

Motivating the Independent Learner at the Arab Open University, Kuwait

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Abstract—Academicians at the Arab Open University have always voiced their concern about the efficacy of the blended learning process. Based on 75% independent study and 25% face-to-face tutorial, it poses the challenge of the predisposition to adjustment. Being used to the psychology of traditional educational systems, AOU students cannot be easily weaned from being spoon-fed. Hence they lack the motivation to plunge into self-study. For better involvement of AOU students into the learning practices, it is imperative to diagnose the factors that impede or increase their motivation. This is conducted through an empirical study grounded upon observations and tested hypothesis and aimed at monitoring and optimizing the students' learning outcome. Recommendations of the research will follow the findings.

Keywords—Academic performance, blended learning, educational psychology, independent study, pedagogy.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN educational psychology, motivation takes on two forms: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Whereas the intrinsic motivation springs from an inner desire to learn for the sake of knowledge, extrinsic motivation is solely guided by the aspiration to achieve high results. It is crucial to know your learner in order to devise the proper learning strategy and the motivation theory. Effective pedagogical practices have always been sought by academicians in the prospect of positively enhancing the learning experience. Within the blended learning system at the Arab Open University, the main apprehension is about the students' independent study. A challenge that poses itself as it negatively affects the face-to-face courses delivery. Therefore, this paper intends to identify the causes that hinder the students' motivation to learn independently and to tailor the instructional behavior accordingly.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The present research aims at:

- Revisiting our pedagogical practices of face-to-face tutoring
- Motivating AOU students to come prepared for tutorials.
- Monitoring and optimizing the independent study
- Boosting students' achievement outcome.

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III. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The blended learning system at the AOU is based on 25% face-to-face tutorials and 75% independent study. However, the multitudes of students, who come from different traditional educational systems of the private and the government sectors, find it challenging to adjust to the new blended learning system the AOU adopts. Hence, the independent learning, a major component of the AOU system, is not easily coped with. The paradigm shift in educational practices entails a certain degree of alteration in learning behavior that AOU students seem to find quite perplexing.

IV. RATIONALE

The importance of the present research is to attempt to add value to and to:

- Monitor the 75% of self-learning through impartial data-based conclusions.
- Get to know the type of learner.
- Tailor the pedagogical approach
- Adopt the proper motivation model or theory
- Revisit the assessment strategy.
- Shed light on the effect of the study material and the instructional behavior upon the students' motivation.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study "Motivating the Independent Learner at the Arab Open University" is based on theoretical and practical approaches. It is an empirical study based on observation and experience. A quasi experimental method has been applied upon a cohort of students whereby the level of motivation has been tested through hypothesis. It has also adopted a quantitative analysis based on a survey given to the Faculty of Language Studies instructors in preparation of a workshop to tackle the instructional challenges. The survey intends to assess the beliefs of tutors on the different factors that affect the student motivation to learn independently. The questionnaire used in this paper includes 14 factors that have been selected. Factors were followed by a 3-point and 5-point Likert scale ranging from "agree" to "disagree" and from "completely satisfying" to "completely dissatisfying". Only 22 tutors were observed and asked to give their opinions about what motivates learners to work independently. These tutors were selected based on their long experience with blended learning at AOU. Collected responses are analyzed below using descriptive statistics.

VI. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature in the field of students' motivation and adult learning behaviors is quite ample. Many theories and models of motivation have vied for practicability from the theories of behaviorism, to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to attribution theory, the expectancy theory to the flow model, etc...

Once we get to know our learners, we may either adopt a certain model or generate new hypothesis based on the results of the data collected about different variables.

Selvi asserted that the freedom exerted by the independent learner constitutes itself a motivating factor as it is at the student's own pace and choice of time and space [1]. This flexibility is an advantage that if well instigated, would increase the student's motivation. The co-authors believe that tutors ought to synchronically participate in guided online forums to further stimulate the students' motivation and their thinking skills in an attempt to gradually wean them from the regurgitation and rote learning created by students' online forums.

Also Styer stresses on the crucial role of the tutor. Friendliness, enthusiasm, warmth are personal traits that should prevail in a tutor to motivate the students [2]. Other factors act as complements such as the attempts to link the course material to their immediate environment, to prepare well for the face-to-face encounters and to vary the pedagogical approaches. However, varying the instructional methods in an independent learning context can be challenging. Not only the students come from traditional learning systems, but the tutors themselves do. AOU officials are aware of this hindrance and training is conducted to enable the tutors to use the sophisticated online tools for proper communication with the students. At the AOU, Kuwait Branch, prizes are given by the management to tutors who are innovative in the creation of supplementary online teaching tools with responsive feedback and feed-forward, with well-defined objectives and interactivity to help the independent learner.

To add meaningfulness to self-study, Bonk and others suggested the stretching of the students' learning experience with peers around the globe by creating online activities wherein courses' concepts are developed [3]. These motivating practices help the learner to apply these concepts on a broader level apart from the immediate environment. To apply these forums upon the AOU students across branches, such activities could be monitored by tutors who log in synchronically during their online office hours and act as mentors for a smooth development of the major concepts.

To arouse the students' curiosity and get them motivated Dennen and Bonk proposed inviting prominent speakers to join in debates [4]. This could progress into an asynchronous follow up among peers and mentors.

From another perspective, the lack of motivation scenarios can be overcome by graded online activities, by group research activities to engage them further into peer interaction. These should be briefly triggered in class, followed up by tutors along with a gallery of students' best projects posted on line for their perusal. This positive practice creates a

competitive spirit that enhances not only the independent study, but it gets plowed in as fertility during the class sessions.

On the other hand, Fidishun stressed the need of a reason for adults to learn [5]. There must be an inner motivation for a particular value that they attach to their learning experiences. With feedback, enjoyment and interest, Baskas added, they get carried up in a voracious reflective reading, become high achievers and show more determination to excel than the extrinsic learners [6]. This is the flow model 'par excellence' that the co-authors thrive to have their students adhere to. It is the experience when students get so much carried away by their reading that they tend to be oblivious of time as it runs by.

However, a pilot experiment has been conducted upon a few classes, whereby the students were promised bonus questions for in-class participation. Most of the tutors reported that their students came to class so well prepared; the primary and the secondary sources had been covered thoroughly. The reward of the grade given for interaction created an impulse to study harder independently. This experiment placed the majority of AOU students as extrinsic learners where the main motivating factor is the achievement of high results.

While applying the behaviorist theory and its reinforcement upon the AOU class, a change has been observed in the students' behavior which resulted from the grade stimulus. The carrot reward acted as a psychological drive for better performance in class. The experiment placed most AOU students as extrinsic learners. This finding of the empirical study has been further proved by the survey responses as the data analysis shows below.

On a counter argument, Dr. Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been expanded to encompass cognitive and aesthetic needs apart from the biological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization needs. Kenrick and others stated that since each person is unique, their motivation for self-actualization would differ from one to another [7]. If one does not do well in class, there must be other domains of fulfillment of the self. In the same context, there are some AOU students who are intrinsic learners and these are usually the high achievers who fall under the flow model addressed above. Guan applied the positive psychology concept of the flow upon foreign language learning and translation disciplines [8]. He asserted the condition of balance between the degree of difficulty and of easiness of the tasks performed. Since AOU curriculum is quite demanding, the flow model is not easily applicable upon the large cohort of AOU students. It is however discernable upon the high achievers as alluded to above.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Fourteen factors that may affect the motivation were listed in the questionnaire. Tutors have been asked to provide their views of agreement about each of them. The result of the analysis is reported in Table I. In addition to the quantitative approach, the questionnaire included an open-ended question to collect qualitative data from tutors on what would motivate students to work harder and to achieve better results.

TABLE I
VIEWS OF TUTORS ABOUT STUDENTS MOTIVATION

| Factor | Frequency | % |
|---|-----------|-----|
| 1. Students are good at working independently. | | |
| Agree | 2 | 9% |
| Disagree | 16 | 73% |
| Neutral | 4 | 18% |
| 2. Students are able to become independent learners too quickly. | | |
| Agree | 2 | 9% |
| Disagree | 18 | 82% |
| Neutral | 2 | 9% |
| 3. The physical environment at the university is: | | |
| Inductive to learning | 8 | 36% |
| An impedim | 8 | 36% |
| Neutral | 8 | 36% |
| 4. The workload for our students is: | | |
| Heavy | 8 | 36% |
| Moderate | 12 | 55% |
| Light | 2 | 9% |
| 5. Generally speaking, the courses you are teaching are academically demanding. | | |
| Agree | 12 | 55% |
| Disagree | 6 | 27% |
| Neutral | 4 | 18% |
| 6. In your opinion, do TMAs have academic value for students? | | |
| Yes | 0 | 0% |
| No | 14 | 64% |
| Somehow | 8 | 36% |
| Neutral | 0 | 0% |
| 7. Are supplementary materials beneficial to students? | | |
| Yes | 14 | 64% |
| No | 4 | 18% |
| Not sure | 4 | 18% |
| 8. Students make use of the office hours for academic purposes. | | |
| Agree | 6 | 27% |
| Disagree | 14 | 64% |
| Neutral | 2 | 9% |
| 9. The work produced by the students is: | | |
| Completely satisfying | 0 | 0% |
| Very satisfying | 0 | 0% |
| Satisfying | 8 | 36% |
| Dissatisfying | 12 | 55% |
| Very dissatisfying | 2 | 9% |
| 10.Students are adamant on having high marks. | | |
| Agree | 20 | 91% |
| Disagree | 2 | 9% |
| Neutral | 0 | 0% |
| 11.Students show interest during the tutorials | | |
| Agree | 6 | 27% |
| Disagree | 6 | 27% |
| Neutral | 10 | 45% |
| 12.The percentage of your students attending the class is: | | |
| 90% or more | 2 | 9% |
| 70-90% | 10 | 46% |
| 50-70% | 4 | 18% |
| Less than 50% | 6 | 27% |
| 13.Does the English language pose an obstacle to comprehension? | | |
| Yes | 12 | 55% |
| No | 2 | 9% |
| Somehow | 8 | 36% |
| 14.Your students are easily distracted by their mobile phones. | | |
| Agree | 12 | 55% |
| Disagree | 6 | 27% |
| Neutral | 4 | 18% |

Surveys responses that were returned were functional and the obtained results indicated the consistency with the hypothesis stated in this paper. Results show there is a

consensus among tutors that all courses are very demanding and the workload is moderate and to some of them is heavy. The tutors also agree that students are not in a position to work independently; they are even not able to become independent learners in a short period of time. Therefore, these findings show that students need to learn more self-study skills and the current pedagogy should provide students with facilities that allow them to develop these skills. For example, it seems that collaborative learning should be first introduced to students on how to learn the course materials, solving assignments, discussions and debates, etc. so students will be motivated to work harder on their own to avoid seclusion. The tutor should carry on this role in creating a situation and build the requested collaborative model applied in the course as a survival technique to encourage the students to work independently. We cannot ask the students to work independently unless they should be trained first to do so. The co-authors recommend revisiting the GR111 course on self-study for an optimization of its learning outcomes.

Another interesting finding is that about 63% of tutors indicate that assignments (TMAs) have no academic value to students. Only 36% of the respondents showed that there is a vestigial value. This shows that the link between TMA assignment and student achievement is still not clear. This supports the hypothesis that TMAs do not increase the academic achievement of students. Another factor supports this finding that 64% of tutors agree that the work produced by the students is completely dissatisfying. These results support Kohn that the homework assignments do not provide any benefit to student achievement, academic or nonacademic [9].

Adding to this hypothesis, Sharafuddin and Allani examined the validity and reliability of the assignments (TMAs) [10]. Their findings show that the majority of tutors believe that students do not acquire critical analytical skills while preparing their assignments (TMAs). In addition, the academic dishonesty prevents the student's motivation to work independently and this might explain why many of them had lower scores in their final exams.

While mobile phones have an important role in establishing new links among learners and providing an easier access to online learning environments, our survey shows that more than 50% of tutors agree that students are easily distracted by their mobile phones. This shows that mobile learning still has some limitations in motivating students to learn in blended learning due to the fact that mobile devices are widely used for entertainment. Sharafuddin and Allani found that most of the students at AOU-Kuwait always carry their mobile phones and the excitement with the smartphones is in many cases on the expense of students' achievement which was the reason behind the decline in students achievement in their grades compared to previous cohorts of students [11]. In addition, the above findings support the results found by Jones and Issroff that "it is possible that the emotion and the excitement generated by this use may be associated with the device-mobiles become identified as 'fun' device" [12].

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above findings suggest that new approaches to motivate the independent learner ought to be adopted. These encompass judiciously used rewards for the extrinsic learner and an enhancement of the flow model for the intrinsic learner. It is a combination of the study material, the pedagogical practice and the assessment strategy that ought to be reexamined.

The experiment placed most AOU students as extrinsic learners. This finding of the empirical study has been further proved by the survey responses as the data analysis shows above.

The authors recommend:

- Revisiting the GR111 course on self-study for an optimization of its learning outcomes
- Omit TMAs from first level courses and prepare the students with a research methodology course.
- Allocate 10% of the OCA to the class participation
- Have access to OU e-library.

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