

## STUDENT LEARNING IN AN UNDERGRADUATE COURSE: A JOURNEY THROUGH AN UNKNOWN TERRITORY

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### Introduction

This research project involved a study of the experiences of learning of a group of undergraduates specializing in psychology at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka over a 3-4 year period. The purpose of this research was an in-depth study of the phenomenon of student learning from the perspective of the students to uncover the complexities involved in it. To achieve this purpose two objectives have been set. The first was to understand how the students view the purposes, contents, processes and outcomes of their learning in the undergraduate course and two, is to identify the dilemmas or contradictions faced by the students.

### Methodology

The study employed a longitudinal qualitative design and a maximum variation sample (Merriam, 1998). To access the diverse views of participants, 15 students representing different categories were identified within a total population of 28 students. The data were collected through interviews with students and lecturers, along with classroom observations, students' reflective comments and documents. The emergent design of the research and the analysis of data were informed by a theoretical framework drawn from Engeström's version of Cultural

Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987). Accordingly the undergraduate course was conceptualized as an activity system. In analyzing the data, the researchers employed a holistic interpretation of what was happening in the selected context. The concepts of contradictions and expansive learning (Engeström, 1987, 2001) in CHAT were used to analyse the tensions or the dilemmas faced by the students and the outcomes of learning.

### Results and Discussion

Students' understanding of the purposes, contents, processes and outcomes of the undergraduate course seems to evolve through a gradual process. Students enter university with a vague notion of the purpose of undergraduate education. However, during the course, their understanding of the purpose of undergraduate education seems to change. Teaching, curriculum and assessment processes and community relationships mediate this process. Students' understanding of the purpose of undergraduate education also seems to depend on how reflective they were on their course experiences.

Students initially seem to have faced difficulties in understanding and adapting to the teaching, learning and assessment processes at the university and they gradually seemed to have

adapted to the situation as reported in previous studies done in other countries (Becker *et al*, 1968; Mavor, 2001) and used the affordances (Greeno, 1998) in the context to achieve their own goals. The students seem to have gradually found their own answers to the questions of why do they learn? How do they learn? What do they learn? What do they need to achieve at the end of the course. Therefore, students' learning in the undergraduate course does seem to be a 'journey through an unknown territory'.

Students also seem to face contradictory demands or dilemmas due to the conflicting values, expectations and cultural traditions held by them, their lecturers and the institutional practices. These dilemmas seem to arise mainly between their purpose (*object*) and *tools* (teaching, assessment and curriculum) of the activity system in the contexts of classrooms where transmission (Brophy, 2002) and teacher centered approaches to teaching are used. In the classroom contexts where social constructivist and student centered approaches to teaching are used, dilemmas arise mainly between assessment and other elements of the activity system. However, according to the students' accounts of their experiences, the use of a variety of assessment practices, teaching methods and learning tasks that make the students to interact with different people and contexts in and outside university seemed to help a majority of students to see the object of the activity system more elaborately and to learn expansively.

## Conclusions

Student learning in this particular undergraduate course seems to be a complex process which is mediated by socio-cultural and historical factors as well as individual factors. Individual students seem to respond to the contradictory demands in the context in their own unique ways. Thus we have a very complex picture of student experiences of undergraduate education, which demands careful consideration within individual contexts. The findings of this study support the argument that policies and strategies of teaching and learning should be analysed best at the disciplinary/departmental level.

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