THE PROCESSES OF STUDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The paper will discuss some research results on the application of recent descriptions of student learning (specifically by Pask and Marton) to students' normal academic methods of studying. The study to be discussed differs from the original studies in that it attempted to analyse a number of real working situations for a group of about 30 students, obtaining as much detail as possible on all aspects of the students' perceptions of their work in those situations. The major conclusion from the study is that students' styles and strategies of learning are context-dependent: rather than applying to individual students, dichotomised descriptions of learning are more readily applicable to students in particular learning situations.

The paper will discuss some of the implications of this conclusion for further research on student learning. In particular, it may be possible to develop a hypothetical model of student learning, both to clarify existing results, and provide a framework for further research.

Introduction

The psychologist William James suggested that the proper study for the psychology of religion is "the most religious man in his most religious moment". This may seem a strange sentiment with which to begin a paper on student learning, but I use it because it embodies a principle which seems appropriate to the study of student learning. In trying to unravel the process of student learning as it occurs in higher education, we are exploring how it operates, what kinds of factors affect it, what different forms it takes. There are many ways of approaching such a task, but the point made by James is that our understanding of a psychological process is best begun by studying it as it is practised by an expert. Students in higher education are likely to be among the most effective learners of their age group, if they are not exactly experts. The remainder of James' argument suggests that we should study them as they are doing their most effective learning.

Part of this paper will consider some of the ways we can go about
studying a student learning, and will then discuss the outcomes of such a study. But first, I want to consider some of the components of “the process of student learning”, and what that phrase encompasses.

**Styles and Strategies of Learning**

Terminological problems abound in this area because none of the frequently used terms, “style”, “strategy”, “process”, have been rigorously defined, nor are there any universally agreed definitions. Pask (1976) makes the distinction between “style” and “strategy” in terms of the conditions under which the two are exhibited. Thus “strategy” refers to the procedure a student uses in working through a well-defined, structured section of subject matter, where the strategy can be characterised by reference to the ordered sequence of component topics selected by the student. By contrast, “style” refers to the more general procedures a student adopts, for example, in private study where the style can be characterised by the way the student structures the subject matter, e.g. in terms of procedures or descriptions. “Strategy” may therefore be related to “style” in the sense that it is a manifestation of style under particular conditions.

Marton and Säljö (1976) have equated “process” and “strategy” in the sense that “the process of learning” is exhibited by what the student does in order to learn something. The process is defined in terms of the student’s focus of attention, and “levels of processing” can then be defined in terms of the differences in focus. The process of learning is investigated through a student’s report of what he is doing, and this can be related to the outcome, which is exhibited by his performance in tests.

Clearly, a description of student learning must include all these aspects of learning, but how can they be distinguished from each other, and how do they relate to each other? One distinction between the two types of description above can be made in terms of the content of the students’ thinking. Both “style” and “strategy”, for Pask, refer to the way the student thinks about the subject matter itself, the way he relates one topic to another. On the other hand, Marton and Säljö, in describing “levels of processing”, are considering how the student approaches the subject matter, what he is looking for, where his attention is focussed. One defines the execution of a learning task, the other, the approach to it. I would therefore like to define the “process of learning” as including at least two aspects: “executive style” (as in Pask’s “style” and “strategy”, referring to the way the student thinks about the subject matter) and “strategic approach” (as in Marton and Säljö’s “processing”, referring to the way the student approaches the task).

If “executive style” and “strategic approach” do indeed define different aspects of the learning process, then they should be mutually compatible,