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Analysis of factors contributing to student engagement

Extended Abstract

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Abstract

Learning engagement is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. The ability to engage is not inherent but subject to a variety of factors. Motivational readiness as well as contextual factors, such as deep or surface learning approaches, are said to affect student engagement. In this study, we examine the relationship between student engagement and learning styles, as well as contextual factors, such as task types and assessment form and student employment outside the university. Based on a quantitative survey, we conclude that students' ability to engage in deep learning is interrelated with their engagement, learning style and their motivation to start their studies. In addition, our findings indicate that student's engagement in deep learning is driven by personal development, work ethic or learning strategy. The results of the study confirm that engagement is dependent on many factors, which must be understood and taken into consideration when teaching.

1 Extended Abstract

The fourth industrial revolution has brought about changes to the way people interact, live, and work. As companies look to take advantage of new trends and technologies, the workplace is also affected, requiring employees to be flexible and continuously learn and develop new skills. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2018, there is a growing need for skills related to "analytical thinking and innovation as well as active learning and learning strategies" (WEF, 2018, p. ix). To meet the workplace demands and challenges of the future, universities and other higher education institutions play an important role in cultivating students' ability to develop lifelong active-learning strategies.

Active learning has been defined as "engagement in the learning process" (Prince, 2004, p. 223). Engagement is complex and multifaceted. It draws on behavioral, emotional and cognitive elements, such as student participation in academic activities, enjoyment and interest in the task of learning, and student investment in deep learning of concepts and skills (Furlong et al., 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004; Mandernach, 2015; Kahu, 2013). Deep learning, i.e. learning to understand, is often contrasted with surface learning – comprised of rote memorization. The effects of deep and surface learning in higher education have been a research focus since the 1970s (see Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Beattie et al., 1997). Beattie et al. (1997) posit that one's ability to engage in deep learning is not inherent, but rather subject to a variety of factors: motivation, student personality, learning style, learning approach, study methods and contextual factors, such as the instructor's attitude and enthusiasm, learning tasks and forms of assessment.

Not all students enter higher education institutions with the same level of motivational readiness to study. This readiness influences their engagement, and in turn can affect time on study and the desire to develop competence (Cote & Levine, 1997). Motivation to study depends on a range of personal goals that students pursue - motivation to engage cognitively as a means to an end or motivation to engage cognitively for pleasure and interest in learning. This extrinsic or intrinsic motivation can lead to a superficial task-based activity or sustained investment in learning (Bryson & Hand, 2008, Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) and can affect student learning styles and assessment preferences (Furnham et al., 2011).

Greater social context also plays a role in engagement (Kahu, 2013). Many students can no longer be considered full-time students as they combine studies with work. According to the Federal Statistical Office, up to 48% of business students study part-time (BFS, 2020). According to Devlina et al. (2008) and Pike et al. (2008), working students engage less with their education setting than their full-time counterparts as they have to balance "time spent on studying" and "time spent on work".

In this study, we examine the relationship between student engagement and learning styles, and contextual factors, such as task types and assessment form. The greater study (social) context is also taken into consideration. Ultimately, the aim is to provide a more constructive and engaging environment for students to learn in order to instill in them lifelong active-learning strategies. We answer the following questions: How do our students engage? What factors influence their learning styles and approaches? To examine what motivates students during their studies, we compare different task and assessment types and their influence on the learning style and engagement. Additionally, we investigate whether part-time and full-time students are differently affected by these factors and whether such factors differently affect their learning style or learning approach. To investigate the relation between these factors, we developed a survey, from a review of validated and reliable questionnaires, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2005), the Burch Engagement Survey for Students (Burch et al., 2015), the Revised Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs et al., 2001), and the Motivated Strategies to Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich and De Groot, 1990). The survey was then distributed to undergraduate level business administration students at a Swiss university of applied sciences. A total of 258 respondents completed the survey, thus limiting the generalizability of the results. The survey was conducted in Spring Semester 2020. The respondent's average age was 23.5. 48% were full-time students and 35% were women. Along with analyzing the correlation,

we applied an explanatory factor analysis with varimax rotation which suggested that a four-factor model is appropriate for our research.

The results of our survey provide empirical evidence that students' ability to engage in deep learning is interrelated with their engagement, learning style, and their motivation to start this degree program. This is in line with Beattie et al. (1997). In addition, our model indicates that students' engagement in deep learning appears to be driven by personal development, work ethic or learning strategy. Our findings indicate that a high intrinsic motivation to attend university is linked to a desire for personal development, which positively influences students' ability to engage in deep learning (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Moreover, the respondents' ability to engage in deep learning is positively correlated with time spent studying. Further, they indicate that continuous assessments positively influence their learning ability (Furnham et al., 2011). Our findings also show a correlation between deep learning and a preference for collaboration as a study method. These respondents report that collaboration improves their understanding of course material.

Our results also indicate that extrinsic motivation to attend university may limit the depth of the learning. As found by Biggs et al. (2001) and Beattie et al. (1997), our results also illustrate that respondents who show a preference for surface learning approaches show a preference for learning by rote. These respondents report that they often do not bother to solve challenging tasks. This learning behavior is also negatively correlated with the average grade in the degree program.

On the whole, the results of the study show that engagement is dependent on a variety of factors, most importantly a desire for personal development, which must be considered when developing curriculum and teaching students.

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