching and learning.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ A “unit” is an individual subject of study within a degree and is the equivalent term for ‘course’ in the United States and Canada.
- ² A “school leaver” is a common term used in the Australian higher education sector. It refers to a student who completed high school in the year prior to commencing university study.