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# Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/kjss>

## Relationship between motivational goal orientations, perceptions of general education classroom learning environment, and deep approaches to learning



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 26 September 2014

Received in revised form 4 December 2014

Accepted 20 January 2015

Available online 15 June 2016

#### Keywords:

classroom learning environment  
deep approaches to learning  
motivational goal orientations

### ABSTRACT

Researchers have reported empirical evidence that the deep approaches to learning account for significant successful learning. The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between students' motivational goal orientation, their perceptions of the general education classroom learning environment, and deep approaches to learning strategies. Participants (N = 494) were first- and second-year college students enrolled in any of the general education courses in higher education in Thailand. All samples were chosen using the convenience sampling technique. They completed a self-report questionnaire for measuring motivational goal orientation, perceptions of classroom learning environment, and the level of taking deep approaches to learning. To analyze the relationship between several independent variables and a dependent variable, multiple regression analyses were used and a positive influence was found of motivational goal orientation and perceptions of general education classroom learning environment on the level of taking deep approaches to learning. These results suggest promoting the deep approaches to learning by students through their individual personal attributes and classroom learning environment factors.

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### Introduction

General education (GE) refers to the fundamental education that complements the more specialized learning undertaken in a student's chosen field of study. GE prepares students for the certain body of knowledge and valuable skills, which they should possess for life-long learning. Most objectives of the GE program are guided by "the Framework for 21st Century Student Outcomes" for example, critical thinking, problem solving, appropriate written and spoken communication skills, information

literacy skills, and life and career skills (P21Members, 2002). To achieve these, deep approaches to learning are a key factor considered in the process of GE and its evaluation (Bresciani, 2007). Furthermore, evidence suggests that deep approaches to learning were emphasized by the faculty teaching GE courses (Nelson Laird & Garver, 2010).

Deep approaches to learning describe the combination of students' learning strategies and students' motivations aimed toward their own personal development, and being more intent on understanding the materials. Students engaged in the deep approaches to learning desire to seek and understand meaning in what they learn rather than trying to memorize it. They relate the new ideas to existing prior knowledge, leading to an understanding and long-term retention of concepts (Biggs, 1987; Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001; Donnon & Hecker, 2008; Duff & McKinstry,

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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

2007; Hall, Ramsay, & Raven, 2004). More recent studies on the association between students' approaches to learning and students' learning outcomes (for example, Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2008; Snelgrove & Slater, 2003; Struyven, Dochy, Janssens, & Gielen, 2006) showed that deep approaches to learning were positively related to high quality learning outcomes.

Studies in the literature indicated that students' approaches to learning can change and be affected by their individual personal attributes and learning contexts (Biggs, 1978, as cited in Hall et al., 2004). For example, from the studies of Elliot (1999) and Elliot and McGregor (2001), we can infer that students' motivational goals (their purposes in learning or what they want to achieve) influenced their approaches to learning (as cited in Cano & Berbén, 2009). Research also indicated that students adapt their learning approach to their perceptions of the learning environment (for example, task or workload, teaching, assessment, and learning objective) (see Biggs, 1987; Dart et al., 1999; Lublin, 2003; Ramsden, 1992).

Although there is some research regarding the influence of individual personal factors and learning context factors toward students' adoption of approaches to learning, there are few that examine them by combining both factors in the same study. Moreover, most prior research has studied in general or within specific academic areas such as science or mathematics or accounting, but very little attention has been paid to investigation in the classroom learning environment of the GE context.

Considering the theoretical perspective in this study, we focused on one aspect of students' personal attributes—motivational goal orientations and their perceptions of learning context—that is, the perceptions of the psychosocial characteristics of the classroom learning environment. Consequently, two main theories were selected. Firstly, according to the research literature, motivational goals refer to different individual purposes or goals for engaging in an achievement situation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot & Church, 1997; Van Yperen, Elliot, & Anseel, 2009). Recently, researchers have focused on the concept of the  $2 \times 2$  achievement goal framework which identifies four distinct orientations: (1) Mastery-approach where the focus is on improving abilities and developing competencies, (2) Mastery-avoidance is defined in terms of striving to avoid misunderstanding or failing to learn course material, (3) Performance-Approach focuses on social comparison in the desire to outperform others, and (4) Performance-Avoidance focuses on social comparison in avoiding failure, looking incompetent and being judged to have low ability (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Based on these studies, each individual's personal attribute variable was measured by examination of their adoption of the  $2 \times 2$  achievement goal orientation framework.

Secondly, the learning context variable used in this study emphasized the concept of classroom learning environment perceptions. These perceptions were assessed in terms of: (1) meaningfulness of the content for student needs, (2) autonomy in the classroom, (3) involvement in the class discussions and activities, (4) cooperation among the students, and (5) competition among the students (Koul, Roy, & Lerdpornkulrat, 2012).

The study reported in this article contributes to further understanding of the conditions useful for promoting the students' adoption of deep approaches to learning in the GE classroom. This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the predominant motivational goal orientations and perceptions of classroom learning environment of college students enrolled in GE classes?
2. What is the influence of students' motivational goals and their perceptions of GE classroom learning environment on the level of taking deep approaches to learning?

## Materials and Methods

### Sample

Sampling in this study involved 494 first- and second-year college students in higher education from Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand. It was comprised of students from six different classrooms with a range from 72 to 88 students per class during the second-semester. All students were enrolled in any of the GE courses and were chosen using the convenience sampling technique which is one of the non-probability sampling methods. There were 192 (38.9%) males and 302 (61.1%) females in the sample. They completed the self-report survey instruments that were administered in GE classrooms toward the end of the academic year.

### Instruments

The survey in this study consisted of four sections. The first section of the survey asked for general information (gender, faculty, major, GPA). The second section of the survey measured motivational goal orientation using 21 items (for example, "I like to perform tasks because this makes me learn new things"). The third section of the survey assessed perceptions of the GE classroom learning environment using 24 items (for example, "In GE classes, most students are expected to work cooperatively with one other"). The last section of the survey assessed the level of taking deep approaches to learning with six items (for example, "I work on several examples of the same type of problems so that I understand the problems better"). The motivational goal orientation items were adapted from previous achievement goal orientation surveys (for example, Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Poondej, Koul, & Sujivorakul, 2012). The perceptions of GE classroom learning environment items were adapted from classroom learning environment surveys developed by previous researchers (Koul et al., 2012). The deep approaches to learning items were adapted from the measurement of deep strategy use in learning (see Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996). In the second, third, and fourth sections of the survey, we used a five-point (Likert-type) response scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), with larger values indicating a stronger score.

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