LEARNING APPROACHES AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING ENVIRONMENT IN A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

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Understanding how students learn is critical to the improvement of student learning and teaching in an environment of increasing diversity of the student population in higher educational institutions all over the world. The components of student diversity are complex and intersecting. This diversity is enhanced not only by the significant growth in the number of international students from different backgrounds entering universities but also by communities themselves becoming more diverse along the lines of gender, class, ethnicity, culture, sexuality and many more. This is further exacerbated by the environment characterised by diversity in learning styles and study approaches of students influenced by prior learning backgrounds, increasing class sizes, changing expectations and the increased use of computer based technologies for teaching and learning which have contributed to major pedagogical challenges faced by universities. The purpose of this study was to investigate the study approaches of students in an Australian university and their perceptions of the learning environment using a mixed research method involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The selection of students was based on convenience sampling and only students volunteering for the study were included. This resulted in a total number of 41 students. The revised 2 factor Study Process Questionnaire (R-SPQ-2F) developed by Biggs, Kember & Leung (2001) was used to ascertain the study approaches of students and in-depth interviews were conducted with seven students to gather data on a range of issues related to the learning contexts which included tutorial discussions, group work and assessments.

The findings indicated that there were no significant differences in study approaches of students and that the study approaches differ according to the learning contexts. The results also showed that students overall seem to adopt deep learning than surface learning. The orientation towards surface learning was seen as a strategy used in some learning contexts. For example 57.4% of students demonstrated deep learning orientations within the deep approach while 42.6% of them showed surface learning orientations. The analysis of the differences between Gender and Age categories provided consistent results indicating that on average female students and older aged students seem to demonstrate deep learning orientations and less surface learning orientations.

In summary, both quantitative and qualitative analysis of data revealed that students' approach to learning is subject to change with the learning situation and the learning context and students adopt either a deep or surface approach to learning depending on their perception of the learning task. The research has established that a greater understanding of how students learn and perceive their learning environment could assist in the development of student centered teaching strategies which would lead to higher student satisfaction thus providing universities a competitive edge in a globalised education environment.