Externally imposed internally driven learning – a paradox?

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Background

This poster is based on a project that was intended to improve the quality of education in a clinical psychology program. We will reflect here on how a project that had good intentions, was in line with teachers’ ambitions and students’ wishes and that was based on agreed-upon pedagogical principles nevertheless failed to turn out as expected. We will also discuss the results in light of theories of motivation and higher education.

In a clinical psychology program, students are expected to learn professional skills such as communication and test administration, which are required for a clinical career. In the Clinical Psychology Program at Linköping University, training in this set of professional skills is not addressed in separate courses, but is integrated into the regular psychology coursework throughout the entire program. Although this has proven to be advantageous for students, there are also problems. For instance, there is a tendency for students to lose sight of the overall goals.

In our ambition to find a method to help students acquire a coherent sense of mastering communication and testing skills, we were inspired by the pedagogical idea of using a portfolio. The portfolio method used here is based on the concepts of self-regulation and self-efficacy, or the belief that an individual can handle specific situations. The method is well in line with the pedagogical principles upon which the entire program is based, i.e., problem-based learning. Despite this, the attempt to launch this method failed, i.e., not a single student reported using the portfolio.

This made us stop and reflect on the basic assumption that learning is always and only benefited by intrinsic motivation and personal interest.

Theoretical assumptions of the project

We aimed to create a learning situation with the potential to enable optimal learning. That is, we were inspired by learning theories arguing that:

- Personal interest is positively correlated with text learning
- Intrinsically motivated persons are more likely to become engaged in in-depth learning
- If one is offered external rewards for engaging in activities one is intrinsically motivated to pursue, this motivation will be inhibited

Outcome of the project

Although personal communication with participants revealed personal interest in the project, our results showed no (intended) learning. What caused this outcome? Let us consider other learning theories, which argue that:

- Students adapt their manner of study to assessment demands
- Interest is fostering learning results even under extrinsic conditions
- Personal relevance, novelty, activity level and comprehensibility contribute to situational interest, which in turn is positively correlated with text learning

Conclusion and suggestions for further research

The results from our project suggest that intrinsic motivation is not sufficient to enable intended learning in higher educational contexts. Rather, it seems necessary to create a learning environment also including extrinsic motivation, such as relevant assessments. In other words, we suggest that the dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation be dissolved, and replaced by the assumption that both may be necessary in various combinations and depending on the context.

A discussion of the benefits of extrinsic factors is usually met with an expressed fear of rewarding trivial knowledge. An association is often made between knowledge transmission, extrinsic motivation and multiple choice assessments, on the one hand, and knowledge construction, intrinsic motivation and essay assessments, on the other. However, our suggestion enables a connection between knowledge construction, extrinsic motivation and essays.

In order to establish such a connection, further research would profit from investigating questions such as:

- How do students react to rewards for engaging in learning activities for which they have no prior intrinsic motivation?
- To what extent can students internalize extrinsic motivation?
- To what extent does (non)interest in a particular activity held by a minority student group affect the degree and/or locus of motivation?

Although it has been shown that situational interest correlates with learning and that interest even under extrinsic conditions fosters learning, it could be argued that this does not constitute optimal learning. However, if the alternative is no intended learning at all, we prefer good-enough learning.

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References

1) See for example:


9) See for example:

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