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A STUDY INTO LEARNING OF BUSINESS AND INFORMATICS STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of business and informatics students on their learning experiences at ACU National and provides a picture of this learning community.

Keywords: learning, students, university level

I. INTRODUCTION

This research project aims to build upon current research in the area of teaching and learning in business and informatics at university level. In recent years, increasing focus, both nationally and internationally, has fallen on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. This concern is “associated with calls for greater accountability and efficiency, increases in the size and diversity of the student population and a relative decline in the real value of funds available for higher education” (Hativa & Goodyear, 2002, p1).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study takes a socio-cultural approach to examining a number of factors that may have an effect on university business and informatics learning communities. These factors include social relationships, and the socially and culturally-determined teaching and learning approaches adopted.

The nature and role of lecturer–student and student–student relationships in university learning situations have been discussed by the National Science Foundation (1998), and Welzel, von Aufschnaiter, and Schoster (1999). The findings reported by these authors

included that students were often heavily influenced by only one or two significant lecturers and that lecturers were conscious of the language they used in shaping interactions.

Lovitts (1996) found that attrition had less to do with what the students bring into the tertiary institution than with what happens to them once they get there. Recent work by Leach, Zepke, and Prebble (2006) has also indicated that social relationships have a significant effect on the quality of students' university learning experiences and their decisions to stay or leave university study. These findings suggest that student choices may be strongly influenced by their social interactions. Those positive about their lecturers' teaching are usually positive about classes (Waldrip & Fisher, 2001). However, lecturers and students differ in their perceptions of what makes a "good" lecturer (Robertson & Bond, 2001).

An important focus of this project was to examine how student approaches to learning shape the learning community. A Canadian study (Kreber, 2003) replicated earlier work by Biggs (1987) and others (for example, Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002) by demonstrating a strong relationship between student approaches to learning and their perceptions of the learning environment. Studies have shown that learner-centered teaching suits some students who find this style more engaging (Waldrip & Fisher, 2001) but other students are more comfortable with lecturer-centred instruction, particularly if assessment is examination based (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000). Stonyer, Dodd, Marshall, and Oberst (2001) advocate the importance of group work throughout entire university programs. Student approaches to their learning and what has an influence on these approaches have also been explored by Ramsden (2003), Lizzio et al. (2002), Prosser and Trigwell (1999), and Trigwell and Ashwin (2003).

Trigwell and Ashwin examined how high achieving undergraduate students' perceptions of motivation, conceptions of learning, and their approach to their studies differed from those of other students. They found that achievement was linked to the degree to which students' conceptions of learning and their learning environment matched those of the university in which they were studying. Features of their study have been used to inform this study, particularly relating to the variation in student experience in different years of

study and student perceptions of collegiality.

This research study focuses on the relationships and the teaching and learning approaches that frame the learning community in university business and informatics. The study recognises that interactions between participants, the language and tools within a learning community, are socially, culturally, and historically determined. This focus is based on a socio-cultural view of learning and an understanding of the learning process acquired through both teaching and research (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Learning in this view is seen as increasing participation in the community (Rogoff, 1999). By investigating lecturer and student perceptions of the university teaching and learning experience, the objective is to determine whether, and if so, how, being a university business and informatics student involves a gradual progression into full participation in a particular community of learning, and development of a professional identity. This study is also timely as increasingly flexible delivery of university education is challenging the notion of the traditional campus as a learning community. It will contribute to our understanding of what it means to teach and learn in contemporary university learning communities.

Students' transition to university study was generally characterised by a need for students to become more independent, self-reliant, and proactive in their learning. Being able to quickly form relationships and connections with other students and with lecturers appeared to be an important factor in facilitating this transition.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study will address the following question:

What are learners' perceptions of the nature of the learning community in business and informatics at university level?

The purpose of the research is embodied in the following objective: research student

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perceptions of learning in university business and informatics. This will involve examining students' ideas about the purposes of learning events, how they learn, who they learn from, and how the nature of the learning environment impacts on their learning.

Although the context of this research is university business and informatics, the findings will have relevance to other areas of university study. In particular, the methodology of the research could be adapted to any discipline area, and this study's findings are likely to have implications for other disciplines within universities.

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

As this study sought to identify the perceptions of the participants, an interpretive approach (Erickson, 1998) was considered to be the most suitable. The study acknowledged the social nature of students' experiences within university business and informatics education and aimed to explore and understand their perceptions of these experiences within their contexts (Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Neuman, 2000).

V. DATA GATHERING AND HANDLING

In this study, data were collected by means of questionnaire and document analysis. The questionnaire offers the advantage that the instrument can be used to survey a large number of people within a short time period. In this study, questionnaires containing closed questions were used to gain a breadth of data from students. The questionnaires were administered in the School of at and statistically analysed.

Where available and appropriate, course outlines, study guides, and assessment items were examined.

VI. RESEARCH PHASES

The project involved a cohort of first-year and a cohort of third-year business and informatics students. The student sample was drawn from undergraduate business and informatics classes. The first-year business and informatics students were surveyed during the first few weeks of their program. Survey questions were quantitative in nature and explored the nature of their learning at school and their expectations of their university study. Third-year students in business and informatics were also surveyed

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during this time about their learning experiences to date. This survey focused on their learning experiences during their years of study and how these experiences measured up to their expectations.

DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANT NUMBERS

Data Method

Participants

Questionnaire

Students

Year 1: n = 115 (50.4% male, 49.6% female)

Year 3: n = 65 (56.9% male, 43.1% female)

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Approval was gained for the project from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). All data gathering adhered to the practices approved by the HREC, respecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants and ensuring no harm from their participation. As questionnaires were completed anonymously, maintaining students' anonymity was easily achieved and there were few ethical issues to address in providing access within the project to student questionnaire data.

VII. QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

First-year students

The questionnaire was completed by 115 first-year students studying business and informatics, of whom 50.4 percent were male and 49.6 percent female.

73 percent of the cohort indicated that they were at secondary school before beginning their first-year studies; 14 percent had been in paid employment, 8 percent had been in previous tertiary study and 5 percent travelled overseas.

Asked about their reasons for taking the course, students most commonly indicated that they needed it for their chosen career (60 percent) or that they expected to enjoy the subject area (11 percent). Seven percent of respondents had enjoyed the subject at school. Careers advisors were reported as having minimal effect on students' university study choices.

Students were asked to indicate their agreement/disagreement with a number of

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statements about their expectations of university study, ranking responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree), and a summary of the results follows. Predictably, they did not expect to have much free time while studying. Likewise, they did not anticipate being involved in sports clubs and cultural activities.

Respondents agreed that they expected to feel part of the institution's learning community, although fewer expected to get to know their lecturers on a personal level. They agreed that lectures and—more strongly—practical classes would be interesting and enjoyable. In terms of their learning experiences, students agreed that the subject area content would be more difficult than it had been at secondary school. They expected to have to learn lots of facts, but also practical and problem-solving skills. They thought assessment would include testing their ability both to memorise material and to apply practical skills—and they would have rapid and useful feedback on their progress. They also agreed that they expected a heavy workload, and that they would be required to produce a high standard of work.

Previous studies have identified workload as an issue for some students (Leach et al., 2006), with some avoiding particular courses if the course workload was perceived to be particularly heavy. Related to this was the strong expectation that students would have a clear idea of what was expected of them in their courses, and that course information would be readily available from sources such as the Internet. Students strongly agreed that they expected to use a computer, and computer skills, during their studies.

Third-year students

Sixty five students (57 percent male and 43 percent male) completed the third-year questionnaire. The most common reason given for taking their particular programme of study was a feeling that they would need it for their chosen career (86 percent). Five percent enjoyed the subject at secondary school. Advice from the school careers advisor was significant for only 3 percent of the sample.

The students reported that they had experienced a wide range of learning opportunities during their programme of study: listening to lecturer presentations, engaging in in-class discussion and debate, group or team-based activities, doing practical activities, making presentations to the class, and doing reading and research. The most enjoyable were practical activities (88 percent), lectures or other lecturer presentations (59 percent), and personal reading and research (51 percent) and in-class discussions (66 percent). Preparing and delivering a presentation to their classmates was selected by only 23 percent of the respondents as was completing book or worksheet exercises. This, along with in-class discussion or debate was not well regarded by students as helping to understand what they were studying (only 44 percent for each). This suggests a need to explain the purpose of these activities to students, given that they teach a different set of skills (including team work and public speaking).

Asked where they would go for help with their studies, these third-year students regarded their lecturers as the most important (selected by 90 percent). The Internet and classmates (both 75 percent) were highly valued, but 60 percent indicated that they would use the library or other reference books. Only 20 percent would choose family and friends. Student support services were selected by only 15 percent of the cohort.

Course-related materials

All courses issued students with course outlines. Course outlines provided students with information such as course aims and objectives, course content, assessment methods and weightings, timetable, regulations, and expectations. Generally students looked at the course outline at the beginning of a semester and only referred to occasionally thereafter.

Many students mentioned that they liked having their lecture notes made available either as handouts or online so that they could read the notes in preparation for the lecture and did not have to spend so much time copying down notes.

VIII. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This study identifies a number of key themes that influence student learning in the
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university education environment:

- Students entering university study generally have positive expectations of their experiences, and feedback from later cohorts suggests these expectations are usually, but not always, met.
- Students' perceptions of teaching staff, and their relationships with staff, are important: students see staff as an important source of learning assistance.
- There is a need for more support for student learning.
- Students attach considerable value to small class sizes, and to practical classes.

Expectations that are not always borne out by subsequent experiences include things such as involvement in sports and cultural clubs and activities (possibly related to workload); learning and being tested on practical skills and problem-solving techniques; receiving appropriate and timely feedback on academic progress; and having a clear idea of lecturer expectations. These factors can affect overall satisfaction with their university experience, but also—and more specifically—affect learning outcomes for students. Where feedback and lecturer expectations are concerned, these issues can be remedied through improving lines of communication between teaching staff and students; which could also contribute to enhanced relationships between the two groups and a stronger sense of belonging to a community of learning. Students place a high value on the development of one-to-one relationships with teaching staff.

Students focus on the perceived quality of teaching, and their comments suggest that this perceived quality can affect enjoyment, learning, and retention.

Responsibility for student learning extends beyond the classroom and the student–lecturer relationship. Students must take responsibility for their own learning, and may need to be supported in this as they make the jump from the highly-controlled world of secondary school to the university system. However, there is also a case for making institutional student learning support services both more visible and more accessible to students, and for staff to be more consistent in encouraging students to make use of them. This may require some education of staff as to what services are available and how students can access them. It may also require more investment in these services by the university, an issue with considerable budgetary implications.

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