Transition to university - a self-regulatory approach

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Introduction

Transition to university is increasingly problematic often requiring significant social and academic adjustments by students (McInnis and James, 1995; Burroughs-Lane, 1996 and Trindle, 1996). With expanding university enrolments and increased diversity of student background and preparedness for university, this problem appears exacerbated.

Success in terms of academic achievement in a university environment is strongly linked to the degree of and success in the adoption of appropriate learning strategies that the effective learner is capable of achieving (Lindner and Harris, 1992; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1986, Bandura, 1982, Schunk, 1984, 1993). For some students, this may require a change to particular aspects of learning behaviours that they previously found successful. For them, the transition process becomes critical.

Prior to entering university, students, particularly recent school-leavers, will have a history of learning which may involve a significant degree of external environmental guidance and support particularly from parents and teachers (Glasser, 1996:305). This guidance and support is likely to include external controls, external

motivation, goal setting, set activities and precise expectations.

These external influences, together with each student's internalised view of their own competence, will be evident in a range of academic behaviours, learning strategies and goal orientations. While some are likely to be aware of the overt and covert differences between their previous learning environment and university and acknowledge that difference may warrant changes in their learning behaviour, others may not. It is these students that are more likely to be at risk and therefore needing particular assistance if they are to be successful in their university studies.

Awareness of the different demands does not necessarily indicate a preparedness to make changes of the required nature to cope with the autonomy and independence in relation to the learning process (Cuthbert, 1995; Boud, 1988).

In addition to a set of beliefs and goals underlying their about-to-begin university study career, students entering university also bring diverse levels of skills. Over time, these beliefs and skills have evolved through the triadic reciprocal determinism of three influencing processes: person (self), behaviour and environment (Bandura, 1986; Zimmerman, 1989). While an individual's personal, behavioural and environmental events can be viewed as separable, they are interdependent sources of influence in analyses of human behaviour (Zimmerman, 1990a:181). It is this interdependence of influences that must be kept in mind when examining the issue of student learning

behaviour.

Transition

Enrolment in university study is not simple. For the school-leaver, the path through such competing demands previously may have been lessened through the influence of school and home. As a young adult, he or she is probably expected to take considerably more responsibility for themselves and their actions.

As recorded in various studies (i.e. Blunden, 1996; Trindle, 1996), students beginning university study are likely to experience a wide range of problems ranging from confusion about self and institutional organisation, the need for greater autonomy, the emergent tension between their expectations (which might be vague, contradictory) and the university's expectations, which are usually very precise, formal and imposed impersonally. As they try to desperately adjust, many are reluctant to make the effort to check, clarify or reduce the gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

To date, universities have generally seen their role in the transition process as interventionist. If and when learning difficulties are experienced or acknowledged, students are encouraged, or even left to their own devices, to identify their weaknesses and seek assistance or remediation from the university sponsored study skill centre or equivalent. Anecdotal comments suggest that often such centres attract

the students least likely to need assistance whereas the student needing help, rarely takes the opportunity. Such centres are often sources of coping techniques and low level support, for example, study skills, rather than a source of developing processes to meet the demands associated with student university life. In this regard, these centres could be seen as defacto support systems.

The transition to university process is characteristised by a decrease in previous environmental supports. There is an increased expectation to become an autonomous and independent learner (Boud, 1990). The initial intention and purpose of students beginning their university courses, is to complete a degree. As they become aware of the inherent pressures associated with university study, including competing demands of meeting academic requirements, a desire for a social life and the need for part-time work, a more immediate goal might become the successful completion of a semester's work, that is, to do the minimum work to gain a pass. To attain even this goal, a higher level of self organisation and discipline is required to even identify priorities and attain weekly goals. This may require the rapid development of appropriate practice, self-monitoring, improved self-regulatory skills and the identification and discrimination of standards and criteria for achieving acceptable levels of performance (Glasser, 1996:305).

As they recognise changing demands for new situations, there is an impetus for the student to adopt new behaviour or change personal aspects of their present. Of particular interest here is the student

who, during the transition phase, becomes aware of the need to change

their approach to learning, particularly in terms of the goals they

set. The need to possibly redefine their goals is seen as a critical

aspect of learning behaviour change. It is in this regard that the

self-regulation literature has something to offer.

Self-regulation

The literature on self-regulation implies that it is during the

transitional process beginning after initial entry, that the university

student who is an effective self-regulated learner is more likely to

make any successful or necessary adjustments to his or her learning

processes (Zimmerman & Pons, 1986; Schunk, 1993).

Self regulation theory focuses attention on how students personally

activate, alter and sustain their learning practices in specific

contexts (Zimmerman, 1986:307). This perspective has directed attention

to students' use of a variety of specific sub-processes to achieve

self-designated goals in a real world context. However, there appears a

dearth of application to the neophyte university student. While there

is a growing body of applied research on the relationship between

self-regulated learning processes and student academic achievement

(Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1984), this particular group appears to have

been largely ignored.

Self-regulatory students use learning processes involving goal-directed

activities that investigate, modify and sustain their performance (Zimmerman, 1989). These activities include attending to instruction, processing and integrating knowledge, rehearsing information to be remembered, and developing and maintaining positive beliefs about learning capabilities and anticipated outcomes of actions (Schunk, 1989, 1990). The literature on self-regulated learning (i.e. Zimmerman, 1990b; Lindher & Harris, 1992) indicates that self-regulated learners understand, value and engage in academic learning in ways that are fundamentally different that their peers who have difficulty .

Social cognitive learning theory framework generally views self-regulation as comprising three sub-processes: self-observation, self-judgement and self-reaction (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1989). As students undertake learning tasks with particular goals, they observe their performances, evaluate or judge their goal progress. As an outcome of this self-monitoring, they continue their work or change their task approach (Schunk, 1990:72). It is accepted that satisfactory self-regulation will not only assist the transition process but also enhance feeling of efficacy thus leading to higher levels of achievement and motivation.

During this phase, as they self-monitor their transition, students not adjusting may need to move beyond their present level of awareness of themselves as learners. They may also need to recognise the changing situation and examine the kinds of processes that they have previously utilised in their learning. Until this self-judgment and self-reaction

are recognised and identified, a commitment to changing their

self-regulation skills, which in turn affects their goal achievement

and self-efficacy, might not be attempted.

Goal setting

Observation suggests that students' ability to self-regulate through

setting appropriate individual goals to meet external goals and demands

varies greatly. Not only does the degree of self-regulation vary

greatly but also, already fragile self-efficacy is lowered further

through inability to adopt the best tactics and strategies to cope with

these demands. It is important to understand self-regulatory processes

to assist students' to change their learning strategies while

increasing their motivation to do so (Zimmerman and Pons, 1986).

Deliberately teaching for effective goal setting and self-regulated

learning seems a valid objective for value added education early in

university studies. Numerous studies, (i.e., Schunk, 1984; Bandura and

Schunk, 1981), examine how self-regulated learning processes affect

academic beliefs, skills and behaviours.

Goal setting, goal specificity, goal proximity, goal difficulty and

goal progress feedback have been associated with self-regulated

learning (Schunk, 1990, 1993, Bandura and Schunk, 1981). It is

believed that if inappropriate goals are set, then other components of

the self-regulation are likely to become inefficient. The application

of inappropriate tactics and strategies is likely to hinder rather than help goal attainment as well as incur other effects. For example, self-efficacy is only likely to increase as students note progress, attain goals and set new challenges (Schunk, 1990:81).

If the transition process to university is to be successful, the student will need to utilise appropriate tactics and strategies to meet changing goals, especially those imposed by the university. Those high in self-efficacy and confident in their ability to self-regulate, will, through observation, judgement and reaction, monitor their own performance and make adjustments.

Implications

For many students, the transition process is frequently left to fate. A Sink or swim mentality attempts to force a situation that is often personally and economically wasteful without addressing the real issues and responsibility. Even for the student who is able to adjust, any change process is by default and thus may be extremely inefficient both for the individual student and their learning behaviour.

To date, universities' concerns with student difficulties appear to have seen several interventions invoked, particularly through the establishment of study skill centres, optional intensive workshops and availability of counselling services. As mentioned earlier, experience suggests that the students most in need of such assistance are also

those least likely to approach and utilise the opportunity. The

question arises as to whether universities are or should be, prepared

to teach and encourage appropriate learning behaviour among their

commencing students or over the duration of their degree.

Current intervention approaches within universities are often limited

in focus and duration as well as suffering the shortcomings referred to

above. Where attempts have been made, the work of one section, e.g.

the study centres, is often not integrated with the unit teaching. On

the basis of the points raised in this paper, it is argued that there

is a real need to integrate and embed self-regulation skills in

academic units rather than as stand alone courses. Of course this then

puts added responsibility on the part of university teaching staff to

provide understanding and practice in areas such as strategies, tactics

and techniques, that is, they have to teach for changes in thinking,

behaviour and content knowledge.

In summary, the underlying issue appears to be one of balancing

individual and institutional responsibility. Should there be in-unit

assistance, that is, transition skills, embedded in each units,

particularly those with high first year student enrolment ? A second

and allied question refers to what is the likely value of the tasks

already embedded in units that will help transition ? Can and should

academic staff teach skills of independent learning in order to

deliberately change learning styles and hence increase the likelihood

of student success and retention?

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