

Facilitating the development of agency in first-year students. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Open distance learning (ODL) requires students to take control of their study processes from the beginning in order to achieve study success. To achieve control, first-year students have to understand what agency requires of them and they have to know what to do to exercise agency. An online program was developed at the University of South Africa (Unisa) to facilitate the development of agency in first-year students and a pilot program was conducted with a group of students who had failed an Economics I course to test the program. The data indicated that time management in a variety of contexts was the major debilitating factor for participants. Feedback from the users indicated that they were generally positive about the program structure and contents, as well as their experience in using it.

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Introduction

Open distance learning (ODL) is regarded as the most viable solution to the higher educational needs of future generations (Badat, 2005; Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalić-Trumbić, 2009; van Schoor, 2011b). While distance education can provide greater access, quality and cost-effectiveness (Daniel et al., 2009), a question remains over why the retention and throughput rates of distance education students continue to be lower than that of their residential counterparts (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). One reason may be that distance education students are subjected to a multitude of life-roles that affect their study role (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011; van Schoor & Potgieter, 2011). It is therefore essential for them to manage their study processes and environments carefully and responsibly in order to be successful. Various terms have been used for this ability to self-manage, such as autonomy (Chan, 2001), self-directed learning (West, 2011) and situated agency (van Schoor, 2011b). In this paper, the term “situated agency” will be used to denote the student’s ability to manage the study process.

Situated agency is a circular process, which operates at two levels. The first is the metacognitive level, which implies a structured way of assessing a situation, based on an understanding of its demands, and making decisions about appropriate actions to perform. The second is at the operational level, where the actions are performed, drawing on a range of academic skills, information and knowledge from prior learning. The ability to operate at both levels has to be in place for academic success to occur.

It is likely that the students who gain access to Unisa are not agentic, although it

is accepted that they have the capacity to become autonomous (Chan, 2001; Gibson, 1996; Lindblom & Ziemke, 2002). This assumption is based on a number of factors. The South African school system generally does not prepare students to be autonomous learners (Gernetzky, 2011). The school system is subject to debilitating factors such as many poorly trained teachers, low levels of teacher motivation and a lack of adequate resources, which encourage rote learning and the coaching of learners to pass examinations. Little evidence of an inclination towards deep learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976) is visible. Surface learning creates a dependency attitude in which students attribute the responsibility for their learning to outside agents, such as an institution that is required to provide structure, motivation and support. While an institution certainly has a role to play, study success is a dual responsibility and the students have to accept their part in it (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Furthermore, access to Unisa, in line with the mandate of distance learning (Daniel et al., 2009) to massify higher education, is based on lower entrance qualifications than in the residential system (van Schoor, 2011a). The combination of a lack of knowledge about the nature of higher education and low levels of academic preparedness (this combination is also referred to as “academic capital” [Bourdieu, 1984]), together with the pressure of multiple life roles, contributes to the unsatisfactory output from distance learning.

While several studies have confirmed the key role of metacognitive processes in academic performance (Chan, 2001; Lizzio, 2006), little evidence is available on how to facilitate the development of these processes. One of the most widely used strategies to develop metacognitive capacity is cognitive behavioural therapy

(CBT) (Ellis, 1995). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full description of the theory and practice of CBT. Suffice to indicate that the process is based on the understanding that what a person thinks will influence his/her feelings or emotions, which, in turn, will determine the actions that give expression to those feelings. Changing behaviour patterns requires a rational assessment of a particular situation, setting goals to address what needs to be changed and executing the actions. CBT operates at the two levels implied by situated agency, and in this paper the metacognitive approach referred to as the DRIVER strategy will be used to facilitate the development of situated agency in the academic context.

The situated agency model

The process is structured according to the *Transformed Situated Agency Model* (van Schoor, 2011b). In the pre-transformation state, people are products of their personal histories or situatedness. Prior formal and informal learning have taken place over the development of this personal history and the outcome has been the development of cognitive templates that continue to influence current and future behaviours. New situations and contexts, and the information that they provide, are filtered through these templates to provide meaning on which actions are based. If the templates stem from positive experiences, which affirm a person's ability to control a certain situation, they will engender a sense of efficacy and the expectation of goal achievement. If they stem from negative experiences, they will have the opposite effect. The DRIVER strategy is a metacognitive approach to manage the impact of these interpretations of situations and contexts and to deal with

negative interpretations in a structured way.

A pilot project to facilitate the development of situated agency

Subjects

The sample consisted of 8,556 students who had failed an Economics I examination at the end of the first semester of 2011.

Method

All the students were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate in the three-part online program. The program was made available via Unisa's teaching and learning management system known as *myUnisa*.

Part One, the pre-program reflection, consisted of a series of questions designed to help students think about their relationships, health and wellness, goal-directedness, study skills, study patterns, anxiety patterns, self-efficacy and reflective capacity. The pre-program reflection provided input into the DRIVER program. Each of the seven steps of the program was presented in the form of a short introduction, followed by applicable practical examples. Further structure was provided in the form of tables or templates that students could use. The follow-up questionnaire was presented after the students had written the examination, that is, after three months had elapsed.

Results

A total of 156 students completed the first part of the program, namely the reflection. The small number of users was disappointing, although it may have been influenced by the fact that *myUnisa* suffered lengthy downtimes due to

technical problems. The results showed the following areas to be problematic:

- Unpredictable employment situations had a negative impact on time to study.
- Lack of proper/regular exercise affected mind–body balance.
- Preparation for examinations did not begin soon enough.
- Not enough time was spent on preparation.
- Not all the work in the course was covered prior to the examination.
- Mild stress was experienced on the day of the examination, possibly due to inadequate preparation.
- Studying right up to the start of the examination, due to poor time management, which may have contributed to the stressful feelings.

While most of the targeted areas of enquiry seemed to be in order, an analysis of the problem areas points towards inefficient planning and time management in different life contexts.

The number of students who went on to complete the online DRIVER program, that is, to work through all seven steps, could not be determined. The online record shows that 1,492 started the program, but the number that actually completed the process could not be verified.

After the students had completed their semester examinations, they were sent a follow-up survey to determine how they had experienced the program and whether it had helped them to improve their marks. The follow-up questionnaire was sent to the 156 students who had indicated that they had worked on the program. A total of 22 responses were received and 19 respondents gave permission for the data to be used for further analysis.

Note: Owing to space limitations, only the percentage of positive responses (i.e. Agree and Strongly agree) will be presented here.

A summary of the data indicated that

- 58% agreed that the self-reflection helped them to identify actions to deal with their failure.
- 56% agreed that the self-reflection helped them to understand their failure better.
- 81% agreed that the DRIVER program helped them to address the problem areas methodically.
- 81% agreed that the DRIVER program helped them to identify solutions to the problems.
- 75% indicated that the steps in the DRIVER program were easy to follow.
- 94% indicated that the language used in the program was easy to understand.
- 75% indicated that the DRIVER program helped them to feel in control of their study situation.
- 83% indicated that they completed the entire program.

In spite of the small number of responses, the data suggest that the self-reflection part of the program needs attention, possibly by helping students to identify specific areas for attention and linking these with the DRIVER program. It seems that the students found the DRIVER program to be structured and effective in addressing their study issues, and indications are that they will be able to extrapolate the knowledge and skills to future study and life situations.

Conclusion

The pilot study yielded a number of positive outcomes, which provide pointers

as to how the process can be improved. It confirmed the feasibility of an online facilitation program, which is a key requirement for effective ODL practice. It also provided tentative evidence that the development of agency can be facilitated by means of the DRIVER program, although the long-term impact in terms of improved academic performance still needs to be confirmed. Students also felt that the DRIVER program was easy to use because of the accessible level of language and the structured way in which it was presented. The program will now be adapted and a second pilot will be run with two groups. Group 1 will comprise first-year students at the beginning of their first semester. The aim will be to assess the impact of the proactive delivery of the program on their integration into the institution and their study performance. Group 2 will undergo a repeat of the first pilot to verify the remedial/retroactive impact of the program. Ultimately, the aim is to provide all students with proactive exposure to the program and to run the program institution-wide.

Outcomes of the presentation

The presentation yielded a range of interesting comments about the program. Firstly, the impression may have been created that the program was only aimed at students who have experienced failure of some sort. It was never the intention to do so and in fact the intention is to offer it to all students at the beginning of their study careers as a support and development skill. However, while the program is still in a development phase, it was tested with a group of students who have failed an examination as it was argued that they would have a defined need to address. Once finalised, the versatility of

the skills make them particularly appropriate for use in a variety of contexts. Secondly, several members of the audience commented afterwards that the issue of student responsibility or agency is a much neglected one and it may even be seen as being deliberately ignored by institutions. It almost seems as if institutions do not want to draw attention to this critical issue as it may be viewed as abdicating at least part of their responsibility for student success. The University of South Africa has a wide range of support services but, in line with a refrain that was heard throughout the conference, students do not use the services as expected. Hopefully, once they have engaged with the DRIVER program, they will engage with support services sooner rather than later.

Thirdly, the concept of scaffolding was raised and it is argued that the DRIVER program is a good example of progressive scaffolds to support learning. The first scaffold is the reflection on a given situation, e.g. examination failure or any other process that may impact on learning. The second scaffold is the application of the action steps in the program and the third is the reflection on the outcome. In this way, the circular notion of metacognition, which leads to action and back to metacognition is clearly displayed in the concept of scaffolding.

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