

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDY ORIENTATIONS OF ON CAMPUS AND OFFSHORE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how students learn is fundamental in the quest for improving learning outcomes of students who are becoming increasingly diverse and mobile. Using a revised SPQ2F instrument (Biggs & Leung, 2001), this study undertakes a comparative analysis of the study approaches of on campus and offshore students and their perceptions of their learning strategies related to a marketing unit in an Australian university. The results indicate that the majority of students seem to adopt deep learning rather than surface learning approaches, though on campus students appear to have deep learning orientations compared with off shore campus students.

INTRODUCTION

Across the world, universities are faced with the challenging task of educating an increasingly diverse and mobile student community with changing demands and aspirations. A key source of this diversity is international students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, the migration trends, greater access to higher education (Ramsden, 2003), particularly the diversification of access to disenfranchised groups and new 'clients' such as working adults, older learners and learners at a distance (Middlehurst, 2004) have contributed to this diversity. A major outcome of this development is the differences in learning styles and academic capabilities of students influenced by their divergent learning backgrounds (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and exposure to a variety of teaching styles (Biggs, 1999, 1987). In order to assure quality teaching and learning, which remains one of the key goals as learning institutions, universities need to understand how students learn, including their different learning styles.

The aim of this paper is to compare the study approaches of on campus and off campus full-time day students enrolled in a marketing unit in an Australian university and to investigate their perceptions of their learning strategies using a specific learning environment and learning contexts. In this study, on campus students are defined as those studying in Australia while off campus students are those studying in an overseas location. The former cohort is a mixed nationality (mainly

Australian born), the latter are Asian students. Further, tutorial classes are used as the learning environment, and teaching strategies such as tutorial discussions, group work and assessment processes are associated with the learning contexts. The paper will cover the nature and the process of the investigation and an appraisal of its findings before outlining the implications and future directions for further enhancement of the teaching practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the needs of the learner remains critical in teaching and learning and particularly in the design or delivery of a subject matter. There is a large body of literature in relation to how students learn and are taught and the impact of social, cultural and past educational background on their own learning. According to learning theories, individual learning differs in view of the different ways of processing information. This has prompted educators and researchers to identify different learning styles or approaches which are useful in understanding the learning needs of students. The increasing cultural diversity and the global mobility of student populations have created greater interest and controversy among researchers and practitioners alike in the application of learning theories in relation to social, cultural, and environmental influences on learning. Most of the research on learning styles and approaches has been in the areas of higher education and professional learning (Coffield et al., 2004).

The literature suggests that planning courses and teaching methods require a strong alignment with different learning approaches of students which relates to changes in curricula and how they are delivered (Smith, 2002). Several different learning approaches and styles have been identified in the literature although there appears to be a consensus that students in higher education show a limited number of different approaches to learning, albeit with some cultural variations (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000; Richardson, 1990). In one of the earliest contributions in the area, Marton and Saljo (1976) identified "two levels of processing" of the material to be learned, namely surface and deep-level learning. Kolb (1976, 1984) classified students into four groups of learners – divergers, convergers, assimilators and accommodators. Honey and

Mumford (1982) also identified four groups of learners – activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. Vermunt (1996, 1998) suggested that learning styles are also related to culture and social environment, meaning that program structure or curriculum design may not be able to be global in nature. Furthermore, the learning style is not a stable trait and is subject to change with the learning situation and the learning context (Zeegers, 2002; Entwistle, 1989). Students therefore learn differently in different situations and the approaches to learning (surface or deep) vary according to the academic task. Ramsden (1992) further confirms that the context of learning and learning orientations influence the learning outcomes of students

It is unlikely that an educational program could cater to each student's individual learning style or approach, but there may be opportunities for some degree of *congruent customization*, whereby a variety of teaching styles are used to address variation in learning approaches (De Vita, 2001). This requires a high degree of integration across subjects within a degree where coordinated program development caters for heterogeneous student groups. Kalantzis and Cope (2000, p. 47) support this view by stating that the "curriculum experience needs to include explicit strategies to negotiate differences." In this context, the investigation of how cultural background influences the development of individual learning style preferences and how educational institutions utilise this information to diversify delivery methods become relevant (De Vita, 2001). A good understanding of how students learn is important not only in terms of improving teaching quality but also to dispel the misconceptions surrounding some nontraditional and international students. Research conducted by Sillitoe et al. (2002) indicates that cultural stereotyping of students' approaches to learning has produced unsustainable positions regarding Asian students when they are labelled as shallow learners, non-analytical, conservative and demonstrating a tendency towards regurgitation of teaching. Their findings indicate that Asian students possess analytical skill; however the culture shock and confusion with regard to the learning environment often produces a cautious respect for what is taught.

Deep approach is defined as the intention to establishing mastery of the material and integration of it into the learner's existing knowledge base while the surface approach is the intention to achieve short-term memorisation of the material so that it may be reproduced, for example in an assessment (Cuthbert, 2005). However, as Ramsden (2003) points out, a learning approach cannot be

considered as a characteristic of an individual person and something can be inferred from observing student's behaviour. It is also incorrect to associate "low ability" with surface approaches or to consider deep approach in a complementary fashion. Research has proved that students are capable of both deep and surface approaches and it should be viewed in the relational point of view. Therefore the intention to adopt a surface approach (reproduce information) or a deep approach (seek meaning) is seen as a consequence of how students interpreted the context of learning; i.e., the learning approach adopted by a student can vary with demands of the tasks. Nonetheless, there is consensus among educational researchers that deep approach to learning leads to better outcomes and it should be the focus of tertiary education (Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 1987, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the first stage, a revised R-SPQ-2F questionnaire (Biggs & Leung, 2001) was administered in tutorial classes to ascertain the study approaches of students. The selection of students was based on convenience sampling and only students volunteering for the study were included in the sample. The sample was comprised of a total of 41 students – 28 on campus and 13 off campus of which 43 percent were of Asian origin. In the first section of the questionnaire, students were asked to rate each of the questions on a Likert scale of 1-5, higher rating indicating a positive inclination towards a particular study approach. Indices were constructed for each of the study approach domains – Deep Approach (DA), Surface Approach (SA), Deep Motive (DM), Surface Motive (SM), Deep Strategy (DS), Surface Strategy (DS) – followed by t-tests of equality of means. The second stage was comprised of depth interviews of 45 minutes to 1 hour duration with ten students (7 on campus and 3 offshore) to capture their personal views and experiences in relation to a range of issues related to their learning and the learning contexts exposed to them

RESULTS

Results indicated that there were no significant differences among students in regard to the study approaches except for minor variations. This result is not surprising as several other studies have also reported no significant differences among students in regard to the study approaches (Biggs, 2003). Table 1 shows that more students adopt deep learning than surface learning though they differ in

terms of the learning context highlighted by the variances in the measured variables within study approach domains. For example, 57.4 percent of students show deep learning orientations within the deep approach while 57.1 percent adopt surface learning orientations within surface approach. High positive scores are reported in a number of subscales such as “work hard interesting” (DM), “learning provide deep personal satisfaction” (DM), “any topic can be interesting,” “self test until understand” (DS), “need to form own conclusions” (DS), but seem to differ when action is to be taken (strategy). The deviations in deep approach are in items: “come to class with questions” (DM), “spend time on interesting topics (DS), “use free time in interesting topics” (DS). In the case of surface approach, all students seem to adopt similar motivation (SM) in learning doing the minimum work possible, and shared the orientation of “learning by rote” as a strategy (SS). It is clear that surface learning is used as a strategy when required. This supports our contention that student learning orientations differ according to the tasks and the learning context.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Study Approaches:
On Campus and Off Campus

	Rarely True of Me	True of Me	On Campus Mean	Offshore Mean
Deep Approach Average	42.6	57.4	3.0	2.8
Surface Approach Average	42.9	57.1	2.3	2.6

Note: The analysis of subscale items are not reported in this paper but will be made available on request.

The cross tabulation of data revealed greater differences in the deep approaches between on campus and off campus students but the differences in the surface approaches were not very prominent. In comparing means between the two groups, on campus students seem to have greater propensity to adopt deep approaches and less surface approaches to study than do off campus students, however in terms of the subscales – Motivation (DM/SM), Strategy (DS/SS) – there were differences as outlined below:

- Studying academic topics can be as exciting as a good novel (DM): higher for off campus students
- Any topic can be interesting (DM): higher for off campus students

- Do suggested reading (DS): higher for off campus students
- Learn by rote (SS): higher for on campus students

The results did not support Biggs’s (2003) finding that Asian students are “deeper” learners than “western” students. This study, however, indicated that on campus and off shore students use similar learning strategies as they appear to use both deep and surface approaches depending on the learning task and the environment.

Further insights into student learning strategies were available through depth interviews. Some of the key themes and messages were:

1. The majority of the students (8 out of 10) felt that the unit was interesting and useful for their current and future studies as well as for their future careers, indicating deep learning approach.
2. Except for two students, all other students agreed that the workload of the unit is reasonable, though three students felt that the load can be increased with an additional practical assignment.
3. There was consensus of the opinion that tutorials were helpful in their learning. Some felt that the time allocated (50 minutes) is inadequate and should be increased while some others suggested that tutorials should be conducted in collaboration with the lectures. The importance of tutorials to student learning was explicit.
4. There were mixed reactions to the tutorial tasks. Students attending lectures regularly did not consider the presentation of a summary of the previous lecture to be necessary, as opposed to those students who do not attend lectures regularly.
5. The majority of the students who attended tutorials regularly come prepared for tutorials.
6. All students agreed that poor attendance in tutorials has an impact on their overall effectiveness, as interactions are important for learning
7. While there was acknowledgement of the unit website as a central learning environment, many viewed the website negatively given its record of downtimes and slow execution of tasks. The important message was that the university failed to provide any introductory training to students on the features and operation of the website.
8. Students displayed varied study approaches towards tutorial tasks, online tests and the final exam. Some demonstrated very deep learning approaches sustained throughout the semester.

It was clear that every student seem to adopt different tactics depending on the nature of learning exercise. For example, all students agreed that some form of memorising is done in preparation of online tests and the exam, however understanding of the material and concepts were considered more important to learning. All students felt that the missing element in assessments was a written assignment to enable students to apply theory to practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focused on analysing the study approaches and perceptions of on campus and offshore students on their learning strategies in a marketing unit in an Australian university. The quantitative results indicated varying approaches but the general orientation appeared to be more inclined towards deep learning though students differed in terms of their study motivations and strategies depending on the learning context. The statistical component of the unit content appeared to be of concern to some students. There was high awareness and appreciation of the value of tutorials and project work as a good learning experience.

The qualitative findings provided additional insights into student perceptions of their learning strategies. The students found tutorials classes as a valuable learning opportunity.

The study supported the view that students' approaches to learning and learning outcomes are interconnected with their previous experiences, content to be learned, and the methods of teaching and assessment associated with the content, and therefore it is through establishing points of intervention within these connections that the quality of students can be enhanced (Ramsden, 2003). These may be achieved by changing the curricula, teaching methods and assessment methods. The success of this intervention however will be dependent on the institution's ability to change

policies and practices related to rewarding reproductive approaches while providing inducements for meaningful learning (Ramsden, 2003).

The study revealed the importance of a review of the course content, the delivery of the unit and the assessment regime. The qualitative feedback also supported the enhancement of the study material and progressive assessments in this unit. As a result of the study the following enhancements to the delivery of the unit were implemented:

1. The introduction of a CD-Rom encompassing the study guide and video clips which will be used as part of the assessments.
2. Increase of the number of online tests from two to four, thus allowing students to revise study material more regularly.
3. Use of online delivery of tutorial workshops with the ability to vary the content.
4. The inclusion of a project (to apply theory to proactive) as a piece of assessment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study has its merits in terms of identifying differences in study approaches and the learning strategies adopted by students, the small sample size and heavy focus on the investigation of one single subject and class would have an effect on the replicability and generalisation of its findings to all learning contexts. The small sample size also had an effect on the opportunities available for more rigorous statistical analysis.

Future research should be directed on two fronts: firstly, investigation into the student perceptions of the impact of the changes implemented in relation to their learning in the unit; and secondly, regarding cultural effects on learning approaches and how far learning contexts influence greater adaptation of learning styles of students.

References Available on Request