Perceptions of Learning Environments, Learning Approaches, and Learning Outcomes: A Study of Private Higher Education Students in Malaysia from Twinning Programmes

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Abstract

It has been well documented that the deep/surface approaches to learning is an important construct in trying to describe differences in students' experiences of tertiary education contexts, and in trying to understand variations in the quality of their learning outcomes. However, what has been lacking is research into how approaches to learning operate in a Malaysian twinning programme context. First, a twinning programme environment is a unique and a complex setting, as students are required to function within a context which advocates ideals of their partner overseas universities, but remain within the boundaries and constraints of a Malaysian educational institution. Second, academics at twinning programmes are faced with real challenges in providing learning environments that can foster deep approaches to learning to satisfy both the aims of the 'importer' and also that of our country. Third, there is a possibility that students operating from a twinning mode and coming from diverse cultural, social, and educational environments may exhibit different learning approaches to those espoused in western contexts. The literature provides strong evidence that many factors need to be considered when contemplating the most advantageous conditions for the encouragement of deep approaches to learning that are associated with the aims of tertiary teaching and learning.

This study sets out to gain a better understanding of the way twinning programme students approach their learning. Particularly, it aimed to examine relationships among students' individual characteristics, perceptions of the learning environments, approaches to learning, and their learning related outcomes. A theoretical model based on a re-conceptualisation of the 3P Model of learning was developed to link students' background characteristics, perceptions of learning environments, learning approaches, and students' learning related outcomes. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the investigation. Data for the quantitative analysis were collected in early 2003 from 368 2nd and 3rd year students from six private higher educational institutions around the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Rich perceptual data were collected from semi-structured interviews of 52 students.

The quantitative findings of the study indicated that: (a) Students' individual characteristics were associated with students' perceptions of their learning environments, the approaches to learning they adopted, and to their learning related outcomes; (b) Deep approaches to learning were related to students' perceptions of good teaching and provision of clear goals and standards. Conversely, surface approaches to learning were associated with students' perceptions of poor teaching, the lack of clear goals and standards, and inappropriate assessment practices; (c) Deep approaches to learning were associated with students' positive academic attainment, acquisition of generic skills, and satisfaction with course while surface approaches were associated with lower academic attainment, poorer acquisition of generic skills, and reduced satisfaction with their course. That is, deep approaches to learning contributed positively to all students' learning outcomes, while surface approaches contributed negatively to students' academic attainment, acquisition of generic skills and satisfaction with course; (d) Students' learning outcomes were associated directly with students' individual characteristics and their perceptions of the learning environments but the relationships were not mediated by their learning approaches. The analyses indicated the need to reconstruct the model developed for the analysis, indicating that approaches to learning were related to individual characteristics and learning environments but did not mediate the associations among individual characteristics, learning environments, and learning outcomes.

The qualitative analysis enhanced our understanding of the relationships among the variables. From interviews with students, the study suggests that: (a) There were relationships between the roles played by students' gender, academic discipline of choice, age, English language competencies, types of schools they attended, ethnicity, and the ways in which they perceived their learning environments and in the ways in which they approached their learning; (b) Approaches to learning were related to students' perceptions of their learning environment. Teaching and teacher characteristics were related to a variety of learning environments which caused students to vary their approaches to learning. Teaching methods, pace and sequencing of subject matter, teacher enthusiasm, understanding,

and commitments were related to students' adopting deep approaches to learning. In addition, appropriate assessment practices, clear goals and aims, sufficient resources, and adequate choice of subjects encouraged deep approaches to learning. Conversely, overload of work, poor allocation of assignments, inappropriate assessment procedures which encouraged reproduction, poor perception of the relevance of assessments, poor teaching, and poor rapport with teaching staff encouraged surface approaches to learning and might contribute to students feeling stressed, anxious, being tired, or wanting to give up. In addition, the manifestations of 'kiasu'-ism and prior learning habits encouraged students towards reproducing study approaches; and (c) Students who spoke of adopting deep approaches to learning were more positive and more confident towards their learning outcomes. On the other hand, students who adopted surface approaches expressed dissatisfaction with such approaches, and felt that it undermined the quality of their learning outcomes.

Recommendations, based on the study's findings, include suggestions for course matters, teaching practices, assessment and workload, and English language improvement.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Signed: .....
Pauline Swee-Choo Goh

Date: .....

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