Understanding Students' Approaches to Learning in University Traditional and Distance Education Courses

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Abstract

This paper presents a descriptive study that compared students' approaches to learning in two settings: one group of students was in a face-to-face course, and the other was in a distance education course. The methods used emphasize the value and difficulty of using qualitative techniques in researching students' learning. The results revealed evidence of distinct approaches to learning in the two groups. However, there were no significant differences in the level of comprehension of content material.

Résumé

Cet article présente une étude descriptive, comparant la façon d'aborder l'apprentissage des étudiants qui apprennent dans deux cadres différents : un groupe d'étudiants dans un cours en classe, et l'autre dans un cours de l'éducation à distance. Les méthodes utilisées ont mis l'accent sur la valeur et la difficulté d'utiliser des techniques qualitatives dans la recherche sur l'apprentissage des étudiants. Les résultats ont mis en évidence des façons bien distinctes d'aborder l'apprentissage dans les deux groupes. Cependant, il n'y avait pas de différences notables dans le niveau de la compréhension du contenu du matériel enseigné.

Introduction

This paper presents a descriptive study of students' learning profiles at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. The study addresses the question of how differently students learn in a face-to-face course and in a distance learning situation. For this purpose a Study Approach Questionnaire, an Interview, and a Reading Activity were used with two groups of students at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy.

The emphasis throughout has been to test methods that may reveal student learning profiles while improving their quality.

The Study

The distance learning system at the National University, Sistema de Universidad Abierta (SUA), has been operating since 1972. At present there are nine faculties that offer courses in co-ordination with SUA. The Modern Languages and Literature Department in the Faculty of Philosophy has achieved considerable success in the development of its courses at a distance. These courses follow the same curriculum as is offered in regular lecture courses in the Faculty (FAC). However, students in SUA attend only a two-hour seminar every week and a full teaching day every six weeks.

As with other departments working in SUA, the Literature Department concentrates its efforts in the definition of the course objectives and the development of teaching materials. In addition, the department gives special emphasis to co-ordinating the actions of the tutors both among themselves and in their relationships with the students. Staff meetings have the double purpose of organizing the tutors' activities and of discussing ways in which they can update and improve their role as tutors.

Although there seems to be a general acknowledgement of the differences between students in SUA and those in the regular course, FAC, there is no systematic attempt to describe such differences in terms of students' learning. The present study is an effort towards a qualitative profile of students' learning in the two populations.

The Design

The general aim of this study is to describe differences in students' approaches to learning and how these relate to a sample of their learning activities. Such a description will result in a qualitative profile of the chosen student population, which may complement quantitative information when decisions on changes on the curriculum are made.

Relevant points of departure for this project have been the studies that reveal the importance of qualitative aspects of students' learning and the value of understanding "how" students learn rather than how much they achieve (Marton & Saljö, 1976a; Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985; Thomas & Fransella, 1988).

The two main questions with which this project is concerned are as follows:

- What relations exist between students' approaches and personal views on learning and a sample of their learning activities?
- In what ways do students from one population (distance learning, SUA) differ from the other (face-to-face lecture course, FAC)?

The design of the project includes the use of three measuring techniques: a study approach questionnaire, an interview, and a reading activity. These techniques were applied in the order stated to obtain a profile of the population ranging from general to specific aspects of student learning.

The Questionnaire

The Questionnaire was based on the Lancaster Inventory of approaches to study (Entwistle, Hanley, & Hounsell, 1979). The number of questions was reduced but the main categories in the original version were maintained (Educational orientation, Motivation, Learning approach, and Study approach). The categories in this questionnaire attempt to integrate different studies in students' learning styles and approaches to studying, mainly those of Pask, 1976; Marton and Saljö, 1976b; and Entwistle, Hanley, and Hounsell, 1979. (See items in Figure 1.)

The use of the questionnaire is to be interpreted as a way of systematically looking at students' attitudes to learning in order to make these more accessible to analysis, not as a way of assigning fixed traits to individuals or groups.

The Interview

The content of the interview was based mainly on the work of Marton and Saljö, 1976b. The purpose of the interview was to find out to what extent some students can make learning a subject of analysis and reflection and to what extent other students take its meaning for granted. The interview consists of eight questions. The first four questions are related to the students' perceptions of their educational environment: courses, teaching, staff, and evaluations. The last four concentrate on learning as it is experienced by students themselves and as it is perceived in others ().

Reading Activity

The main purpose of this activity was to have a sample of students' learning. To achieve this, the activity was designed in a way that would meet the following criteria:

- In terms of content, it should resemble as much as possible the type of texts that students read in their literature courses. A text by the writer J. L. Borges on Nathaniel Hawthorne was selected. This is a literary essay, the level of difficulty of which was not too simple for those in the third and fourth years. The text was selected with the help of some tutors. and the choice was made on the basis of their agreement on the level of difficulty and relevance of the text.
- In terms of process, the activity should simulate what students do when learning from written materials.

- In terms of demands, it should make demands on the students at the level that is required in a university course. A set of questions was designed to obtain a record of students' comprehension of the text. Again, the tutors participated in the formulation of the questions and provided an agreed version of the answers to the questions ().

The Sample

The sample consisted of two groups of 20 students each, one belonging to the distance system, SUA, and the other to the regular courses in the Faculty, FAC. The age range in the SUA group was 19 to 32; that in the FAC group was 18 to 26. All students were attending courses in the Modern Languages and Literature Department. Students participating in this project ranged from second to fourth year, and they participated on a voluntary basis. A brief written summary of the project was presented to both teaching staff and students. The teachers were sympathetic with the project, which helped to encourage students' voluntary participation.

Data Collection

The administration of the questionnaire was carried out in small groups of three and four students and occasionally with individuals. The time allowed to answer the questionnaire was 30 minutes, but the average time taken by the students was 20 minutes.

The interviews were carried out individually with the exception of a group of three students who were interviewed at the same time, but nonetheless they each answered the questions individually. The interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes, and students could expand as much as they wished on their answers. All of these sessions were tape recorded. The schedules offered for the interview were flexible, which helped to facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere (often at the student's home) for carrying out these sessions.

For the reading activity, students were approached individually. They were given a familiarization exercise, which enabled them to know what to expect and what to do when the reading record technique was applied. Some students found that the technique was rather disruptive of the way they normally read. They were encouraged to use the technique on several other texts before the text on Borges was given.

Analysis

The Questionnaire

Personal Construct Psychology leads us to be wary of taking the responses to questionnaires as objective measures of attitudes. Firstly, the wording of any item will almost certainly be interpreted differently (that is, it will have different personal meaning attributed to it) by different respondents. Secondly, the personal meaning of each item is achieved relatively (that is,

in the context of all the other items in the questionnaire). The "results" from the two groups were therefore analyzed not absolutely in terms of the individual responses, but in terms of how the cluster linkages among items varied between the two groups.

The Interview

The Interview presented the problem of processing open-ended answers. The analysis of the information was approached as follows: student answers to one question were grouped according to a similar criterion, and a superordinate category name was assigned to each coded cluster, making an attempt to reflect the commonality in all answers. For example, question number 6 "why are some people better at learning"? elicited responses like: "It has to do with the family background, the schools you attended," "It is related to his social economic position: if you belong to a large family, if you work, if you are badly nourished," "If you do not have the means to go to a private institute to learn English." All these answers were grouped under the category "identify causes in external, socio-economical factors." This way of organizing information allowed the results to be structured to a certain degree without losing the variety of responses the students gave.

The Reading Activity

The reference for marking the correctness of students answers was an agreed version elaborated by the tutors and validated by two other external lecturers in Literature.

Results and General Considerations

The Questionnaire

Figure 1 shows the simplified correlation matrices for the two groups. Correlations below 0.7 are omitted, and the items are reordered to highlight the cluster linkages. General clustering reveals at least four main areas of interest in the students' responses:

1. Students in the distance learning courses have a more differentiated view than those in the traditional lecture course.
2. Distance students relate personal learning (items 27, 25, and other associated items) to students' independence and responsibility (items 28 and 26), whereas FAC students view these as separate entities.
3. FAC students associate items 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 18, and 19 together, showing the importance of grades and the emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of their learning.
4. Students in the distance learning courses tend to read beyond the school requirements.

Interview

Coding of responses to the eight topics raised in the interview again shows some differences between the groups. and shows tables for each of the eight topics. The participants in SUA generally take a more positive stance than those pursuing the traditional lecture courses. This is consistently revealed in most of the responses to the interview but particularly in the relationship with the faculty and evaluation. Furthermore, in the last two items of the interview, the students in SUA reveal a more personal meaning- oriented approach to learning, whereas the students in the FAC tend to view learning from a more instrumental perspective.

General Considerations

The size of the group samples does not allow for definite and broad generalizations. However, it is important to notice the tendencies shown in students' answers:

The findings revealed that the students in distance courses were more interested in their own learning, and they value the role of the tutors and the system of education in the University as a whole though they have criticisms of it. The students in the regular courses, on the other hand showed less involvement and more negative attitudes regarding the context in which their learning occurs. Also, the SUA students seem to consider learning more as a personal experience than as a school requirement. The FAC students displayed more utilitarian and applied orientation towards learning. In reading achievement, there were no significant differences between the two groups.

The study manifests the importance and methodological difficulty of analyzing qualitative data, an indispensable ingredient in the study of human learning. The techniques used in the study proved useful for this purpose, particularly in the way they preserve the richness and uniqueness of individual answers and, at the same time, they allow comparisons of the population as groups. However, further refinement is needed in the way the results are analyzed, which in turn may lead to wider and more accurate interpretations. Finally, it is important to mention that students in both populations reacted extremely positively to the fact that they were approached individually and showed great interest in communicating and discussing aspects of their own learning.

This experience made evident the complexity of students' learning in both distance and face-to-face courses. Further studies should analyze the distinct profiles that begin to emerge with these two different approaches to education.

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