Student's attitudes towards learning in educational environment

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Abstract

The main issue of the European higher education space is to prepare students for labour market, make them able to acquire further qualifications and to continue their education. However, the curriculum restructuring has developed consumerist mechanisms which on the surface seems to offer students greater choice and control over their learning. This could result in a loss of responsibility for their learning, little tolerance for the expansion of study beyond the routine of the predictable and consequently affect their disposition and motivation towards learning. The present study aims to explore the student motivation and approval of the educational environment. The Learning Orientation Questionnaire (LOQ) as an assessment instrument to reveal the dominant power of emotions and intentions in guiding and managing cognitive processes and identifying conative processes specific to learning settings, was used. The results show that students don’t seem to be ready to assume a leading role in their learning and motivation. Students generally perceive the ideal learning environment to imply a less hierarchical relation and more interaction between teachers and students.

Keywords: Higher Education, Motivation towards Learning, Learning Orientation

1. Introduction

Today’s students live in a world of change-climatic, economic, educational, political, and social change. They are competing and collaborating in an emerging third era of a global knowledge economy (Friedman, 2005). Thereof, there is an urgent need to adjust the curriculum to create a more contemporary sphere of learning that features quality assurance, social access, transparency, mobility, and recognition of qualifications. Like other consumers, students, hold unique perspectives of what constitutes quality and must be able to distinguish between “receiving a diploma” and “receiving a quality education” (Freeman, 1997). Therefore, the perception and experience of the educational process and environment by the students is an important issue to be addressed to accomplish their expectations. Accordingly, all social institutions and all individuals whose existence depends upon higher education institutions, have to possess the ability to improve themselves and undertake lifelong learning, because learning is the key to better performance (Vakkayil, 2008).

Nevertheless, there has been a tendency in the field of pedagogy to put a stronger emphasis on learning in recent years. Priority is to be given to a combination of teaching methods involving a high level of student activity, new forms of assessment and regular feedback that promotes learning (Karseth, 2006). Some academics and students fear that the compressed nature of new programmes does not allow enough time to develop a critical and reflective approach to the materials presented and generally does not foster an independent mind. There were frequent comments that efficiency, time management and completion in due time are now playing a greater role, while academic curiosity and intellectual development have become less important.
There is a considerable amount of research on the effects of attitudes toward learning on students’ behaviours. Positive attitudes toward any subject are frequently found to enhance the students’ interest in the subject and their motivation to learn. Successful learners are enthusiastic, exhibit confident attitudes toward learning, have positive expectations and do not experience anxiety about learning (Braten and Stromso, 2006; Duarte, 2007). Students’ belief in acquiring information was seen to trigger learning (Saade 2007; Pierce et al, 2007). Students were also observed to be more eager to solve problems, to acquire the information and skills useful for daily life and to engage themselves emotionally, thereby meting the requirements of the courses in terms of behaviours, emotions and psychomotor skills (Yang and Lau, 2003; Scheiter and Gerjets, 2007; Yudko et al, 2007; Tsai and Kuo, 2008).

2. Learning orientation
The increasingly rapid technology changes are creating skill shortages and revealing that our learners are not prepared to learn smart, fast, and well enough to manage change successfully or initiate change productively (Martinez, 2001). Some learners have strong beliefs about learning and like to work hard, set high standards, achieve lofty goals, take risks, and use their initiative to discover and apply new information. In contrast, many learners remain satisfied with less effort, comfortable standards, highly structured environments, and easily attained goals, and certainly some learners generally or situationally resist learning.

In particular, the affective and behavioural components, and their potential relationship to the cognitive components of students’ goals, have been largely ignored. For this reason, the potential multi-dimensional structure of students’ goals should be explored further. In addition to the above, several authors (Blumenfeld, 1992; Lemos, 1996; Covington, 2000; Bempechat and Boulay, 2001) have identified the need to more systematically investigate students’ goals, particularly in real life and classroom contexts. Students’ motivation should be conceptualised as a process of managing multiple goals, which may interact in conflicting, converging, or compensating ways. For this reason, students motivational orientations in the classroom settings may comprise a much more complex and dynamic system of goals than has been acknowledge in the literature. Interventions based on a more complex understanding of students’ motivational goals may be maximally useful to practitioners, as they seek to positively influence students’ achievement strivings.

In recent years, Elliot and his colleagues developed a trichotomous model that draws from the approach and avoidance motivation theory (Elliot, 1999; Elliot and Thrash, 2001). They argued that the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is critical and fundamental to the study of human behaviour, affect, and cognition. The model posits three types of achievement goals: performance-approach goals (the attainment of favourable judgments of competence), performance-avoidance goals (the avoidance of unfavourable judgments of competence), and mastery goals (the development of competence and mastering tasks). Both mastery and performance-approach goals are considered approach orientations because they represent regulation according to positive potential outcome such as persistence/effort while studying, absorption during task engagement, and challenge construal. The performance-avoidance goals are considered avoidance orientations because they represent regulation according to negative potential outcomes such as low absorption during task engagement, decreased intrinsic motivation, and poor performance.

One of the critical developmental tasks that students face in college is to identify and solidify their interests as they select courses, choose their academic major, and make decisions about career paths. Students’ achievement goals may play an important role in shaping academic motivation and interest because they reflect the purpose of achievement behaviour in a particular setting, and can influence how a student approaches coursework (Nicholls, 1984; Dweck and Leggett, 1988). The questions why do some students become involved and interested in their
coursework and why they continue in a particular academic discipline, as well as, do students learn more and perform better in their classes when they are interested, highlight the importance of interest in college education (Harackiewicz et al, 1998; Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000; Hidi and Renninger, 2006). A variety of studies have shown that different goal orientations determine students’ cognitive and behavioural reactions as well as their educational performance (Ames, 1992; Ames and Archer, 1988; Valle et al., 2003).

The learning orientation construct describes, from a whole-person perspective, the dynamic flow between: deep-seated psychological factors (conative, affective, social, and cognitive factors); learning orientation; subsequent choices about learning, including cognitive learning preferences, styles, strategies, and skills; responses to different treatments and solutions; intended learning outcomes; and progressive or regenerative efforts toward improved learning performance. The intentional learning theory defines successful learning as a continuous, regenerative human process that supports intentional, discriminating management and use of intrinsic and extrinsic resources for meeting challenging goals, building new knowledge, acquiring new skills, and improving strategies, abilities, and performance. Successful learning is a satisfying, self-fulfilling, transformative experience. Less successful learners constrain the learning process by allowing psychological and extrinsic influences to limit beneficial outcomes. In addition to the more commonly researched cognitive and social factors, key conative and affective factors, such as passion, intentions, emotions, aspirations, and desire for autonomy or learner control, play a significant role in explanations on how we learn.

The area of conation is slowly gaining recognition as an important influence on learning and is no longer demoted to a secondary role in the process. Research conducted by Martinez (1999) suggests that there is a way to determine a more stable predictor of individual difference than by using cognitive measures alone. Her work on conative and affective measures suggests that recognizing the dominant influence of emotions and intentions on learning is a primary factor in understanding why individuals learn differently and how they develop, manage, and use cognitive ability. In other words, it is the emotional response that drives learners as they try to navigate a course, acquire new skills and knowledge, or improve performance.

If educators and administrators want to improve the academic experience of college students, understanding the potential factors that enhance motivational strivings should therefore be of primary concern.

3. Current study
The present study aims to explore the student motivation and approval of the educational environment at the Faculty of Transport and Traffic Engineering in Belgrade. The pilot study included 50 undergraduates, between the ages of 18 and 22.

Instrument used in this study is the 25-question Learning Orientation Questionnaire (LOQ) with a seven rating point Likert scale (1 = Not At All True of Me and 7 = Very True of Me) to measure the dimensions that underlie the Learning Orientation Construct (Martinez, 2000). LOQ was designed as an assessment instrument to reveal the dominant power of emotions and intentions in guiding and managing cognitive processes. The questionnaire was administered in paper-and-pencil format and individuals were asked to respond to items about the occurrence of particular behaviours, thoughts, and feelings. Subjects were asked to voluntarily participate in a study. Assurances were made that all data collected would be kept confidential and their responses would in no way affect their class grades.

4. Results
The results show that most of our students often carefully plan out learning goals, strategies, and expected outcomes before beginning a learning task (Fig.1). Their abilities to monitor their own
progress to help them manage and improve their learning and professional performance were vague (Fig. 2). The majority of students were uncommitted with regard to setting risky or challenging learning goals, believing that they, not the instructor can show the best way to evaluate achievement of learning goals, and that the instructors failed in planning the best learning approach for accomplishing training objectives (Fig. 3).

Learning about new topics does appear to be an enjoyable and comfortable process for half of the participants (Fig. 4).

26% of the participants avoid, and 20% show a tendency to avoid learning situations if possible, while 20% were uncommitted regarding this question, reflecting our students’ learning orientation (Fig. 5). 10% students didn’t show differentiated attitude, while 23% don’t like to learn, and 9% like to learn and feel comfortable learning for any reason (Fig. 6).

But surprisingly, at the end of a course the majority of them assess their progress to determine how to improve their learning ability. This response indicates the importance of feedback on learning outcomes and interaction between students and the instructor.

A large number of students do believe that learning can help to achieve challenging personal goals, improve the quality of life, help to accomplish professional learning goals beyond stated course objectives (Fig. 7).
Upon the question that learning provide enjoyment while exploring new topics to help achieve personal learning goals, the equal number of participants considered this statement either characteristic or very uncharacteristic of them.

The majority of students are not seeking new learning opportunities because they enjoy learning, not relying on the instructor to monitor and evaluate how well they learn, relying on themselves. When it comes to the choice to seek and use supplemental information helping in learning more about new topics, two separate groups of students appear (motivated and demotivated) (Fig. 8), but most of the participants know that if they want to do well on a course, they will, which indicates that if there is a will to achieve something that will be achieved.

On the questions dealt with issues concerning pushing beyond the goals expected by the instructor to accomplish personal learning goals the students choose extreme alternatives, either 1 of 7. There are confusing answers on whether personal or educational learning goals have priority over the instructor's objectives, and who they rely to judge if they are doing well in a course, while the majority learn best if they personally manage their learning goals, strategies, and tasks (Fig.9).

Students who are involved more actively in the teaching and learning process and who
receive and give a greater amount of feedback are more secure and assertive in transmitting academic content. The study finds that students generally perceive the ideal learning environment to imply a less hierarchical relation between teachers and students. These conclusions seem to denote what students perceive as improvement in higher education learning, this being more information, more consultation and more involvement.

5. Discussion and conclusions
Students, in general, don’t seem to be ready to assume a leading role in their learning and motivation. The intensity of an individual’s motivation will trigger him or her to execute good or bad learning strategies. Both motivation and learning strategies affect student’s learning performance. Students’ beliefs interact with the learning environment to influence motivation and cognition. Those who believed that learning occurred quickly or not at all were more likely to have fewer problems in searching for information or evaluation than the students who believed learning requiring both time and effort. In the new knowledge economy, students must be able to distinguish between “receiving a diploma” and “receiving a quality education.” Students’ emotions, interest and beliefs about learning affected their behaviours. Positive attitudes led to the exhibition of positive behaviours towards courses of study, with participants absorbing themselves in courses and striving to learn more.

The questionnaire used in this study was found to focus primarily on identifying conative processes specific to learning and teaching settings. Additional studies built on this research will be able to ask more probing questions while strengthening the case for validity of the LOQ. Its use can take us one step further in finding new ways to assess individual differences in learning. Based on this knowledge, those who understand the intentional learning construct claim to be able to tailor learning treatments to that which an individual can most easily adapt.

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