

The Importance of Learning Context in Approaches to Learning

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ABSTRACT

The way students approach their learning is linked to the quality of their learning outcomes. However, approaches to learning, deep and surface approaches, should not be seen as uniquely a characteristic of the student, but as a response to a situation. Many researchers believe that although the concepts of learning approaches are not applicable to the individual students, it can describe students in particular learning condition. This means that the contextual factors are believed to have greater impacts on students' approaches to learning. Thus, this paper discusses a framework that explores the variables or contextual factors that affect, hence, influence the adoption of approach to learning, such as students' interest and experiences, feedback, assessment, teaching, and course structures in academic departments. The framework has some pedagogical implications that could promote quality learning.

Keywords: *learning approach, learning context, quality learning*

Introduction

The connection between approaches to learning, either deep or surface approach, and contextual factors (i.e. where the learning environment takes place) is long standing in the higher education literature. The realisation that unfavourable conditions created, consciously or not, by university may inhibit students to experience deep and satisfying learning

experiences had begun since the mid 19th century. Cardinal Newman (1852), for example, supports the proposition of self-education as opposed to the ‘system of (university) teaching which, professing so much, really does so little for the mind.’ He believes that through this way, students are more likely:

to have more thought, more mind, more philosophy, more true enlargement, than those earnest but ill-used persons who are forced to loads, their minds with a score of subjects against an examination, who have too much on their hands to indulge themselves in thinking or investigation, who devour premises and conclusion together with indiscriminate greediness, who held whole sciences on faith and commit demonstrations to memory.

(Nur Fakhzan 2000: 29)

Later, at the end of 19th century, Pattison (1876) has also criticised the Oxford assessment system in equally uncompromising terms:

[The examination papers] could not be answered by a mere knowledge of the subject....quite another way must be taken in the preparation of the candidate. For two years the pupil is thus forced along a false road of study in which neither science nor philosophy encounter him. Memory is really almost the only faculty called into play.

(Nur Fakhzan 2000: 29)

Laurillard (1979) shows how students approach to learning tasks in their everyday studies are related to their perceptions of the purposes of the tasks. It would seem worthwhile to explore the deduction from these findings that academic department, particularly as perceived by their students, can encourage different approach. There is certainly no shortage of historical and theoretical arguments to support this possibility. Writers like Whitehead (1950) and Rogers (1969) have argued that rigid assessment systems, impersonal staff-student relationships and lack of choice over method and content have damaging effects on the quality of students’ learning experiences, while commitment to teaching amongst staff and freedom in learning facilitate student understanding. Thus, these empirical evidence suggest that assessment, teaching, and course structures in academic departments are critical variables in the determination of student learning, and that student perceptions are a

useful way to measure these contextual characteristics. Furthermore, Rebele et. al. (1991) urge researchers not to overly concerned with the learning styles, but explore under what conditions such styles reveal themselves so that important insights for curriculum design and pedagogy may be borne out.

Understanding the Effects of the Learning Context

Students' approaches to study are the functions of their interest in the task, their prior experiences, their perceptions of how works will be assessed, their perceptions of choice over contents and lecturers' attitudes (Marton et. al. 1997). The framework for understanding the effects of the contextual of learning is outlined in the Figure 1 below:

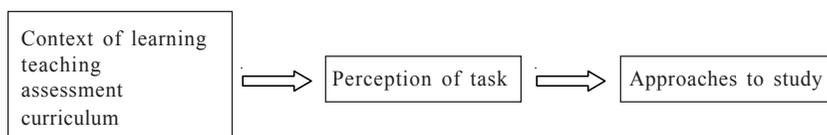


Figure 1: Students' Learning in Context
(adapted from Ramsden (1992: 83))

Because there are numerous contextual factors that can affect the students' perception of task, this paper will discuss seven factors only, which I believe are the most vital elements in determining their approaches to learning, namely students' interest and experiences, effect of assessment system, workload, effect of teaching and course design, freedom, quality teaching and feedback.

Students' Interest and Experiences

Students' interests are crucial element in the learning approaches adopted. The students' intentions to understand or to reproduce are related to their interest in conducting the learning task; either it is for their own sake or a response to external requirements. Surface learners have lack of interest or fail to recognise the relevance of learning material; while deep learners are curious about material studied (Fransson 1977).

Insufficient background knowledge of the relevant field may also lead to the futile attempt to understand the learning material. This is especially the case where the learning task demands that students have to grasp the fundamental concepts. In accounting, for example, the consolidation issues have to be fully understood, otherwise, the consolidation account cannot be constructed correctly.

Effects of Assessment System

Assessment is believed to have one of the most profound effects upon students' approaches to learning. Students take cue from the assessment process of what are expected from them, and subsequently choose learning approaches that will enable them to maximise success. Atkins et. al. (1993) had commented on this satisfying behaviour that 'it seems clear that many students have a well developed sense of what is needed to get good grades (or to get through with minimum of effort)'.

Students may perceive that assessment systems signal that the surface approach which is all that is required, whereas lecturers intend the opposite. Therefore, if the deep approach is to be promoted, it is vital for students to perceive assessments as being consistent with the deep approach. This effects course structure; the design incorporated and reward the problem solving analysis and thinking. Of course, not every student responds to the same assessment pressure in the same manner. Some students exploit assessment systems to achieve good grades without understanding of personal commitment to material studied, while others accept the systems at face value. It is not only the lecturers' stereotypical 'weak' students who use a surface approach. Ramsden's (1997) work demonstrates that certain excellent students, who some even achieve first class honour, explain the assessment system has discouraged them from using an approach aimed at developing personal meaning in learning. This finding suggests that high achievement in conventional terms may mask students' dissatisfaction of learning experience and also hide the fact that they do not understand the material they have learnt as thoroughly as they might appear to be.

Workload

Closely related with the assessment methods is workload dimension. In recent times, the pace of change and development has put pressures on curriculum to expand. As there is technology revolution, there is also a

demand to incorporate material on new developments, so that, students are familiar with the current technology. The combination of pressure to incorporate new learning material, and the reluctance of lecturers to drop certain amount of existing material, has led to concerns to many curricula becoming overloaded.

This situation has resulted in various undesirable learning outcomes. Students have been observed to engage in superficial learning by concentrating on memorizing a minimal amount of material to pass the examination when they felt the workload is too pressing (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983). Students also find it increasingly difficult to distinguish fundamental concepts and supporting materials when they are taught a large amount of material (Marton and Wenestam 1978). Moreover, as stated before, if students perceived the assessment situation was threatening, they were more likely to adopt rote learning.

Therefore, the perceived excessive workload and overloading of syllabus lead to poor understanding and learning, resulting in surface orientation to learning. Nevertheless, it is a debatable issue where many lecturers argue that the quality of education may suffer if less is taught. The nature of this relationship is unsure, however, as it is not clear whether it is the students' perception that the workload is too heavy that causes the surface approach being adopted, as Entwistle and Ramsden (1981) suggested, or whether a surface approach lead to the perception that the workload is heavy. If the first hypothesis is accepted, it implies that lecturers will need to reduce the learning materials and to refine the quality of teaching. However, if the second hypothesis is adopted, lecturer will have to introduce strategy to change the students' approaches to learning.

Effects on Teaching and Course Design

Perhaps the assessments that are perceived by students to employ deep approach in learning can inhibit the use of rote-learning (refer to Elton and Laurillard 1979). But there are other two factors that are more likely to induce a deep approach: good teaching and greater freedom to both content and ways of learning.

Lecturers do have far-reaching effect influences on learning. It is not a direct effect that is examined in this study, but the indirect effect of teaching on learning. Lecturers, who can convey the knowledge information with much enthusiasm and interest, speak clearly and engage students in class discussions, are more likely to induce a deep approach

to learning in students. Students may also feel relevance of the lecturer content for their own understanding. Other studies have provided evidence that informal student-lecturer interaction play an important role in learning environment (see, for example, Cooper, Stewart, & Gudykunst 1982). The more accessible the lecturer is in sharing experiences, ideas, research, and personal time outside the classroom, the more effective the lecture. Students who have developed interpersonal relationships with their lecturers also tend to acquire more understanding and satisfaction of with their learning experience. The lecturers' helpfulness with students' study difficulties is also another factor that can stimulate positive attitude towards learning.

Freedom

Researches have shown that interest in learning material tends to evoke a deep approach. Logically, the interest will be heightened if the students perceived they have greater freedom in choosing the content and methods of studying. The idea of choice over subject-matter and freedom in pursuit of knowledge are threads running through the history of higher education (see, for example, Dewey 1916), although the application of these concepts to undergraduate education are uncommon, except in its later stages. Students who are given the opportunity to choose and control their learning report higher motivation, greater commitment, deeper involvement, and more strategic thinking (Paris & Turner 1994). Another study done by Ryan and Grolnick (1986) also reveals that students who report greater learning autonomy also have higher levels of motivation and interest in their schoolwork as well as greater confidence and self-esteem.

Nevertheless, greeter freedom in learning comes with greater responsibilities. Lack of structure and clarity of goals may hinder effective learning, particularly for anxious students (see Wade 1979). Therefore, we cannot conclude that there is a significant relationship between less structured learning and deep approach.

Quality Teaching

Where there is quality teaching, there will also emerge quality learning (Ramsden 1992). This means there is a direct relationship between teaching and learning. A part from the conception of quality teaching, one should include adequate consideration of how students can best

make use of their independent study time and build up structure which can enhance deep learning. Other concerns are with the clarity and organisation of lectures and courses themselves.

This dimension, however, seems paradoxical, as the well-structured classes indicate that students do not have to think much by themselves, all the learning materials are given to them by lecturers, i.e. spoon feeding method. On the other hand, poorly organised classes demand students to arrange their notes, to find more relevant information for more understanding, to think logically over the material and make sense out of them. This may promote a deep approach to learning. However, this is by no mean that discouraging teaching should be promoted. Indeed, lecturers need to develop strategies that will force students to reflect more deeply about learning material.

Feedback

Students report higher motivation to study when feedback is relevant and timely (Baume and Baume 1996). Providing feedback on performance can improve and accelerate learning. Lack of information about performance makes further learning more difficult. As such, Race (1995) encourages lecturers to reduce the time lag before the feedback is given and, where possible, to incorporate feedback as part of learning task.

Usually, lecturers are encouraged to praise what is good, which in theory, is supposed to promote a positive self-image, which in turn produces high motivation, and hence high achievement and perhaps even love of learning. But sometimes in practice, the lecturers' attempt to praise the students for their personal effort and commitment may lead to praise for work of quality that does not deserve. As for negative comments, they can be discouraging and may be interpreted as personal criticisms.

Thus, lecturers should know the balance of praising the work and the student as a person. Lecturers need to make specific and clear comments, comprehensive and constructive suggestions as well as encouragement for reflective learning. Good teaching methods can encourage deep learning approach. Good rapport with students, good course structure and lectures, enthusiasm of the fellow lecturers, adequate feedback and provisional directions to students are crucial teaching elements that lead to deep learning approach.

Pedagogical Implications

This paper has demonstrated the importance of contextual factors in determining the students' perception of the task, thus, leads to the adoption of which approach to learn that will suit them. There are two implications from the proposed framework; first, it is strongly suggested that lecturers should try to eliminate the contextual factors that lead to poor quality of students' learning. Factors that prohibit quality learning are found to be associated with heavy workloads and poor teaching method, lecturers' unfavourable attitude, and lack of feedback and guidance. The keys are actually by ensuring a reasonable workload for students, cutting down on lecture time and extending individual study time and time designated for projects. Secondly, it is suggested that lecturers should take a more active part in helping their students to learn how to learn. Lecturers can change the way students learning approach by changing their style of teaching, without interfering with the content and structure of the courses. Some of the strategies which lecturers can implement include open-ended assessment tools such as projects and essay question to encourage student/student interaction, stating high expectations so the students will always be challenged and critical in thinking, use active and interactive teaching methods, for example, case studies and buzz groups, making links with what students who already know to encourage sense of structure, allowing students input into course goals and methods and being more receptive, helpful, friendly and flexible. Lecturers also may teach for depth of understanding rather than breadth of coverage.

Conclusion

By emphasizing on teaching context, it does not mean that learning responsibility is shifted from students to lecturers. Quite the opposite, the decision to employ any learning approaches is largely in the students' hands. Different students seek different things from a university. Some survive with intimidating assessment and teaching situation. The difference in the quality of learning is partially attributable by contextual influences.

It would be a mistake to assume the contextual factors are irrelevant in understanding how students learn. It is misleading and unjust to consider students with poor academic performance to inherently 'weak' or; unmotivated' students. Interest, commitment and approach are products

of the interaction between students and learning environment. On the other hand, to view the 'impact' or 'effectiveness' of teaching solely in terms of teaching methods or the quality of their teaching performance by lecturers is narrow and inadequate. Students learning, after all, are subjected to a dynamic and richly complex array of influences which are both direct and indirect, intentional and unintended.

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