IDENTIFYING DISTINCTIVE APPROACHES TO STUDYING

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ABSTRACT

Dimensions which have been used to describe various aspects of studying are reviewed. These draw attention to three distinctive approaches to studying which contain elements of both study processes and motivation. The development of an inventory of approaches to studying is reported which confirmed the importance of these three dimensions, but also drew attention to the importance of characteristic styles of learning in describing the processes through which students arrive at different levels of understanding.

Introduction

STUDY METHODS AND MOTIVATION

In a series of studies carried out at Lancaster since 1968 attempts have been made to develop inventories to measure important aspects of study methods and motivation. The original scales were developed in a collaborative study in Aberdeen (Entwistle and Wilson, 1970), while subsequent modifications of these scales have been used to predict academic performance (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1970; Entwistle and Wilson, 1977). These scales gave separate scores for motivation and study methods. The type of motivation implied by the items was akin to Atkinson's descriptions of achievement motivation (Atkinson and Raynor, 1974), though specific to the academic context. The study methods scales emphasised organisation and planning.

These scales showed consistent but rather low correlations with academic performance. Their greatest weakness was an over-simple description of study methods, through a failure to take account of the existence of very different approaches to studying used by students. On theoretical
grounds it was argued (Entwistle et al., 1974) that it would be important to distinguish between three forms of motivation — extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation stemming from interest in the subject matter, and intrinsic motivation which depended on the maintenance of self-esteem. An interview study (Entwistle et al., 1974) linked this last form of motivation with achievement motivation or "hope for success" (Atkinson and Raynor, 1974). The contrasting motivation which emerged clearly from the comments of students was "fear of failure", and in a large scale follow-up study (Entwistle and Wilson, 1977) distinctive clusters of students were identified with these two different forms of motivation. The students in these clusters also had very different ways of studying. The confident students with a high "need for achievement" scored highly on both scales — motivation and study methods. But the total pattern of their responses suggested

a rather cold and ruthless individual, governed by rationality and spurred on by competition to repeated demonstrations of intellectual mastery (Entwistle and Wilson, 1977, p. 129).

"Fear of failure" showed itself in a marked lack of confidence and a high level of neuroticism. Yet many of these students obtained good degrees, while showing only moderate or low scores on the scales of motivation and study methods. It was clearly necessary to produce a modified inventory with additional dimensions.

The next scale to be added was based on the ideas of "syllabus-boundness" and "syllabus-freedom" described by Hudson (1968) and Parlett (1970). Some students prefer to have clear instructions, deadlines, and defined courses, while others demand much more autonomy in their learning. Again both groups can do well in examinations, though the "syllabus-free" category is most at risk.

Parlett also carried out a study of students' perceptions of assessment procedures in a department at Edinburgh University (Miller and Parlett, 1974). Interviews with students showed differences in the attempts they made to "play the system". Some students were "cue-seeking": they sought out lecturers and tried to discover what was required in the examinations. At the other extreme were "cue-deaf" students, who saw assessment as an objective procedure for determining what had been learned. In this issue Ramsden (1979) argues that "cue-seeking" as defined by Parlett can only be used effectively in rather open, informal departments. In other departments certain students will however, take special care to look for other indications of what is required. He suggests therefore that we should use the term strategic to describe this more general tendency to determine the implicit rules of the assessment game. This dimension has been built into the most recent inventory.