

Affective Experiences and Student Engagement in Higher Education

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1 INTRODUCTION

The students perceive teaching from various viewpoints, including e.g. teaching staff, teaching methods and teaching environment. To study and clear the assignments,

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students use different methods based on their needs, *feels*, and obviously their own personal capabilities and preferences (Kennedy et al. 2008). Variety of learning and teaching methods suits university tuition well and cause better learning results and more motivated students (see e.g. Virtanen et al. 2013). Learning and teaching *experience* is more motivating and rewarding with such variety. This kind of positive affect is an important aspect of educational environments and enables outcomes such as students' intrinsic motivation and better grades (Pekrun et al. 2011) and increased *student engagement* (van Rossum & Hamer, 2010). It could be stated that experience is the source of learning and development (Kolb 2014) and positive affective experiences serve motivational factors (Moreno & Mayer 2007).

University tuition has traditionally been more teacher-centered (i. e. Zupancic & Horz, 2002). The objectives and instructions therefore are given by the lecturer to be performed by the student by using a certain premeditated method chosen by the lecturer. However, it has been claimed that when the students engage in the teaching and work on real problems, the outcome is better (Blumenfeld et al. 1991). In fact, a cognitive learning approach favours practical experience as a vital part of the learning process (Virtanen et al. 2013). It relates more to knowledge and questions like "what we know and understand, and how we describe, comprehend, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate this knowledge and understanding" (Shephard 2008). On the other hand affective learning relates to values, attitudes and behaviours and involves the learner emotionally (Shephard 2008). Originally Krathwohl et al. (1964) stated internalization as a process by which phenomenon or value successively and pervasively becomes a part of the individual. However, a further interpretation uses this definition as an affective learning approach (Thies 2014).

In the present paper, we will study students' affective experiences and student engagement in higher education setting, specifically in engineering education in a technical university. This paper argues that the role of affective experiences cannot be overlooked when evaluating university learning and teaching. Especially when the aim is to increase student engagement, the role of affective experiences of the students should be taken into account. The perceived affective experiences are empirically analysed through a mystery shopper data set, which was gathered in the case university by a group of students. The study bases theoretically on affective experiences framework, more familiar from the consumer behavior research stream. The aim of the study is to analyse what kinds of affective experiences students perceive when studying in a technical university and further to elaborate, how these affective experiences could be used to increase the student engagement. The study provides innovative approach to university learning and teaching by applying mystery shopper method and affective experience approach from the business discipline. The contribution to education science is the increased understanding of the role of affective experience in student engagement and learning.

2 THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

2.1 Student motivation and engagement

Increasing student motivation and reaching better learning outcomes in university education have been considered partially as results of high level student engagement (e.g. Mäkinen 2012, Mäkinen et al. 2011, van Rossum & Hamer, 2010). Engagement is discussed in educational psychology within, e.g., Self-Determination Theory, where

the assumption is "... that people are by nature active, with an evolved tendency to engage the environment, assimilate new knowledge and skills, and integrate them into a coherent psychological structure" (Schunk & Zimmerman 2008). This engagement, however, is presented as a function of the social context which may, or may not, support it.

Biggs (1996, 1999, 2014) sees that it is the teachers' responsibility to support student engagement which includes not only activating teaching practices but also encouraging students to actively participate in the planning and development of every aspect of teaching. Wenger (1998) on the other hand presents learning and other forms of human development taking place in communities of practice, i.e. in social situations and by engaging in social activities. Paavola & Hakkarainen (2005) add one more dimension to this participatory perspective on learning and see it as collaborative knowledge creation. More specifically, in this process there is a concrete or abstract object of collaborative activity that is being developed together in such a fashion that both teachers and students are all engaged.

Baxter Magolda (2000) discusses teaching as promoting personal and intellectual growth, maturation, and sees that the role of the teacher changes when knowledge is seen as socially constructed. It is then a knowledge construction partnership instead of authoritative knowledge provider. In a partnership, then, both partners need to be engaged in collaborative meaning-making to create inclusive and successful learning environments. Goodman et al (2011) suggest that in addition to quantitative data on student experiences, teachers should listen to student voices as evidence to develop knowledge sharing practices and enhance learning. The mystery shopper data described below will offer an opportunity to some student voices to be heard.

2.2 Affective experiences

Affective experience refers especially to the affective dimension of experience which involves one's affective system through the generation of emotions, feelings and moods (Gentile et al. 2007), which in turn can further be described according to their features like intensity, duration, cause, awareness, and control (Scherer 2005). Generally, moods are characterized by a relative enduring predominance of certain types of subjective feelings that affect the experience and behaviour of a person and may last from hours to days (Scherer 2005) to even months (Jalonen et al. 2016). Emotions and feelings on the other hand last a few minutes or hours, whereas feelings are subjective experiences of individual persons, emotions are projected feelings and typically directed towards social interaction (Jalonen et al. 2016).

Mehrabian & Russell (1974) suggested that there exists a limited set of basic affective responses to all stimulus situations, independent of the sensory modality involved and this framework has been applied in numerous studies ever since. Variations in pleasure (valence), arousal and dominance (PAD) should universally constitute the common core of human affective states. On a general level, pleasure refers to the degree to which an individual feels for example good, happy, or satisfied. Similarly, arousal refers to the degree to which an individual feels for example excited, stimulated, alert, or active. Dominance, in turn, refers to the degree to which an individual feels for example in control of, or free to act. In Figure 1 the aforementioned, "PAD-space" is presented based on the seminal work of Mehrabian & Russell (1974).

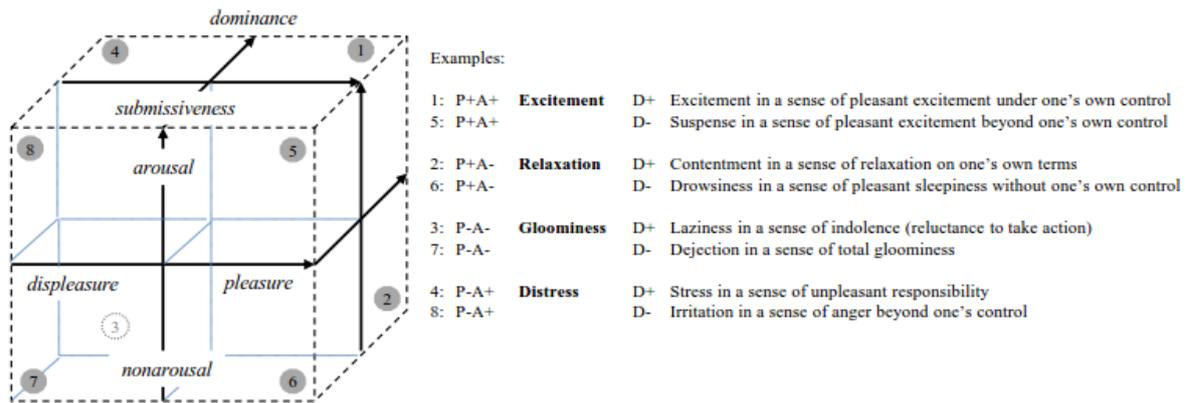


Fig. 1. The PAD framework of affective experiences.

This PAD framework is used to analyse the empirical data set of the study.

3 EMPIRICAL STUDY

This study is a phenomenological exploration to describe and more comprehensively understand the nature of affective experiences in higher education setting. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual (Lester 1999). This kind of research setting calls for methods allowing the respondents freely speak with their own voice.

The empirical data of this study was gathered in spring 2015 in a technical university in Finland. There were 45 students from all faculties participating in a mystery shopper project organised by the university administration in collaboration with the student union. The goal of that project was to observe both instruction and learning environment on the whole. The students kept an informal yet theme based diary on four larger topic areas: *teaching staff and teaching* (including pedagogical competence and teaching culture, instruction and guidance, course arrangements), *students and the learning culture*, *student services* and *learning environment*. As the focus in the mystery shopper project was on the student experience as reported by the students themselves, this empirical data set suite well for the purposes of this research to analyse affective experiences of the students.

4 RESULTS

The empirical data was analysed qualitatively, as theory-based content analysis based on the PAD framework. In all of the four main themes in the mystery shopper data (i.e. teaching staff and teaching, students and the learning culture, student services, and learning environment), the different affective experiences came up, even though the students were not specifically asked to describe their feelings and emotions in their diaries. In next Table 1 examples of the narrative statements from the mystery shopper data are presented.

Table 1. Examples of perceived affective experiences.

	Pleasure	Non-pleasure	Arousal	Non-arousal	Dominance	Submissiveness
Teaching staff and teaching	"Close interaction with teaching staff" "Motivated teaching staff that is committed to the course and students"	"Poor level of English of the teaching staff" "Dull lectures" "Distant teacher who seems not to care the students"	"Activation of students during the lectures e.g. by asking questions" "When the teacher is able to show how important the theme is"	"It is hard to get excited about the course when the teacher seems not be excited about the theme and teaching at all"	"Constant feedback possibility in course assignments, especially in candidate thesis work"	"There should be clear instructions for assignments. In one course the teacher stated "let's see what happens" as the learning goals of the assignment seemed not to be clear even for him."
Students and the learning culture	"Student unions and clubs offer lots of pleasant activities"	"Student culture sometimes too much disapprove if prioritize studies and not social events.."	"The spirit" [teekkarihenki]	"For some students the study place at our university has been only the second option, this affects the student motivation"	"Easy to get help from other students"	"There are too many group works. The problems rise when all of the group members are not as goal oriented. Also the schedules for group meetings are challenging"
Student services	"Versatile services available at campus"	"Cutting of the amount of secretaries weakened the services"	"Excellent facilities for sports"	-	"Easy access to student counselling services"	"Too many different platforms and information systems used in courses"
Learning environment	"Campus is open 24/7"	"Air-conditioning is terribly poor in many class-rooms"	"Newly renovated areas in the campus are inspiring and cozy"	"Some of the class rooms are very dull"	-	"Campus watches are all in different time – it is not nice to be five minutes late from the lecture because of this"

In overall, the quality of contact teaching seemed to attract most attention in terms of pleasure vs. non-pleasure and arousal vs. non-arousal. Even though there were many positive comments, still the teachers' pedagogical approach and motivation for teaching were most often indicated as creating non-pleasure and furthermore, also non-aroused experience. It seems that the teacher can create strong non-pleasure and non-arousal affective experiences among students by tiny things, e.g. by expressing in the beginning of lectures that she/he would rather be in researching than teaching the students. In fact, the students clearly consider whether the teacher is interested in them and their learning and also in the subject itself. Lack of interest and motivation of the teacher is also decreasing their interest and engagement.

The technological issues and feedback and evaluation were the themes that brought up most of the dominance viewpoints. For example, the number of teaching/ learning platforms used was criticised as there seem to be many that are used and sometimes the use is not systematic. In this way the non-dominance of the teacher towards technological solutions caused also the non-dominance experience and

frustration (non-pleasure) among students. Quality and quantity, and also timing, of feedback offered to students, were felt inadequate. These create a feeling of losing dominance in learning situation, as the bases of grade are not opened up in detail. Course scheduling was also criticised if there were changes or open questions when the course is about to or has already started. This caused non-pleasure, but also the experience of lost dominance in the learning situation.

5 SUMMARY

The application of the PAD framework, which has its roots in the consumer marketing research, opens a novel view to study the role of affective experiences of students in a higher education setting. The theoretical contribution of the present study lays on opening up new insights on the Kolb's (1974) thoughts on experiences as the source for learning. Based on the empirical study, especially the teaching staff and their attitude towards students create the peak experiences, both in good and in bad, and in all three dimensions of the PAD framework. However, in all it seems that it is not easy to draw strict lines between the three elements of PAD framework (pleasure, arousal, dominance) in learning, as these three have strong relationships. For example a non-motivated teacher causes not only non-arousal experience among students, but also certainly non-pleasure and most likely even non-dominance experience. Sadly, when all these negative affections come up, there is no chance to create student engagement towards the certain course and its learning goals. From practical viewpoint this study contributes to the identification of the influence of affective experiences to student engagement. Again, based on the empirical data, it seems that the teaching staff plays the single most important factor in creating student engagement – if the teacher is able to first create positive affective experience.

As the present study bases on empirical data that has been gathered by using mystery shopper method, more familiar from the consumer business research, the study provides a fresh approach to higher education research. For example, Purnell et al. (2010) studied staff interventions planned to support learning and attachment to university studies. Active measures to engage students in their studies decreased retention rates and supported student success. Although the mystery shopper study was not intended as an intervention it may have served as one as it has first directed the respondents' attention to certain aspects related to teaching and learning in higher education. As the mystery shopper reports were processed and discussed within the university, they may again have served as an intervention within teaching staff: an invitation to engage in developing teaching in collaboration with students. Teacher perspective was, however, beyond the scope here. As a further research avenue, addition of teacher perspective to the empirical study would be very beneficial.

This study has still several limitations, e.g. in terms of generalizability of the results and in the depth of the empirical analysis. In overall this study opened up an affective view on learning and student engagement, but still more comprehensive research is needed on this issue.

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